

Managing mask-related anxiety: some tips

For many of us, the pandemic and all the upheaval it has brought have been significant sources of stress. This is especially true since it's disrupted our usual habits and routines and forced us to make new ones. Each new change pushes us off balance, which brings about worry, apprehension and other emotional consequences.

Let's talk about wearing masks. That's a change that brings its share of discomfort—for some, intense enough to cause anxiety.

What about mask wearing can cause anxiety?

First of all, you can't wear a mask unless you remember to bring it with you. Fear of forgetting (and the inconvenience if you do forget) increases the level of tension that many already feel.

Masks can also be seen as a sign of danger, a reminder of an invisible threat you need to guard against. This can lead to hypervigilance, as our brains start scanning our surroundings for anything that could be a potential danger—like someone who isn't wearing a mask correctly or staying two metres away from others.

Masks impede our ability to communicate with other people. Not only is it harder to make out what someone is saying when they wear a mask, but it's impossible to read lips (which people often do unconsciously) or get non verbal cues from expressions on the lower half of the face.

There can also be physical discomfort from the mask itself: chafing, soreness behind the ears, less air circulation, etc. That last one can cause choking sensations and tightness that are a lot like a symptom of anxiety. It can be hard to tell the difference between the two.

This feeling that you "need air" can cause a stress reaction—and that in turn makes it even harder to breathe. It's a vicious circle.

What do you do when anxiety happens?

1. Recognize the symptoms you're feeling and what triggers them

Trying to identify your symptoms and the triggers behind them helps you address the root cause. What symptoms are you feeling? What exactly triggered these alarm signals? When did they happen?

For example, if you feel like you're choking when you put on a mask and you feel better when you take it off, you might try a different type of mask, and see if that's less uncomfortable. There are now multiple designs made of different materials. It might be useful to try out several kinds so you can find the most comfortable one for your own body that you can breathe easiest through. Cutting down on the physical and mechanical discomfort will help take your mind off the mask itself. Gradually, you'll grow used to the discomfort, and it will not bother you as much or cause so much anxiety.

If communication is one of the things worrying you, you could ask the other person to speak louder, repeat what you think they said back to them, or confirm what you heard by asking questions.

2. Try changing your mindset

It's also worth keeping in mind that anxiety comes from how we perceive and interpret a situation. When your mind is filled with negative thoughts or worries, it can be helpful to notice that fact and try to consciously change your thoughts with a reassuring and compassionate mental dialogue. For example, if you tend to see masks as a sign of danger, focus on the fact that they're protective: they lower transmission risk.

Letting go of what you can't control (like the requirement to wear a mask in some places) can also help you to accept the situation. It is also an equalizer, in the sense that the same rules apply to everyone. Accepting that fact helps you feel less negative (for example, angry) toward the requirement, and helps you recognize that masks are a fact of life now. That way, masks will be less likely to trigger your alarm signals and anxiety symptoms.

Continued on next page



Optim'assist can be reached
7 days a week • 24 hours a day

514-352-2240 or toll free: 1-855-480-2240

Managing mask-related anxiety: some tips

3. Adopt an anxiety management strategy

The usual anxiety management strategies work here too:

- Practice a breathing technique like abdominal breathing or heart coherence (concentrating on the rhythm of your breath and trying to slow it down will help to soothe symptoms of anxiety).
- Focus on the present moment; practice mindfulness.
- Find a quiet place to calm down in.
- Talk to someone you trust about the things that are worrying you.
- Etc.

Adaptation in times of change

It's true that, little by little, we've adapted over time to the constraints of the pandemic. All the same, having to mask up and seeing other people wearing masks reminds us that the world right now isn't like it used to be. It's perfectly natural to need a certain amount of time to adapt to the new normal.

However, if your anxiety symptoms persist, increase or affect your ability to function, it's important to seek professional help. A counsellor can suggest specialized techniques to meet your individual needs. **Your assistance program is here to help.**



**Optim'assist can be reached
7 days a week • 24 hours a day**

514-352-2240 or toll free: 1-855-480-2240