

Keeping calm and safe – talking with people who are angry or upset about a vaccination order

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As health workers you are likely to experience colleagues and members of the public venting their frustrations over the vaccination mandate.

This can be difficult and exhausting, and unfortunately is likely to be something we all experience over the coming weeks.

The first thing to reinforce is that it is reasonable and important that you keep yourself safe and well.

The tips below are designed to help you feel a little more confident and able to maintain your own safety and sense of calm when you are on the receiving end of strong emotions.

You may also be interested in *Keeping calm and safe – tips for de-escalation*, which outlines some strategies for setting boundaries around what is acceptable behaviour and self-care if behaviour becomes threatening or aggressive.

Why are emotions so strong?

People may be feeling a wide range of very strong emotions from angry, upset, anxious to grieving, outraged and fearful. Understanding some of the beliefs that are driving those emotions can be helpful in understanding what will help a distressed person.

The person may have previously decided not to get the vaccination, truly believing that that is the best way to keep themselves their whānau and friends safe.

The vaccination order is therefore in direct opposition to their belief about what is safe and provokes a full scale fear reaction – which is both psychological and a physiological (often described as the flight or fight response).

One of the ways we all try to reduce our fears and anxieties is to increase our sense of control. For those with low trust in authority or 'the system', the mandate equates to control being taken from them and given to an actor they do not trust. Again this triggers that strong fear reaction.

Misinformation can play a role for some, in terms of decreasing the perceived threat of COVID and increasing fears around the vaccination safety and/or state intervention.

You won't know the exact reasons for the person to have such strong emotions.

The person may also be isolated by the vaccination stance they have taken. They are likely to have experienced negativity from people around them who are pro-vaccination and are frustrated with their decision not to get vaccinated.

Alternatively, the community they are in, may be strongly sceptical and so getting vaccinated will potentially feel like they are risking those close relationships.

Respond with respect and empathy

Even when we disagree with someone's beliefs we can empathise with their distress and with their struggle. By showing that we care and that we empathise, we are likely to diffuse the intense emotion and enable them to be calm enough to move forward with vaccination.

Showing you care and recognise that this has been a difficult decision for them to come to get vaccinated, will support the person to manage their conflicted thoughts and emotions.

Acknowledging the strength of emotion can be helpful "I can see you feel really strongly about this." Resist the urge to tell someone to "calm down", as usually the opposite happens.

Notice your own emotions and keep calm. If you start to get wound up, take some slow breaths and maintain a steady voice tone and rate.

Strong emotions can be overwhelming. If the person continues to be highly emotional, focus on de-escalation of the emotions (see *Keeping calm and safe – tips for de-escalation* or *Supporting someone who is anxious* resources).

If the person is able to calm their emotions sufficiently, you can use open questions and active listening to encourage them to share and explore their concerns:

Ask: Open questions can help you learn about their beliefs and fears – "Tell me about.." "Help me understand..."

Listen: Override the temptation to jump in as soon as they say something you disagree with or think is wrong. Be curious, with a goal to understand what matters to them.

Reflect: Active listening helps build trust – reflect back what the person has said and check you have understood “It sounds like you are thinking/wondering/worrying about... have I understood that correctly?”

Explore: Often the first response gives you limited insight, ask further exploratory questions to understand the underlying beliefs and assumptions and to start to build a picture of how they have developed these beliefs. “You’ve talked about... I am keen to understand more about that.” “Help me understand, how did you come to the view that.....is true?”

Feelings Check: Pause and check-in on how you and they are feeling. Ask them “Is anything I can do that would be helpful for you at this moment?”

Talking about the vaccine mandate

Your role is not to argue the rights or wrongs of the mandate. The mandate is part of your work context in the same way that policies, protocols and regulations determine many aspects of our working lives.

Getting into an argument is unlikely to shift thinking and is likely to raise frustrations for all.

Expressing empathy for the fact that the mandate has created a challenging situation for the person can help to show that you care about them and their concerns.

Your goal is to support them with the distress they are experiencing.

Having a good understanding of the reasons for the mandate can also make you feel more confident in conversation.

The notes below might be helpful for this:

- Vaccinations are part of a wide range of public health actions that we are all taking to help reduce the risk of spread and illness from COVID-19 along with masks, physical distancing, handwashing, and scanning.
- The evidence shows that vaccination is a vital and safe measure for significantly reducing infection and transmission.
- Many of our government laws and regulations are designed to create safety for our community as a whole and to protect the vulnerable in society. Other examples include road safety and water safety laws.
- We have many health and safety regulations determined by Worksafe and our organisations, which we comply with every day, for example fire safety.
- Some people are at higher risk of contracting the virus due to their workplace or role and/or are more likely to come into contact with vulnerable people or people who cannot be vaccinated.
- As health professionals we take many actions to keep our patients safe, including germ and infection control procedures.

COVID-19

- We need as many workers as possible to be vaccinated to reduce infection across the workforce, to allow our health services to respond to the pandemic and deliver everyday health services with as little disruption as possible.
- The mandate is designed to protect our valued workforce and vulnerable patients/students/members of the community.

For further resources check out: [How to talk to your friends and whānau about the COVID-19 vaccine | Unite against COVID-19 \(covid19.govt.nz\)](#)