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Online scams, abuse and bullying predicted to rise

NZ's online safety organisation shares advice to protect people as international pandemic takes hold

As Coronavirus (COVID-19) takes hold and people avoid physical contact and start to rely on virtual connections, Netsafe are urging people to be vigilant to opportunistic scammers, fake news and possible online abuse.

“Reports from around the world indicate there has been an increase in abuse and harassment online due to COVID-19,” says Martin Cocker, Netsafe CEO. “Our expectation is that Kiwis will be more supportive than abusive, but it is a good time to remind people of their rights and responsibilities under the Harmful Digital Communications Act.”

There have already been reports of xenophobic abuse, breaches of the 10 Communication Principles and social media pile-ons. Cocker says anyone who was aware of such conduct should use Netsafe's free service for expert incident advice.

The Harmful Digital Communications Act says it is illegal for anyone to send or publish threatening, offensive or sensitive material and spread damaging rumours. Individuals can be punished by up to two years in prison or a maximum fine of up to \$50,000.

Reports of Coronavirus scams have also emerged this week. While the scams are different in nature, they all have a common theme in that they are trying to obtain your personal information and financial details.

Scammers are setting up fake websites selling items such as medical-grade masks, sending emails and texts purporting to be from the World Health and claiming to “cure” COVID-19 with teas and oils.

Cocker said everyone needed to check the emails and texts they received were from the official organisation purported to be the sender. “Often these types of emails use a very similar domain name extension that is easy to be confused by.”

Meanwhile, Netsafe is warning those wanting the most accurate health information about COVID-19 to rely only on the Ministry of Health website rather than social media posts penned by people not qualified or responsible for distributing critical updates.

Online safety tips to protect NZ as international pandemic takes hold

- 1. Be wary of unusual requests for your personal information or financial details**
- 2. Report spam text messages to 7726 for the DIA to investigate**
- 3. Use your critical thinking skills to determine what's fact and what's fake**
- 4. Check out CERT NZ's tips on how to stay secure when working remotely**
- 5. Visit [netsafe.org.nz](https://www.netsafe.org.nz) or call 0508 NETSAFE for online safety advice and expertise**

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About the Harmful Digital Communications Act

The Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA) was passed in 2015 to help people dealing with serious or repeated harmful digital communications. It lays out 10 communication principles that guide how to communicate online.

The Act covers any harmful digital communications (like text, emails or social media content) which can include racist, sexist and religiously intolerant comments – plus those about disabilities or sexual orientation.

The 10 Communication Principles state that a digital communication should not:

1. disclose sensitive personal facts about an individual
2. be threatening, intimidating, or menacing
3. be grossly offensive to a reasonable person in the position of the affected individual
4. be indecent or obscene
5. be used to harass an individual
6. make a false allegation
7. contain a matter that is published in breach of confidence
8. incite or encourage anyone to send a message to an individual for the purpose of causing harm to the individual
9. incite or encourage an individual to commit suicide
10. denigrate an individual by reason of colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability

About Netsafe

Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety. We keep people safe online by providing free support, advice and education. Visit netsafe.org.nz for useful resources or call 0508 638 723 seven days a week for help with an online incident.