

## What is mask anxiety and what can I do about it?

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I have attached a document at the end of this article that talks about Mask Anxiety. I have added some of my own comments here hoping that if you struggle with anxiety related to wearing a mask you will find some relief.

Some people become anxious when wearing a face mask or just thinking about wearing a face mask. This would be what some are calling *face mask anxiety*. But it is important to remember that the mask is NOT causing the anxiety. The person's perceptions about the mask are what lead the brain to become anxious. In this way we think of mask anxiety as more of a phobia; an irrational fear or worry about something that would otherwise not be threatening. If a person can change his or her perceptions of what the mask is doing or how it feels, then the anxiety will come down or disappear.

Popular media and opinion have expressed that wearing a mask will significantly alter the level of gases in your blood; while this might be technically true there is no evidence that the alteration will lead to fainting. As stated in the article I have included with this document below, masks have been worn for many years by many people doing very complicated and serious work, without compromising performance.

Anything you think might make you anxious; at a somewhat automatic level your brain alerts to a possible threat (*I might have to put the mask on now*) and the sympathetic nervous system kicks into the "fight or flight" response. You might remember some of this from a high school or college class along the way. Once you are slightly anxious, you are more irritable, sensitive, and vigilant toward things that might make you nervous, but you are also feeling more anxiety at the same time. You now have a perfect storm; you are *thinking* about the threat and you are *feeling* discomfort in your body, so it is easy to assume that the threat is causing you to feel the discomfort, which makes you more uncomfortable, which makes you more convinced it is the threat, which makes you more uncomfortable, etc., etc., etc. And then boom – you are in a room with several other people wearing masks but you are the one breathing fast and shallow and feeling like you might pass out or break into a long session of cussing.



Before we go further, let's focus on the fast and shallow breathing. When people become anxious, they breathe in a fast and shallow manner. They feel they need more air so they breathe faster; but to breathe faster you have to breathe less, or shallower. Oddly, sadly, breathing fast and shallow will tend to make you feel panic because fast and shallow breathing leaves too much carbon dioxide in your lungs. The trick is to do what most classic parents tell their children to do.....*calm down and take deep breaths*. Most athletic coaches will say the same thing to athletes during a time out.....*slow down your breathing and take deep breaths*. Slow and deep breathing allow you to exhale enough carbon dioxide while taking in enough air (oxygen) to keep your blood gas levels optimal.

While taking slow and deep breaths, you then want to ask yourself 1: *What am I afraid will happen?* and 2: *What is actually happening?* The fear of #1 starts you to breathe fast and shallow. The body starts to panic and breathe fast which fools the brain into thinking the danger is real. The vicious cycle keeps spinning until you are not only convinced something bad is going to happen you have caused your body to feel really bad.

The article included with this document is really good, I think. One, it is short, thank goodness. Psychologists can get a bit long winded. Two, it covers the definition of the problem, the symptoms, the causes, and the solutions.

I would just add the following. We all have excessive anxiety about something. For you, it might be wearing a mask; for me, it is riding elevators (I would be so mad if I was stuck on one), for others it might be large crowds, or swimming, or being out in the dark, or having to take a test (remember those days?).



The point is to not feel stupid or weak or immature because of your anxiety. But it is important to not celebrate it either or make it your *special issue* for life. It happens and when it happens the fastest way to get over it is to slowly make yourself do the thing that you THINK will make you anxious. The powerful thing about anxiety is that it will keep us from getting the very experience that will prove to us that we are not being threatened. So, yes, the best thing to do if you have mask anxiety is the following:

- **One:** Don't call it mask anxiety; that just raises it to some special level and you run the risk of feeling entitled to special treatment. It isn't a disability; it is just anxiety that you have when wearing a mask or thinking about wearing a mask. Don't make it out to be something bigger than you; it is yours, you are creating it, which means you can change it. Own the power, not the privilege.
- **Two:** Practice wearing the mask for longer periods of time. Wear it until you are really uncomfortable then take it off and relax. Wait a bit, and then put it back on. Remember the old saying you have to get back on the horse that threw you off?
- **Three:** You don't have to feel great while wearing the mask. Masks are not something humans naturally choose to wear. They can be uncomfortable, hot, they muffle speech, etc. But they are not impossible to wear. Sometimes anxiety can lead to irritability, and then you are miserable and you make the people around you a bit uptight. I don't think anyone really likes wearing a mask, even kids at Halloween will complain eventually about wearing a mask. But not liking it doesn't mean you can't wear it. So, practice, practice, practice. Build up your tolerance, and for crying out loud, take some pride in yourself that you are making it work. It isn't easy for some people, we get that. Don't be ashamed, be proud you are pushing yourself.
- **Four:** As suggested in the article, try to have some fun with the mask. Decorate it, add your own motto or logo, add some pleasant calming aroma to the mask. This, wearing a mask, is NOT forever, but it is for now. And remember that when you wear a mask you are telling people that you care about them. Right? We wear masks for others, not ourselves.

Here is the article I have been mentioning. Give a quick read:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/erasing-stigma/202006/how-combat-mask-anxiety>

Thanks for your efforts to make our campus safer. Be well. Have fun.



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