

Evidence check

30 September 2021

Rapid evidence checks are based on a simplified review method and may not be entirely exhaustive, but aim to provide a balanced assessment of what is already known about a specific problem or issue. This brief has not been peer-reviewed and should not be a substitute for individual clinical judgement, nor is it an endorsed position of NSW Health.

Therapeutic sessions and personal protective equipment

Evidence check question

How does the wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE) impact on therapeutic sessions with adults and children who have experienced domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect?

In brief

- There is limited evidence on how the wearing of PPE impacts on therapeutic sessions with adults and children who have experienced domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect.
- Most of the literature focuses on face masks rather than PPE.
- One peer-reviewed qualitative study of three cases from the UK found the wearing of face coverings to be a potentially significant stressor. For one individual, wearing a facemask felt like a hand covering their mouth.¹ Another case study reported that mandated face masking in public may exacerbate post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in victims who were assaulted by masked perpetrators or had their mouth and nose covered by the perpetrator during the assault.²
- Many experiences have been described in the grey literature including newsletters and blogs. Overall, the themes described are:
 - Face masks can make it difficult for others to hear, appear threatening to some clients, and make it difficult to fully express facial emotions.³⁻⁵
 - Masks can trigger old trauma for adults and children who have experienced violence, assault, abuse or neglect.⁶⁻¹⁰
 - Virtual sessions can assist in face-to-face therapy.¹¹
 - Clinicians and clients adapted quickly to mask wearing.¹²
- Coping strategies to assist those who have experienced trauma in complying with face mask requirements include: flash cards; grounding techniques that use sight, smell, sound, and taste; cognitive techniques.¹
- The British Psychological Society has developed a guide for practising psychologists which includes suggestions to help overcome PPE challenges, such as: creating new positive associations with PPE; printing photo of face on A4 paper to attach to torso with name badge; practising a range of different interactional techniques, such as exaggerating movement, slowing down talk and smiling with eyes.³

Limitations

Almost all the studies identified focused on mask wearing during therapeutic sessions and there was very limited evidence on PPE more broadly. It was not clear in many of the included studies whether the patient cohort was adults and children who have experienced domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect; therefore, broader studies on psychology/therapy sessions were included.

The type of PPE that was used during therapeutic sessions was not always clear in the literature. Much of the included literature is opinion based and empirical data is lacking. Whilst results were not limited to COVID-19, most of the findings were related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, service providers conducting therapeutic sessions with adults and children who have experienced domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect have enforced mask wearing in some settings.¹³ This evidence check aims to synthesise evidence on how this use of PPE impacts on therapeutic sessions with adults and children who have experienced domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect.

Methods (Appendix 1)

PubMed and Google were searched on 10 September 2021.

Results

Table 1. Peer-reviewed literature

Source	Summary
Peer reviewed sources	
COVID-19 and how the wearing of face coverings can affect those with an experience of trauma ¹ Welfare-Wilson et al. 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This qualitative study in the UK includes three personal stories and indicates that mask wearing by victims of violence can trigger their past traumas. As explained by one participant: <i>"Wearing a face covering feels like a hand over my mouth, but it's not just any hand, it's his hand (hand of the perpetrator), and although part of me logically knows that I can take the covering off and I will be able to breathe, in that moment I'm back there and I can't breathe again."</i> For most people wearing a face covering is a new experience encountered in the context of a global pandemic, both of which are potentially significant stressors. Coping strategies to assist those who have experienced trauma in complying with this important safety measure include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> flash cards grounding techniques that use sight, smell sound and taste cognitive techniques. The nature of the experience of trauma in this study was not explicit.

Source	Summary
Peer reviewed sources	
Posttraumatic stress disorder exacerbation as a result of public masking in times of COVID-19² Jolly et al. 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This case report study presents two cases of post-traumatic stress disorder exacerbation in the context of public masking, which led to inpatient psychiatric hospitalisation. • Case one: a sexual assault victim attacked by a masked perpetrator admitted to hospital due to severe panic attacks and flashbacks related to post-traumatic stress disorder. • Case two: a child sexual abuse victim admitted to hospital due to suicidal ideations, with the re-emergence of flashbacks and intrusive memories of sexual assault during which her mouth and nose were covered by the perpetrator. • This study concluded that public masking may exacerbate people's post-traumatic stress disorder. Further research is needed to assess the impact of mandated masking on psychological outcomes in people with post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychiatric conditions.

Table 2. Grey literature

Source	Summary
Grey literature	
Masks provide COVID-19 protection but can surface old traumas for sexual assault survivors⁶ Rieger 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this newsletter published in Canada, a therapist working with the Central Alberta Sexual Assault Support Centre (CASASC) noted that while wearing a face mask protects people from COVID-19, it can also trigger old traumas for sexual assault survivors as articulated by the therapist below: <i>"One of the issues that comes up is breathing in hot air... we see quite a few kids like that, where they were sexually assaulted may have been under blankets or like some type of restriction, so they were breathing in hot air"</i>
Emotion-Focused Psychotherapy in The Era of Covid-19¹¹ Webster 2020	This qualitative report published by the Annandale Institute in Australia includes the experiences of a psychotherapist and clients. One individual specifically noted that wearing a facial mask in therapeutic sessions is discomforting and requested online therapy to avoid the discomfort: <i>"For me, being in the closed space of a therapy room for an hour would require both me and my therapist wearing a mask as well as keeping social distance. This rather misses the point of face-to-face therapy. At least on Zoom I can see the full range of my therapist's expression. And having my therapist in my home is comforting."</i>
Wearing a Mask During Therapy: Clinicians Share	The Dorm in the US reports clinicians acknowledged that wearing masks is a significant adjustment, however they indicated that most clinicians

