

Feeling Anxious About Wearing A Mask? Here Are 5 Ways To Overcome It

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5 Quick Tips To Getting Comfortable Wearing A Mask:

1) Learn to exercise control over your breathing: Dr. Nicol encourages everyone to practice “mindful, diaphragmatic breathing”—before you even put your mask on. To do this, she says you should try something called 4-7-8 breathing. To do this, you inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and then exhale for 8 seconds. This will help you to slow down your breathing and also strengthen the muscles in your chest and abdomen to make your breathing more efficient. She suggests that other [breath training programs](#) can also help to consolidate these skills, and so can something like a regular yoga practice.

2) Gradual Practice Makes...Tolerable: Dr. Gómez says logic like “I can take off my mask whenever I feel like I can’t breathe” can often help your mind, but will not be able to help your body’s response to anxiety. For that, you need to practice wearing a mask. To do this, she suggests putting your mask on at home when you are not planning to use it that day, so that there is no time pressure. Then, she says to do the following:

- With the mask on, breathe in, paying special attention to the fact that you can breathe.
- As your body ramps up its anxious physiological response, tell your body: "It is safe. It's just a mask. See look, I'm breathing."
- Take big, deep, long breaths to show your body that you can breathe. Continue the self-talk: "I have nothing to be ashamed of. My body is responding in the way that it should to keep me alive and well. It's just confused. So, I'm showing it that I can actually breathe here."
- You can also take the mask off, again to show your body that if it does become too much, you can take the mask off and breathe fully.
- You can then, put the mask on and breathe again, or, it may be that today, you couldn't practice that long because your mind and body became so anxious that it was unbearable. That's okay. You can try again tomorrow.

For some people, Dr. Gómez says, doing this just once will be enough, but for others, it may take more practice. Dr. Joshua Morganstein, Chair of the the American Psychiatric Association’s Committee on the Psychiatric Dimensions of Disaster, emphasizes that this practice should and can be gradual and at your own pace, like is done with anything distressing (think: airplanes or spiders). He says if 1 minute is too long to wear a mask, you can do it for 10 seconds, and if 10 seconds is too long, then you can do it for 2 seconds. But, you just want to gradually increase your comfort and familiarity with it over time. Dr. Nugent adds that she would recommend

initially practicing at home or in a safe setting. The goal would be to habituate or “get to the point where it feels boring and no longer distressing” in that low pressure setting and then, slowly, increase the “intensity”. This might mean you go for a drive wearing your mask or a walk where no one is nearby and continue to expose yourself to harder and more populated environments. During this time, Dr. Nugent notes, it is important to challenge your thoughts. If you are thinking “I am unable to breathe” then tell yourself, “I did this a hundred times at home - I know I can do this.” That is, of course, because you can!

Dr. Nicol adds that somewhat similarly you can use [behavior shaping approaches](#) to increase mask wearing in children with neurodevelopmental disorders. For example, she suggests that you start with just holding the mask and pairing this with a pleasant physical stimulus like a hug. Then, over time, you can gradually increase the mask exposure with longer wearing times and more rewards. This will help encourage kids to keep it on when needed.

3) Control timing and location: Especially if you are new to wearing a mask, or helping someone else get adjusted to wearing one, Dr. Nicol emphasizes that it is important to take breaks. In other words, when thinking about your day, you need to find areas and times when you can safely be mask-free. Tara adds that she knows her anxiety is worse when she is around more people, so for her work, she has been doing more telehealth, and she has been choosing to go to the grocery store at 6 am. You have to do what works for you.

4) Find the right mask for you: Not every mask works for every one. Tara suggests that you might start off by asking yourself which part of the mask gives you anxiety? Some may be too heavy or thick, or might make you too hot because of the type of cloth used. You may be able to find a mask that is lighter or made for athletes, or a different fit or fabric entirely. Your discomfort may even go beyond just covering the face, and involve how tight it pulls, and again, there are different masks that are designed to do this differently. Tara suggests that you experiment with different styles and fabrics of masks until you find one that you can wear at least somewhat comfortably. She says she had to find one that did not mimic what it felt like when she was having an asthma attack (like a cloth mask) or the fit of an oxygenation mask. For trauma survivors, Dr. Gómez adds it may help to design the mask, to give them control over it, and make sure it is distinct and looks nothing like any of their other clothes. For children, Dr. Nicol feels it is important to find ways to make masks “fun.” She says you can [do this](#) by “decorating them, putting them on stuffed animals, or incorporating mask wearing into fun/game-like activities at home can reduce fear and avoidance.” The bottom line is, you control your mask choice and your first mask does not have to be your last mask.

5) Wearing a mask is altruistic: Tara says that before Covid-19 when she did not wear a mask, it was only jeopardizing her own health, and now, it is not just about her. She says “in a way, mentally it’s like suck it up buttercup. This honestly was probably the biggest factor.” If altruism, or doing something for the greater good, can motivate you at all, she says it can help to focus on that thought and how you are helping and protecting others, as you try to push aside the anxiety. Brooke Vittimberga, a bone marrow transplant recipient, adds “I’ve also learned to lower my expectations-I’m not going to be 100% comfortable. It’s okay to trade some comfort for the safety of myself and others.” In other words, no one said wearing a mask was comfortable or even fun, but it can save lives, and that is important.