

Face Masks and Complex Trauma

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet for people affected by complex trauma

Masks are increasingly being recommended within Australia as well as globally. In some areas they are now mandatory. But it is important to understand why many of us with trauma histories may be triggered when we are asked to wear a mask, or even when we 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.

Such experiences vary enormously. For some people it may be as a result of medical or dental procedures. For others it may reignite feelings of not being able to breathe, such as in the recent bushfires. Some survivors may have been assaulted by a person wearing a mask. For many survivors, the feeling of being trapped and helpless is all too familiar. It can cause feelings of panic and of being suffocated. So too is the discomfort of not being able to see another person's face to help us read the non-verbal cues so we know what is happening. For others, a mask may be a symbol of being silenced, or of not trusting.

Many survivors are on high alert looking for cues of present danger in a world which was previously dangerous. Masks mean that we cannot pick up facial cues as we usually do, or hear voices clearly as they may be muffled, and a person's tone may be harder to identify. For some people such as people who lip read, wearing a mask may stop them being able to communicate at all.

For many survivors as well as many people who have not experienced trauma before, this time of physical isolation raises feelings of stress and anxiety. With the COVID-19 pandemic there is a pervasive threat and a feeling of not knowing. Many survivors of complex trauma have long struggled to be and feel safe. Many of us are anxious and feeling unsafe, with the very real fear of infection and illness. Having rules imposed - even for our own protection and wellbeing - can feel disempowering. This feeling can trigger prior traumatic memories of times during which we had no power or choice. Face marks are a very visible sign that things are not normal and that there is a threat around us.

Many survivors are sensitised to threat and live with nervous systems which are on high alert. This means that we are easily triggered by reminders of previous trauma and thrown back into a fight, flight or freeze survival response. When this happens, our thinking brain goes off-line, and we are in reactive mode. Our body remembers the trauma we experienced before.

It is important to be as tuned into your body as you can be. This is so you can pick up the early signs of being triggered and use different grounding and breathing techniques 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.

Here are some suggestions which we hope you find useful:

- When you are triggered try to recognise your body reactions and identify that you have been triggered, and that you are now wearing a mask to help you stay safe
- At first, try to limit the amount of time which you wear a mask, and increase it gradually to see how your body reacts
- You may like to decorate your mask to see if it feel less of a threat when it has your design on it
- Be gentle with yourself if you are triggered and understand that this is a normal reaction for you to have
- Breathe mindfully: breathe deeply down to your belly; put your hand on your tummy and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. Breathing slower and deeper can help reduce any 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.
- Connection with others remains important. Even when we are physically distanced, we can stay connected with people we trust and with whom we feel safe.

Latest health advice regarding COVID-19 can be found here:
<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-news-and-media>

