



EMPLOYEE SERIES

Tips to Manage the Impact of Mask Wearing on People with Complex Trauma

People with trauma histories may be triggered when asked to wear a mask or when they see them. A trigger is an internal or external cue which stimulates our senses to throw us back into a time of earlier trauma experiences.

Here are a couple of reasons people may be triggered by masks:

- Traumatic medical or dental procedures
- Feelings of not being able to breathe (i.e. exposed to bushfires or house fires)
- Assault by someone wearing a mask
- Feelings of discomfort as they are unable to see facial expressions and read non-verbal cues
- Feelings of confusion and uncertainty as voices can be muffled and it may make it hard to enunciate
- A mask may be a symbol of being silenced, or of not trusting

Many survivors of trauma are on high alert looking for cues of present danger because their previous experience of the world is that it is dangerous. Having rules imposed - even for our own protection and wellbeing - can feel disempowering. This feeling can trigger traumatic memories or times we felt powerless or choiceless. When a person is triggered it is normal for them to go into a fight, flight or freeze survival response.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing difficulty with wearing masks it is important to be as tuned into your body as you can be. This will help identify the early signs of being triggered and you can implement strategies to help calm your nervous system. This helps to turn off the stress response. Also remember that we are all different and that what helps one person calm their nervous system may not be helpful to someone else

Tips for managing the stress response are as below:

- ✔ Be gentle with yourself if you are triggered and understand that this is a normal reaction for you to have
- ✔ Breathe mindfully: Breathing slower and deeper can help reduce any panic

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-  Engage your senses: What can you see, hear, smell, touch or taste. This will help to keep you mindful and can help stop the stress, worry or panic.
-  Wear headphones and play soothing music or some of your favourite tune while you are wearing your mask to help calm yourself
-  Chewing, humming, chanting or singing can get key muscles working to stimulate an important nerve (vagus) which can help calm your nervous system
-  Building your own resilience through daily walks, long baths, meditation (if it suits you), connection with pets and nature – we are all different. You choose what works best for you!
-  Connection with others is important. Even when we are physically distanced, we can stay connected with people we trust and with whom we feel safe.

References: <https://blueknot.org.au/resources/blue-knot-fact-sheets/covid-19/face-masks-and-complex-trauma/>

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