



Why do some autistic people find the sight of PPE distressing?



Before supporting a person who is distressed, it is important to consider the situation from their point of view. Thinking about why they might be distressed helps us to respond in the most appropriate, effective, and compassionate way.

Consider your own experience of masks. Reflect on where we see mask imagery in society, the media and internet. Often these are situations that have frightening connotations – horror films, news stories about crime, or medical emergencies. PPE usually indicates “danger” and masks often indicate fear and something to hide. Imagine if you had a phobia of dentists and suddenly everyone, even your trusted support staff looked like a dentist...



It is important to consider how a person's sensory processing works.

Some autistic people process visual information atypically. They may be creating the 'whole' from a sum of its parts. There may be additional difficulties with recognising faces (prosopagnosia). Some autistic people see things in a disjointed or pixelated way, and this can increase under stress (and seeing your support worker wearing a mask is likely to be stressful!).

Voices sound different from behind a mask. Lip reading becomes impossible. If your auditory processing works in a way that hears everything unfiltered, then there is no visual clue to prompt you to pay attention to the speaking person.

Coping with change can be very difficult – if the world seems disorganised and chaotic because of your atypical sensory and cognitive processing, you may try and make sense of it by creating rules and routines to live by that help things feel more predictable and safe. Things that suddenly appear different, or changed, or out of place can feel distressing, painful, and terrifying.

We have put together some tips for supporting people who may be distressed.



Top Tips for supporting people who find PPE distressing.

- Respond to each person as an individual.
- For some people, clear masks may help because the mouth can be seen; but for others this may look even more disjointed or distressing.
- Names written on masks and a photo attached to the mask, may help people to recognise who is who.
- Clear face shields that cover the whole face may be preferable to masks that hide the mouth (the whole face is within the outline of the mask so is easier to visually process)
- Do staff have to wear masks? All the time? How can it be minimised? Might there be opportunities over the course of the day when masks or face coverings are not necessary?
- Take time for sensory regulation for everyone involved – if possible, at frequent intervals throughout the day. These are unprecedented times.
- Acknowledge the distress that people might be feeling – recognise how this can affect interactions.
- Consistency across staff teams. Some people may cope better if there is a rule about masks that is communicated clearly and stuck to rigidly.
- Involve the individual in choosing (or making) a mask for their support staff to use. Staff need to wear the same type of mask each time if possible and try different styles (if available) to see what works best.
- If the staff member puts the mask on in front of the person they are supporting, it may be less distressing than suddenly being faced by an unfamiliar sight.
- Explanations may help. Social stories or YouTube videos might help. <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/> Recognise that the issue may not be solely about understanding, and an explanation or aim to desensitise the person could be counterproductive.
- Communication. Use visual communication as well as talking if this is helpful or indicate clearly with a sign that you are talking to someone. They may not be looking at your face because of the mask and to avoid eye contact so may have no idea the muffled voice is coming from you - or is directed towards them.
- Keep things familiar wherever you can to provide predictability and a feeling of safety. Staff should behave in their typical way (e.g. having a joke) and wear easily recognisable clothes or do other things that reinforce to the person they are supporting that they are the same – just dressed differently.