

Communication skills for staff wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)



The global COVID-19 pandemic has affected how healthcare workers and the people who use our services experience face-to-face consultations. People are fearful that they may be seriously ill or become seriously ill as a result of viruses and staff are fearful that they may be infected with viruses by their patients. These fears are increased by the need for staff to wear PPE which can make them appear intimidating and disguises their non-verbal communication. In these circumstances, core communication skills, particularly those required to establish and maintain a supportive therapeutic relationship are particularly important. And these skills need to be adapted to circumstances where opportunities to use touch for example, are limited or prohibited. **Remember it is both what we say and how we say it that will be remembered.**

Making conversations easier



“ It’s very daunting for the patient. All they see from when they come through the doors are people coming to them wearing PPE. They already feel vulnerable and afraid, and PPE takes away the humanity.

Impact on the person

PPE can heighten fears of isolation and people being cared for by healthcare staff in PPE can feel vulnerable and afraid. If staff haven’t previously met the patient, PPE can also pose a significant challenge to building rapport. The quality of the patients’ experience with staff wearing PPE can be affected by:

- the inability to engage in usual nonverbal social behaviours, such as handshakes/fist bumps, leaning in, and facial cues.
- the sense of disconnect and distraction created by the PPE and difficulty hearing what the person or healthcare worker is saying due to reduced speech clarity. This, combined with the loss of lip reading and visual cues, can make communication between staff and the people who use our services extremely difficult.

These barriers compound the existing obstacles to interpersonal interactions, such as cultural and language differences between patients and staff. Despite some barriers, demonstrating empathy is possible while wearing PPE.

Communication skills

Communication is at the heart of everything we do. It’s central to our relationships, our work and our leisure interests. But it’s particularly important in healthcare, where a patient can feel vulnerable, alone and frightened. Research suggests that demonstrating empathy and understanding of a person’s ideas and concerns enhances their experience. It may also lead to better healthcare outcomes, due to increased adherence to agreed treatment plans.

The protective gear renders communication between colleagues, and between staff and the patient, more difficult. *“It’s really difficult to hear each other”* so what can healthcare workers do to address this?

Calgary-Cambridge Guide

Communication skills

We don't intend to tell you exactly what to say, instead we are highlighting certain skills and providing a series of useful phrases under the relevant sections of the Calgary-Cambridge Guide.

Providing structure

- Make organisation overt
- Attend to flow

Initiating the conversation

- Preparation
- Establish initial rapport
- Identify the reasons for the consultation

Gathering information

- Explore the person's problems
- Understand the person's perspective

Physical examination

Providing information & planning

- Provide right amount and type of information
- Aid recall and understanding
- Incorporate the person's perspective
- Shared decision making and planning

Closing the conversation

- Ensure appropriate point of closure
- Forward planning

Building the relationship

- Greeting and introductions
- Non-verbal behaviour
- Involve the person and share your thinking
- Demonstrate empathy

Adapted From: Silverman, J., Kurtz, S., & Draper, J. Skills for Communicating with Patients (3rd ed). Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing (2013).

Initiating the conversation

Preparation

Prepare yourself

It can be hot and uncomfortable to wear full PPE. Be aware of how you are feeling. Take regular breaks as necessary.

Prepare the environment

Try to minimise background noise or move to a quiet area if possible.

Prepare your information

Read carefully information from colleagues, test results, referrals and letters.

Building the Relationship

Greeting & Introductions

- Ensure that your **name badge** is visible and easy to read.
- **Identification boards** can be useful for staff whose face is covered by personal protective equipment (PPE), for example, photographs of its staff on a board in the wards to help the patient identify with the person behind the mask. So, when introducing yourself, point to the board and say: *"This is me, this is who you are talking to and I'm looking after you today"*.
- Wear a **clear photograph** of your smiling face.

Non-verbal behaviour

- PPE face masks reduce speech clarity and combined with the loss of lip reading and visual cues make communication between staff and person more difficult. If it is possible, use a plastic 'see-through' visor. Face the person and make sure they are looking at you before communicating.
- Look directly at the person and make good eye contact.
- Lighting on your face is important. Try not to stand with a light or window behind you and don't cover your mouth or face with your hand.
- Be responsive in the conversation. Support understanding by intentionally using gestures and body language to communicate information.
- Even though the person may not be able to directly see your face and some of your gestures bear in mind that your non-verbal communication will be transmitted to some degree and will be picked up. Also, allow the person a little more time to pick up on your non-verbal communication as it is disguised by the PPE.

Touch

- Where touch is appropriate, it is okay to use this to comfort the person while wearing PPE.

Positioning

- Do not speak to the person while you are moving about.

Involve the person

Devices

- If the person uses a hearing aid or listening device ensure that they are available and in use.
- Acknowledge the impact that PPE/not shaking hands/distance has on the communication... *"Now I know I appear a bit intimidating dressed in all this gear but I do really want to understand what's being going on for you and how you feel about it all"*.

Gathering information

Explore the person's problems

- The most important thing you can do is to listen carefully to questions and concerns.
- Summarise your understanding of the person's problem(s) – this demonstrates you have understood the person fully, despite the barriers of PPE.
- Name the emotion and use verbal empathy since it can be difficult to express empathy non-verbally while wearing PPE.
- Ask clear, open-ended questions to elicit a list of needs up front.

Understand the person's perspective

- Explore ideas, concerns, and expectations from the person's perspective.

Providing information & planning

Provide right amount and type of information

- **Slow down.** Provide information in small chunks – the additional stress of the consultation means the patient needs more time to process the information you are providing. We normally learn a lot from facial expressions, and if the person is wearing a mask, it can be difficult to gauge their degree of concern or bafflement when you cannot see the bottom half of their face.
- Encourage questions and keep checking understanding *"please stop me if..."*. This allows the person to let you know if they can't understand what you are saying because of the PPE.

Aid recall and understanding

- Speak clearly and at a slightly slower pace, but don't shout or over enunciate mouth movements. Keep your head fairly still.
- The person may want to communicate by note-writing, this will take a little longer, please be patient and if necessary, respond by writing.
- Be prepared to repeat and rephrase information if necessary. Ask questions to check understanding.
- Invite the person or family member to summarise their understanding of the information and/or plan.

Visual aids

- If available, share information leaflets or hand-outs with the patient.
- Refer to visual information (drawings, diagrams or photographs) during conversations.
- Another solution is for staff to use a whiteboard on which to write messages.

Closing the conversation

Ensure appropriate point of closure

- Be sure to finish the consultation with a **clear** plan of how the person is going to continue to receive on-going support. Check for understanding of the plan and any agreed next steps.

Document reference number	NHCG-D-024-1
Document developed by	National Directorate: Public Involvement, Culture and Risk
Version number	V1.1
Document approved by	National Healthcare Communication Group
Approval date	February 2025
Revision date	February 2028