



Striving for Best Practice During Lockdown Two:

Family Violence, and a guide to including infant awareness in our practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Seminar 5 Notes - CFECFW

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Why our Mental Health is so important in working with clients

Intimately connected to our ability to provide support to others is our ability to accept support from others, as well as ourselves. As committed and passionate professionals within the welfare sector, and who work with vulnerable populations, our need for self-care is critical. Perhaps not fully appreciated or made overt is how much we collectively feel supported by the relationships we form in our workplace. Incidental connectivity occurs by popping out for coffee or going to lunch with workmates. When you sit alongside a co-worker in your office, banter with your team during meetings or share caseloads, this camaraderie is critical in our workplace. There are shared values and experiences that sometimes creates friendships at work that possess a different quality to our friendships outside of work.

Whilst our workplace can be an environment that causes stress it can also help relieve stress – when we are free to mix with others. Currently many workers are working from home. The day is not interspersed with incidental connectivity

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² Coco is a toy poodle who is nearly five years old, is ball obsessed, sometimes nasty to her older poodle sister Tilley who is twelve and blind. She likes to be held when not barking, playing, eating, or growling at Tilley.

and each day can feel like there is little other than the intensity and worry of moving from working with one client to the next. Workloads have increased as well as fears of risk for our incredibly young clients and their families. Some sad and distressing outcomes have already taken place and has left some workers carrying a sense of guilt and anxiety that they should have done more. Worker fatigue is growing as our external environment and supports have effectively shrunk. So too has our ability to tolerate what seems like an endless fog which hinders our ability to see where we are going and despairing about when this fog might lift. Here are some ideas about how we might help ourselves, our work colleagues, and ultimately, our clients, to navigate the lockdown fog.

Keeping energised

The usual ways of keeping energised, either as a collective, or as individuals have been severely compromised during this time. This calls for us to create new ways to connect and keep ourselves and others energised:

Workplaces can create buddy systems to ensure that colleagues regularly check in on each other, perhaps do small acts of kindness for one another, shares humorous photos or clips and any other creative demonstrations of keeping their buddy in mind. Online meetings that are not about work can take place during work time. This could be a session of Yoga, PT, playing trivial pursuit, having a quiz, a sing along, anything that creates opportunities for playful socialisation. Time might be allocated in formal team meetings for staff to share a victory lap, sharing an outcome about a case outcome, a client or a work achievement which has been rewarding and surprising. There has been no more important time than now to hold a 'strengths based' focus; for ourselves and our clients.

Individual workers can set up a clear boundary between working hours and non-working hours, ensuring they start and clock off on time and have a proper lunch break. This is not a skill our sector is terribly good at, even in the best of times. It is now critical, especially for those working at home, to ensure they take breaks, finish on time and are realistic about what they can achieve. Workloads are increasing, and it is not sustainable to carry the weight of this work beyond the hours you are paid to work, particularly when the divide between home and

the workplace has evaporated as most are working from home. If you can, find a place within your home which is your designated work area and separate to where you spent most of your time when you are at home in out of work hours. Perhaps find some way to replicate the 'drive home ritual' many use to make the transitional from work to home. For example, go for a walk each day when you 'clock off'. Light a scented candle or put music on. Anything that designates the move from work to 'letting go' and being at home. If you are living with others 'go all out', announcing, "Hey everyone, I'm home!!" Or yell this out to yourself and your pets if you live alone. Some ideas workers have shared with me also include:

- Make one day a week a 'screen free' day. No looking at news feeds, social media, texts, or work.
- Keep your social network in mind. Make one call a day to a different friend or family member.
- Think of fun things you can do with workmates online, play games which require spontaneity, the sillier the better.

