



COVID-19: Mandatory Mask Mandates: (Associated Anxiety and Coping Strategies)

As we enter the depths of winter, we near almost one full year of evolving challenges related to COVID-19 and the disturbances that many have encountered as a result of the virus and its' profound impact on daily life, both personally and professionally.

In recent weeks, focus has shifted to possible variations of the virus and the distribution of vaccines to combat and limit the spread of COVID-19. With the vaccine comes hope for new norms and the return to common social and business practices. As we move forward, governments and health authorities at all levels remind us that continuing precautions and safety practices are essential in managing the risk of infection.

A primary weapon against COVID-19 and increasing case numbers is the use of facial masks. Their effectiveness with other precautionary measures including hand-washing and physical distancing has led many institutions, publically-governed spaces, businesses and workplaces to institute mandatory mask wearing.

With mandatory mask protocols in place, some individuals may experience increased anxiety and stress related reactions. In some instances wearing a mask may be a difficult undertaking, for example, those who struggle with claustrophobia. When wearing a mask the act of breathing engages our sympathetic nervous system. If we perceive or encounter any difficulty with normal breathing, our body

may trigger automatic responses of anxiety and physical manifestations including an increased heart rate and increased sweating.

In other instances, we may come across individuals who are not in compliance with the required mandates. A general guideline is to focus upon those efforts within your control (ensuring adherence to public health guidelines and to maintain physical distancing guidelines from individuals outside of our household) versus those occurrences outside of your control (encountering others who may not wear masks or observe physical distancing guidelines). Here are a few suggestions on how to manage and reduce those anxious moments.

- **Start small.**

Practice can improve and/or control your reactions, even when it comes to reducing mask wearing anxiety. Try wearing a mask at home for short periods of time. Even if at first you are only able to wear your mask briefly, you will find that it becomes more tolerable for longer periods of time the more you practice.¹

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- **Take slow, deep breaths.**

Tell yourself that you can breathe. Squeeze and release your muscles. Close your eyes and imagine you are in a comfortable and safe place. Focus on your breathing intake and exhale slowly, where possible, listen to music and focus on the sounds. Take breaks and give yourself space. If you must be in public areas for long periods of time, take breaks and find somewhere secluded where you can take off your mask. Take as long as you need.

- **Take someone within your safety bubble with you.**

Have a family member or trusted friend accompany you when you must be in public spaces. If you feel overwhelmed, let them know, so they can help.

- **Remind yourself that you are safe.**

Regular cotton masks are not airtight and allow for adequate airflow around the mouth and nose. Studies have shown that their use results in no significant change in oxygen or carbon dioxide levels. While wearing your mask speak to yourself using calming words such as "I am still safe and I will get through this." Try a few variations until you find one that resonates. ¹

- **Remember why you're doing it.**

Wearing a mask is a gesture of kindness to others. When you are feeling stressed, it might make you feel better knowing that you are helping your community.

There are some exceptions to mandates for those with pre-existing health conditions and those under certain ages. Please check with your local health authorities for up to date information and details.

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References

1. <https://www.lifemark.ca/blog-post/five-steps-reduce-mask-anxiety#:~:text=When%20we%20wear%20a%20mask,heart%20rate%2C%20and%20increased%20sweating>



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