PERFORMING MEDICINE

NHS
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COPING WITH PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

TOP TIPS FROM ACTORS USED TO WORKING IN RESTRICTIVE CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Healthcare professionals are reporting feelings of discomfort, isolation, and difficulty communicating when wearing PPE.

Actors are used to wearing restrictive costumes, masks, puppets, animatronics and prosthetics. Here, they offer some simple tips that may be useful when wearing PPE, and share some photos of their extraordinary outfits for your entertainment.

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PREPARATION

Prepare well: tie hair back, wash your hands and remove jewellery.

Make sure you are hydrated and have gone to the bathroom.

Try to warm up a bit before you put on the gear, gentle stretches and getting joints moving helps.

When in stressful gear the first thing that can get restricted is breathing. Take a moment to make sure you are breathing freely within the limitations.

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ORIENTATION & SPATIAL AWARENESS

Walk around the space carefully when you first put on the gear to understand any spatial obstacles or challenges there may be.

Plan your routes and physical techniques for negotiating the environment.

Consistency of equipment layout is paramount. If someone changes the order or layout of things without telling the person in restrictive gear, there can be an instantaneous breakdown of trust in oneself, in the environment and in colleagues.

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MOVEMENT

Different clothing and equipment will make you stand differently and can be tiring - engaging different core muscles. Try to be aware of keeping an upright posture as it's more comfortable in the long run.

Economise with movement when you can.

Try learning a routine of small stretches you can do, making absolutely sure you do not touch your face and the gear remains fully intact.

When wearing goggles or head gear - don't just turn your head - turn head, shoulders and chest at the same to time to relieve neck. Use core muscles to turn.

Working in a visor can be tiring and can affect your vision. Try to release tension regularly by stretching and flexing your face muscles, from your forehead to your jaw.

Give your hands and fingers a wiggle from time to time to stay connected to your sense of touch and to keep a feeling of connection, sensitivity and vitality in your hands.

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UNIFORMITY

When you are all in the same gear it is really difficult to tell who is who. Put a name label on your back, as well as your front.

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NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Think about developing a shared physical language with those you communicate with regularly. Agree basic signals before wearing any gear and practise without head gear but with the rest of the outfit on.

Keep your movements assertive. A nod can be mistaken for a panicked shaken head and vice versa.

Lack of peripheral vision is a real issue. If you want your colleague to look at something (if you are both in PPE) take both their hands in yours and turn them to face you. This can save loads of time and frustration.

Try to face colleagues directly to make communication easier.

Eye contact is paramount. The most your colleagues and patients will see of you are your eyes. Engage and enliven them.

Be mindful of the power imbalance between people who have on very little clothing and those fully covered up.

Trust that you are able to connect and communicate beyond the outfit - that your intention will shine through. If you are present and connected the people around you will feel that.

Listen.

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SPEAKING

Instead of raising your voice and speaking in higher pitch to be heard, try to speak low. Let your voice drop down - a lower voice can cut through and be more resonant and soothing to others.

Don't trail off at the end of sentences - get to the end of the thought.

Annunciate. Articulating consonants of words improves clarity.

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ACKNOWLEDGE & ACCEPT WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE

What you are wearing affects everything - how you think, how you behave, it affects who you are.

It's important to acknowledge that, and to remind yourself what you look like. Look in the mirror. Don't forget how weird this is for others.

Try to make it human, by acknowledging the restriction and difficulty.

Use humour with colleagues - try to enjoy, to embrace it; even in difficult circumstances.

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BREATHING TECHNIQUES & BODY-SCANS

There are a range of breathing techniques and simple body scans that can be done in short periods of time – 1 to 5 minutes – to help deal with claustrophobia, anxiety or stress.

Root the feet into the ground, lengthen the spine, loosen the jaw, smile.

Take 20 seconds when you can and try to take your attention outside or away from the outfit or mask.

FOCUS ON ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Your breath. Breathe in for 4 and out for 8. Do this twice.
- The floor. Focus on the contact between your feet and the floor.
- Your skeleton. Imagine the bones of your body from the feet up the legs and spine to the head.
- The space above you. Focus for a moment on the space above the head.

Try closing your eyes and meditating inside your suit if you have any downtime.

Remember everything's temporary; and the time will come when you take the equipment off.

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BREAKS

When wearing restrictive gear and PPE it is essential to take regular breaks to rest, even if it is an effort to change; sweating or becoming itchy can lead to you touching your face.

Create rest stations out of the way of the action. Have water, rehydration pouches, chairs, even a fan.

Have a person whose job it is to look after the staff in your shift. Maybe create a rota amongst yourselves.

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LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

Tell colleagues what is working well. Have some tips that you can pass from shift to shift. Share your successes.

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CLOTHING

Contrary to instinct, wearing very little under a full body suit is a bad idea; when it gets sweaty your skin can stick to the suit and make it sore.

Don't wear loose fitting clothing under a body suit as it bunches up and, when it gets sweaty, can actually make you feel more uncomfortable and claustrophic.

Sports clothing, made from technical fabrics, wicks sweat away from your body and keeps you cool. It also washes well and dries quickly.

Think about underwear! Sports socks, sports bras and pants really make a difference to comfort.

Take all your underclothes off when you take off your gear, put them in a separate bag and change into a completely different outfit.

Wash these in a separate clothing cycle to isolate them from your everyday clothes and keep some boundaries between work gear and personal gear.

Different people have very different sweat patterns - if you have a sweat problem, flag it - so you can have extra breaks and change clothes.

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OVERHEATING

When you are wearing something that makes you hot, it can take a long time to get your temperature down. Control temperature efficiently with frequent breaks rather than 'pushing through'.

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WHEN YOU TAKE IT OFF

It is essential to take as much care taking off equipment (and disposing of it), as you do putting it on.

It's important to take pleasure in the feeling of release.

Try to wear something nice afterwards, or something super comfortable.

Take time to warm down - like an athlete would after a marathon – take the physical demands seriously.

Really stretch out your body - enjoy the amount of space you have.

Take time to be still, to recover, to get your bearings.

Don't rush.

Replenish with good food and water.

Give yourself or a colleague a reward.

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TALK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE

Talk about the experience of wearing the equipment with others, when you're not in it.

Check in with others regularly. Some might not admit they're struggling unless they're asked.

YOU ARE DOING AN AMAZING JOB

THANK YOU

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