In our work with infants and families, one of the most powerful things we can offer is reassurance. This may be hard with some individual clients and families where they have experienced significant trauma and easily become dysregulated, panicked or despair. This can become heightened further if we too then mirror back these overwhelming emotions. Remind yourself to think, and with the client reflect on how this current emergency is happening outside of their home and does not need to invade what happens inside their home. You are there to support them and will stay by their side. Remind clients of their significant achievements, help them reflect on how they want to look back on this challenging time and how this might complement other challenging times in their lives when they have not only survived but accomplished many things despite the obstacles. Help parents imagine what their infants and young children they may want and may need from them over the coming months. This can be enhanced by helping them reflect on what they would have liked from their parents during the tough times in their childhood. Pull together a list the infant might make if they could, for example: play time, cuddle time, singing time, quiet time etc. Remind parents that infants will let others know when they are not managing and how infants will ask for help through crying, not responding, becoming flat, not eating or perhaps are unable to settle. This is not

so different to older children and adults. Support parents to consider the variety of possibilities that infants may be communicating and recognise that asking for help, for infants and for anybody of any age is what makes us human. The only successful way through this current pandemic is by trying to help one another. If we cannot help, we will try our best to find someone who can.

Picking up new clients and meeting them only by phone or through online platforms is particularly challenging. Engagement may need persistence and creativity. Some workers have reported these ideas:

- Starting with an activity the client may enjoy or suggest. For example, one worker has each week sent the ingredients for a cooking session to the house of a young mother and via zoom both have cooked up the same recipe whilst getting to know one another. Slowly the mother has opened up, and actively included her infant in the sessions. Another has used a similar idea but instead does artwork alongside her clients over zoom.
- A worker has sent a picture of herself to the new client with some information about their working life which the client may appreciate knowing.

Consider running groups online. Whilst this may not be your preferred way of working or an area where you feel particularly skilled, now is the time to take a risk. For some isolated infants and parents this has proven to be an even safer way to connect with others, than by attending groups in person. Some have chosen to only participate through audio until they have built up the confidence to appear on screen. Some people do not turn up to each session but know the group is happening and will make sporadic appearances, if encouraged to feel free to attend whenever they can. Newsletters about what happens in the group each week works wonders and keeps a sense of continuity in connection between group members which is enormously powerful. The social cohesion created through the provision of groups online and diminishing social isolation, particularly for vulnerable infants, children and mothers is important and is proving highly effective.

Accept our limitations

The older and more experienced you are, often the more accepting you become of your limitations as a worker. For younger and new graduates, this pandemic may be a fast track to accepting that you cannot do everything, save everyone, or know everything. I worry, however, that we may lose some wonderful new workers in this pandemic. Not through COVID but through burnout. It is ok to ask for help. It is ok to say you are overwhelmed and cannot manage your workload and need some support. There will be some incredibly sad and tragic outcomes for clients and workers during this time. We can do our best but, in such times, even our best may well not be enough.

Accepting that bad things sometimes happen is accepting that we have chosen to work in a sector where the infants, children, and families we work with have had more than their fair share of trauma, disadvantage, and harm. We will not always be able to change or prevent negative outcomes. We will, however, more often than not, make a worthwhile difference in the lives of the many people we work with. Recognising that you will have off day/s when you cannot be bothered, when you feel cranky, or do not want to keep going is very normal during these times. If you have experienced your own mental health issues, then it is likely some of these challenges will resurface. This is more reflective of the collective struggle we are all facing than about you! Give yourself a break. Do not hold yourself to such high standards but be gentle with yourself and take on the advice you so often give to your clients. And again, ask for help, talk to your team leader, manager, a trusted colleague, your GP. As workers in the helping profession there is no shame and only enormous benefit and self-development is seeking out our own counselling; something I have consistently done throughout my entire professional career.



Connection, connection, connection

Bruce Perry, in explaining how early neural networks are formed stressed that it is the “repetition, repetition, repetition” of relational experiences which dictate how pathways in the brain are developed. Our ongoing health and wellbeing are forever dependent on “connection, connection, connection” with other people, whether family, friends, or community. These connections embed, feed and water our wellbeing. Now more than ever we need to reach out to others, and in a planned way, as the spontaneity we previously enjoyed is on hold. Giving and receiving is a reciprocal process which energises in different but equally important ways.

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That will be \$1000. Chasing birds is not a reasonable excuse to be outside

