

Coping with “Face Mask” Anxiety

Objective

To identify ways to help you overcome fear and anxiety related to wearing a face mask.

You Should Know

Even though you want to help stop the spread of coronavirus and keep yourself safe, you might be struggling with wearing a face mask. Quite a few people say when they put on a face mask, they worry they will have a difficult time breathing *and their worrying actually makes this come true*. In other words, it is not the mask itself that is causing breathing difficulties, but rather the anxiety about having your mouth covered that causes you to feel your breathing is restricted.

There are also other reasons why people have difficulty wearing a face mask. Check off any of the following statements that apply to you.

- I feel dizzy or sick when I wear a face mask.
- I feel trapped or claustrophobic when I wear a face mask.
- Covering my face changes the way I look, making me feel like I look foolish.
- Having certain materials touch my face bothers me.
- I wear glasses, and they steam up so I cannot see clearly, causing me to feel upset.
- I feel like I am being smothered by the mask.
- My breathing is shallow, and I am afraid I will hyperventilate.

You might not ever feel totally comfortable wearing a face mask; however, there are things you can do to make the experience easier. Here are some tips:

- Get fresh air outside before and after you put on your mask.
- Do something to relax before and after you wear a mask. For example, you might engage in breathing exercises or meditation.
- Choose a face covering that hangs down your neck (a ‘neck gaiter’), rather than one that fits around your jaw.
- Keep your body as cool as possible. For example, wear loose-fitting clothing.
- Add a scent to your mask, such as lavender oil.
- Experiment with different fabric types or ways to secure your mask. Some fit around the ears, some tie behind your head. Take the time to find a face mask that is most comfortable for you.
- Choose a transparent mask or see-through face covering so your face is not obscured.
- Calm yourself by focusing on your surroundings rather than on the face mask.
- Distract yourself. For example, listen to music or podcasts through headphones.

- Remind yourself that wearing a face mask is important for your health and the health of others.
- Use calming statements to get through your anxiety like, “I will be okay,” or “I can get through this.”

Write down ideas from the above list you think will help you cope with wearing a face mask.

These tips might reduce your fear or anxiety, but the best way to overcome your face mask anxiety is to just gradually increase your time wearing a mask – even if it bothers you. First wear a mask for five minutes, then 10 minutes, then 20 minutes, then 30 minutes, then longer if you feel you will be required to wear a mask for longer periods of time (for example, on an airplane). This method of gradually facing your fear and anxiety, also called exposure therapy, is the best way to get over any fear.

Many people tell us that wearing a face mask will be required in some places for months or even years to come, even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. However, the good news is that manufacturers are rushing to improve face masks, making them more comfortable and easier to breathe with them on.

Reflections on This Exercise

What else can you do to reduce your anxiety and distress about wearing a face mask?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