Source	Summary
Grey literature	
Their Insights and Experience ¹² The Dorm 2021	<p>and clients adapted quickly during therapy and viewed mask wearing during meetings as important for their own safety. One participant noted:</p> <p><i>“As with most tasks these days – it’s getting used to a new normal! At first, it was a different experience not being able to communicate with some facial expressions – but much more can be communicated with eyes than I initially realised. I find that wearing a mask does not interfere with connection during sessions – if anything it provides new space to be authentically connected to each other. We are all wearing masks in sessions in order to keep each other safe.”</i></p>
Returning to the workplace: Safety considerations for practising psychologists ³ British Psychological Society 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The British Psychological Society notes that despite being considered part of safe-working, the use of PPE presents the risk of psychological and emotional barriers between psychologists and their clients. • Notably, they mention that face masks can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ make it difficult for others to hear ○ appear threatening to some clients ○ make it difficult to fully express facial emotions. • They have developed a guide for practising psychologists that include suggestions to help overcome PPE challenges, such as creating new positive associations with PPE. They are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Printing photo of face on A4 paper to attach to torso with name badge (depersonalisation). ○ Practising a range of different interactional techniques, such as exaggerating movement, slowing down talk, smiling with eyes, among others.
Doing Therapy with Masks And Other Considerations As We All Face The “New Normal.” Martincin 2020 ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A blog post of a health worker for a large hospital in the US highlighted several uncertainties regarding whether to wear a mask or not when engaging with clients. • The health worker was concerned about her inability to convey non-verbal information to clients and was worried about situations where the clients have a hearing impairment and relied on lip reading and facial expressions.
Mask Requirements during COVID-19 Bring Challenges for Survivors of Strangulation ⁷ Snow 2020	<p>This report by a Clinical Services Supervisor in the US indicates that the use of face masks during COVID-19 can be a trigger for survivors of strangulation as the masks feel restrictive and an individual may feel as though they cannot breathe as freely, which is reminiscent of the traumatic strangulation experience.</p>
Sexual assault survivors tackle trauma to stay COVID-safe, self-isolate and wear face masks ⁸	<p>In this report in Australia, the memories of a sexual assault survivor’s trauma were triggered by a request to wear a face mask:</p> <p><i>“When I was assaulted my mouth was covered... the sensation of a mask being over my mouth is very similar to the assault.”</i></p>

Source	Summary
Grey literature	
Bamford 2020	
Covid-19: Are you concerned about wearing a mask? ⁹ The Survivors Trust 2021	The Survivors Trust in the UK found in a survey that clients covering their own faces or seeing the faces of others covered has been a fear-triggering experience for them.
COVID-19 Masks Can Be Triggering for Sexual Assault Survivors ¹⁰ Estey & Bomberger, LLP 2020	This opinion piece published by Estey & Bomberger in the US notes that wearing a mask may mimic a survivor's sexual assault experience. This is because, during some assaults, a perpetrator may have covered the survivor's mouth, strangled them, or forced the survivor into a position where it was difficult for them to breathe.
Anti-Violence Frontline Work During Covid-19 ⁵ Schwarz & Welch. 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In this qualitative report involving 17 telephone interviews with frontline workers from 8 organisations in the US, the interviewees mentioned that mask policies created new challenges or heightened already emotional moments. For example, one administrator/program manager explained that wearing masks was a necessary health practice that also limited certain social interactions and interpersonal connections as noted in the following quote: <i>"...sometimes, is a lot, and trying to connect with people and interact with people in a meaningful way when half of your face [...] is covered up, that takes a lot of body language away. And that's really, really important for me, when I'm dealing with staff or when I'm dealing with clients. Very important. You can also see more of their emotions and issues, you know, when they're not covered up."</i>

Appendix one

PubMed search terms

Search 1: ("PPE"[Title/Abstract] OR "personal protective equipment"[Title/Abstract] OR "therapy"[Title/Abstract] OR "counselling"[Title/Abstract] OR "therapeutic session"[Title/Abstract]) AND ("domestic violence"[Title/Abstract] OR "family violence"[Title/Abstract]) Filters: from 2020 – 2021

46 hits

Search 2: ("stress disorders, post traumatic"[MeSH Terms] OR "ptsd"[Title/Abstract] OR "sex offenses"[MeSH Terms] OR "sexual violence"[Title/Abstract] OR "sexual assault"[Title/Abstract] OR "domestic violence"[MeSH Terms] OR "domestic violence"[Title/Abstract] OR "family violence"[Title/Abstract]) AND ("personal protective equipment"[MeSH Terms] OR "personal protective equipment"[Title/Abstract] OR "PPE"[Title/Abstract] OR "face mask"[Title/Abstract] OR "face covering*"[Title/Abstract])

50 hits

Google search terms

- “impact or effect of wearing PPE on therapeutic sessions with victims of domestic or family violence, sexual assault, abuse or neglect”
- “effects or impact of protective equipment on counselling or therapy or therapeutic session for victims of domestic or family violence or abuse”

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