

COVID-19 Masks Effect on Body Language and Mindful Communication

Reality: In the times of COVID-19 pandemic (coronavirus disease 2019) the use of face masks and social distancing has become a necessity worldwide.

In addition masked faces, video chats and PPE (personal protective equipment) make it harder to interpret facial expression and body language, while the presence of the virus (Sars-Cov-2) has rendered body proximity and touching a potential health hazard.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, the question that arises is how face masks are changing the way we interact.

When it comes to effective communication, even though we rely on language to express our thoughts or emotions, nonverbal communication is just as important as the words we use.

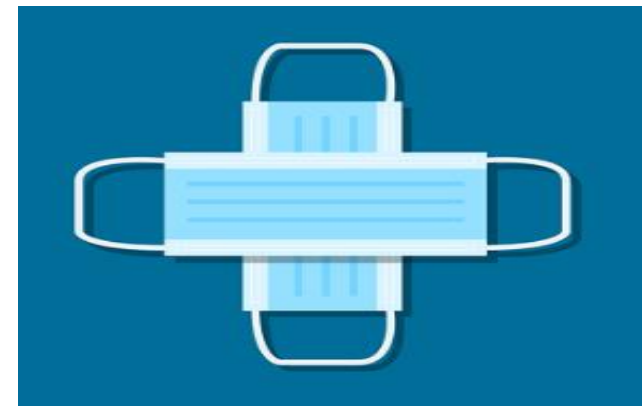
The roots of non-verbal communication, such as: body language, touch and use of physical space, are deeper than writing or speech.

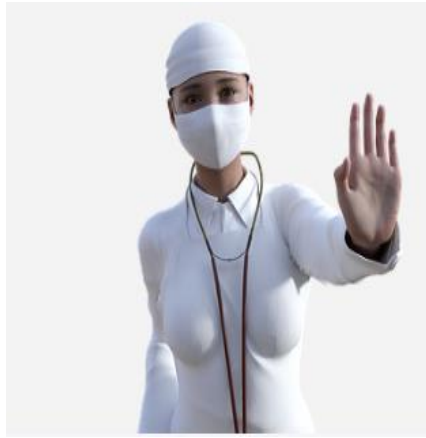
According to psychologist Albert Mehrabian three elements need to be coordinated for the effective communication of feelings or emotions: words, vocal tone and body language. Mehrabian's rule, known as "7:38:55 rule" concluded that only 7% of communication is verbal, while 38% relates to the tone of voice and 55% is body language primarily facial.

Wearing face masks make communication with others harder, as they neutralize facial expressions and can muffle sound. Masks take away our ability to read lips, make it more difficult to understand speech or see someone smiling.

It can also be uncomfortable for people with hearing aids or people with communication problems, voice problems or those who are otherwise unable to remove a mask without assistance.

Furthermore, standing six feet apart (physical distancing) makes speech sound quieter and more difficult to see visual cues, as people cannot lean in or get closer to help fix this communication breakdown.





Positive nonverbal communication, the benefits of touch and smiling with your eyes only

Positive nonverbal communication, such as head nodding, open body language, focused eye gaze, smiling and touch is usually used by health workers to show that they care for their patients. Research shows that it decreases patient anxiety and leads to better health outcomes.

In addition, when a person is unwell, scared or going into the hospital, the entire human system and brain are stressed, which in turn affects the immune system. Empathy and touch are necessary for immune function; they release oxytocin, known in psychology as the “kindness hormone”, which slows down the release of stress hormones and boosts the immune system. A lack of touch and compassion can lead to depression, anxiety and stress.

The coronavirus pandemic has deprived us of the ways we comfort each other and physical isolation keeps us apart from those we care for.

Although virtual interaction cannot replace real presence, making use of electronic media can provide an alternative means of communication.

As social distancing is a new community norm, other gestures have rapidly become popular, such as elbow touches and bowing. The pandemic also allows people to avoid what has been always been socially accepted, such as handshaking, kissing and hugging when greeting others. This has results in less physical contact between people.

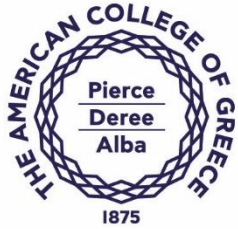
Several basic emotions, like happiness, sadness, anger and fear are expressed without saying a word, but with a range of facial movements, like raised eyebrows, tightened lip and clenched jaws. The widespread use of face masks has made nonverbal communication of these emotions increasingly difficult.

But because eyes are the windows of the soul, keeping more eye contact would be an effective way to understand other people’s feelings and emotions.

According to the French scientist Guillaume Duchenne, a genuine smile, known as holistic smile cannot be faked and involves the contraction of the orbicularis oculi muscle. This muscle is responsible in controlling blinking and also in raising the cheeks and wrinkling around the eyes when someone is truly and positively smiling.

But, in the era of face masks, one has to use more exaggerated gestures to compensate for the loss of facial expressions; like expressive eyebrows and a simple thumbs-up.

Yet, with patience, understanding and our unique ability to adapt, we will overcome this unexpected challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Know the Facts

Health



Steps on How to Have More Effective Communication.

The following three steps, based on the ABC mnemonic rule, can improve mindful communication with people, while wearing face masks.

1. Attend mindfully

- Think about things from your communication partner's perspective and make sure you have their attention. You may communicate with older people, people with mental health conditions (dementia) or other sensory sensitivities (people who have trouble speaking or hearing).
- Prepare yourself for your conversation and think of ways to support them so they understand you.
- Try aligning your nonverbal signaling (characteristic gestures and body language) with your spoken message.
- Practice the habit of underlying everything you say with gestures and pantomime; use your hands.

2. Behave Calmly

- Approach the person from the front. Older people or those with intellectual or developmental disabilities will become more familiar with you when they feel respected.
- Show them your ID badge to show who you are behind the mask.
- Face your partner directly, make sure that you drop down to eye level and that nothing is blocking your view.
- Make sure that you have a positive, calm attitude and avoid body language that shows frustration, anger or impatience. Keep a gentle tone and your voice even.

3. Communicate Clearly

- Avoid noise and overwhelming stimulus and make sure that the person is wearing their glasses or hearing aids. Move to a quiet place if you can.
- Use short, simple sentences and give them time to respond. Ask them if they understood you; if not, say it a different way and underline your words with gestures.
- Talk a little louder and slower, if necessary
- Use more words than you normally would and ask more questions to understand the other person's emotions. Confirm understanding verbally along with nonverbal cues, like open body language and hand gestures.
- Ask if there is anything you can do to make communication easier for both of you and write down words or show pictures to help them understand you.

