

Utilising Te Whare Tapa Wha to overcome pandemic related stress

Mental Health is an issue that is often overlooked in society, but, it is crucial because the state of our mental health directly impacts our overall well-being. Maintaining positive mental health for youth is specifically essential as we are in the developing stage of life, meaning that we are vulnerable to change¹. During this time of our lives, we begin to gain our identity and learn valuable skills that benefit us for the future. We will inevitably experience stress through our journey to adolescence, some of the common causes of this stress include society's expectations, school and relationships. However, for the youth of 2020, our experience was quite different. Above the public pressure was the additional stress prompted by the global pandemic. COVID-19 affected everyone but the youth most significantly because it interfered with our development and the uncertainty and the lack of physical connection affected the mental health of the youth. The unsettling environment and the constant negative impacts of the media was something we had never experienced before, and it was challenging to maintain our everyday lives in a completely new environment.

There are various ways to overcome stress in times of distress; however, we should begin with a foundation. As New Zealanders, a method that is accessible to implement is 'Te Whare Tapa Whā'. It provides us with the Māori essentials to strengthen and nurture our well-being while being personal to us. The structure emphasises four elements; these are Taha Tinana (physical), Taha Hinengaro (mental), Taha Wairua (spiritual) and Taha Whānau (family).² Some of the youth in New Zealand applied these elements during the lockdown through the support of their schools. For example, Carmel College and its leadership team worked hard to maintain the student's well-being and bring normality to our lives through positivity. By acknowledging each aspect and creating innovative ideas to adapt to our circumstances, we achieved stable mental health. Firstly, Taha Tinana was managed by encouraging exercise challenges like walking and creating our own gym equipment; this was promoted to all students through utilising social media.

Secondly, Taha Wairua and Taha Whānau came as one because both of them reminded us of our importance and identity. Carmel completed this by creating a variety of activities to take part in such as cooking, knitting and more via video calls. It enabled people to feel that same connection and inclusiveness during a time where this was physically impossible. With these innovative ideas and Te Whare Tapa Whā unintentionally at its core, we were able to strengthen our Taha Hinengaro and overall well-being.

¹ Singh, S., Roy, M. D., Sinha, C. P. T. M. K., Parveen, C. P. T. M. S., Sharma, C. P. T. G., & Joshi, C. P. T. G. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations. *Psychiatry research*, 113429.

² Ministry of Health, <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/maori-health/maori-health-models/maori-health-mode-ls-te-whare-tapa-wha>

By incorporating Te Whare Tapa Whā into our lockdown, it contributed hugely to creating an overall balance for our well-being, and it also gave us a sense of hope and positivity moving forward. Coping with stress in a time of distress is no easy task especially for a member of the youth but having a positive state of mind and utilising New Zealand's unique guidelines, will ensure that we achieve our mental health goals. COVID-19 was a learning opportunity, and having such a versatile foundation allowed us to build resilience, which is a concept that is more important than ever, especially because of our continually changing living environment. Having a foundation that we are familiar with will help us in the future with any scenario that comes our way. For the meantime, we must stay prepared and prioritise our well-being and continue to live our lives with optimism and hope.