Dealing with face-mask anxiety

Wearing a face mask or a face covering is about acting for the public good but they can also cause us great personal anxiety. However, there are things you can do if you're feeling stressed about wearing one.

Face coverings have become the visual 'motif' of the COVID-19 pandemic. Once only common in Far Eastern countries, they're now used worldwide, shielding users from potentially infecting people with COVID-19. Therefore, the more people wear face coverings, the potential for the disease to spread becomes less. World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance is clear – wear a mask to protect yourself and others.

UK government advice states that wearing a face mask is now compulsory in England's shops and supermarkets as well as on public transport. (This is also the case in Scotland but regulation in the rest of the UK varies.) People who refuse may be fined £100. There are exceptions but for the majority of shoppers, popping on a mask before they go to buy groceries is now almost as commonplace as taking a shopping bag.

Unfortunately, there's also a potential downside. Some people suffer from anxiety related to covering their mouths, and further they may feel uncomfortable just seeing others use them. Additionally, face coverings are a very potent symbol of the pandemic and can act as an ever-present reminder of the general feelings of stress associated with it. Individuals may experience helplessness, anger, fear and some may not want to leave home at all. Physical problems can arise too, such as high-blood pressure, nausea and a fluctuating heart rate.

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Reactions vary from mild to severe, but there are things you can do to mitigate the potential stress involved when wearing a face covering:

Breathe

A great deal of the anxiety associated with wearing a mask relates to perceived difficulties in breathing. Some people report sensations like hyperventilation or gasping for air. If you find yourself feeling short of breath while wearing a face covering, relax and take a few slow, deep breaths. Repeat each time you feel anxious. The more you do it, the more you'll be able to relax, breathe more freely and control your anxiety.

Everyone, everywhere

Wearing a face covering may seem odd at first, but as more people use a mask, you'll become much less self-conscious when wearing one. You won't stand out – you'll be part of the crowd. Remember that virtually no one likes wearing them but are doing it for the greater good.

Love your mask

Treat your mask less like a medical shield and more like a piece of fashion. Advice for most people suggests wearing a cloth covering rather than a surgical mask. That provides lots of scope for personalising your face covering and turning it into something which reflects your own personal style. Make your own and experiment with pattern and colour, or buy one from your favourite brand. Either way, you'll be more likely to feel better wearing it.

Face up to your mask stress

If you realise that you're being adversely affected by wearing a face covering, use some anxiety-reduction techniques to help. Take some time to write down the issues you're facing and go through each one. This is a great way of evaluating your troubles, working on them and perhaps realising that some don't really need to be problems at all while others need a lot more work.

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Talk it out

Try talking to someone about your anxiety. Sometimes just having a chat can alleviate stress and make you feel much more grounded. Remember that the **Employee Assistance Programme** offers a dedicated counselling service available 24/7, 365 days a year. Professionally-qualified counsellors provide advice, triage and support for a range of personal and professional problem areas including anxiety. There's the PAM Assist app too for mobile access to wellbeing advice.

Finally, if wearing a face covering (or the thought of it) is causing you extreme anxiety, you may be exempt. UK government guidelines say you do not have to wear a mask "if putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause you severe distress." If that's you, then leave the mask at home and remember to concentrate on the other aspects of preventing the spread of COVID-19, such as socially distancing in public spaces, regular handwashing and limiting unnecessary contact with others.

For further guidance on face coverings please refer to the information provided on the **www.gov.uk** website.