

Wellbeing in PPE



Coping with anxiety in PPE

- Be kind to yourself if experiencing anxiety; this is a strange & unnatural way to work so will take some getting used to.
- Know that this is a natural response; the way the body feels in PPE (restricted, difficult to breathe, tense, sweaty) mimics the symptoms of anxiety so tricks the mind into thinking it should be anxious. Remember you are not in any danger in PPE, it is there for your safety.
- You are never trapped while in PPE; it is clothing which will come off, it is a room which you will leave.
- PPE can seem like something scary, yet it represents caring & compassion; wearing PPE is the best way to show we are taking care of others safely, it is a kind thing to do. PPE is an ugly duckling that just wants to be loved.
- Connect with your values; if we have a good reason for doing something this helps us put up with the discomfort. E.g. I value providing safe care to patients who need me so I am willing to wear PPE.
- Plan ahead to ensure you use the strategies on this sheet, such as preparing well, movement and breaks.
- Practice first, e.g. wear a mask while at home so that you can get used to the feel of it just being there. Notice that you can relax & be less bothered by it if you keep practicing.
- Use breathing techniques if you notice anxiety; try our star breathing, box breathing, lazy 8 breathing or triangle breathing techniques.
- Break things down into small chunks so that they are less overwhelming, e.g. break tasks down into small steps & focus on only one step at a time. Break the shift down into 2 hour chunks & focus on getting through only 2 hours at a time.
- Use a buddy system on shift; pair up so that you have somebody who will look out for you and who you will look out for in return.
- Share your experiences with others; you will not be the only one feeling this way & you might be able to share what works. Sharing how you feel with a supervisor could help with planning ahead for what you'll need on shift to feel less anxious.

Taking care of others

- Be mindful of the power imbalance between people who have very little clothing on & those fully covered up. Patients might feel extra vulnerable & exposed.
- Remind yourself what you look like - look in the mirror – even though you get used to it, try not to forget how weird & frightening this could be for others.
- Large visible face/name badges will help both patients & staff to feel human, connected & safe.
- Leave orientating or reassuring information with patients where possible, such as clocks, calendars, pictures & information sheets – as you will not be able to do as much through your patient-professional relationship.
- Look out for signs of anxiety in others, or be aware of those who might be anxious, and offer regular proactive reassurance.
- Some patients & staff might not want to say they are struggling so check-in with others regularly.



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Prepare well

- Acknowledge any thoughts & feelings that might arise, such as frustration with things taking longer in PPE, try to make room for these rather than fight them.
- Make sure you have eaten, hydrated & have gone to the bathroom.
- Try sports clothing & underwear; it wicks away sweat, keeps you cool & is comfortable.

Orientation & spatial awareness

- Walk around the space when you first put on the PPE to understand spatial obstacles & plan your routes.
- Keep items in the same places to build familiarity & sense of safety; avoid changing the order or layout of things without telling others first.
- You may lack peripheral vision so keep turning your whole body to look around.

Movement

- Keep stretching; you will move & stand differently in PPE so will engage different muscles which is more tiring.
- Keep an upright posture & avoid slouching; it's more comfortable in the long-run!
- Don't just turn your head; turn your head, shoulders & chest to relieve the neck - the neck will be carrying more weight now. Use core muscles to turn.
- Wearing anything over the eyes will create strain; stretch & flex your face muscles, from your forehead to your jaw. Relax the face. Let's avoid those squinting & frowning wrinkles.
- If in gloves, give your hands & fingers a wiggle to stay connected with your sense of touch.

Communication

- Try to speak in a low pitch; a lower voice cuts through background noise better & can be more soothing to others.
- Annunciate; pronounce words slowly & clearly.
- Try a shared visual language, such as Makaton, for basic signals.
- Write things down, carry a notepad or use a white board.
- Directly face the person you are communicating with & make eye contact.

Breaks

- Take regular breaks to rest, hydrate, cool down & be in the quiet – give your senses a break.
- Plan breaks for the shift so you know when your next break is & others can remind you to go.
- Get outside to connect with nature as often as you can, both on work and non-work days.

Adapted from: UCL NHS Foundation Trust & Performing Medicine: Coping with Personal Protective Equipment

Speaking

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