autism
wellbeing

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. 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.