

# Living with feelings of mask anxiety



**Wearing a mask is an important part of keeping ourselves, our whānau and our communities safe during COVID-19.**

While many people can wear a mask without too much discomfort, for some of us just the thought of wearing one can increase feelings of anxiety, stress and panic, and lead to a sense of being isolated or misunderstood by others. All these feelings are completely understandable and valid.

This resource is designed to help you, or your loved ones, work through any difficult feelings that may arise when wearing a mask. It offers practical tips on how to manage these feelings and find a way through them together.

## Masks and mental health

International studies have found that wearing a mask during COVID-19 has led to better mental health and wellbeing outcomes for many people. This could be due to the person feeling like they are “doing the right thing” by protecting themselves and their loved ones or feeling safer with a mask on, which could help to decrease feelings of anxiety.

But research has also shown that for some of us, wearing masks has increased our physical discomfort and anxiety and triggered feelings of trauma we’ve experienced in the past.

These feelings can be a result of being unable to communicate as clearly as we’d like through a mask or feeling judged by others. Other barriers, like the cost of the ‘most-beneficial’ types of masks can also increase our stress and anxiety.

## Challenges when wearing a mask

Wearing a mask can be triggering, cause anxiety and evoke many other different emotions for some people. These reactions are completely understandable.

When wearing a mask, some of us might experience:

- A feeling of being trapped, flustered, uncomfortable or overwhelmed.
- Sensory overload from the mask touching your skin, or from feeling your own breath.
- Intimidation or fear when seeing others in masks.
- Triggering of a past memory or situation. Or, feeling like you must be extra-prepared for triggers.
- Increased feelings of disconnection and isolation from others.
- Negative feelings around your identity or body image as a result of covering your face.
- Feeling like you’re having difficulty breathing.
- Difficulties communicating.

As Dana, who experiences mask anxiety, shares, *“It felt like I was being selfish for having these feelings. I know it’s important to keep people safe, but it’s hard for me to wear a mask.”*

Although these emotions may be difficult to experience, it’s important we don’t let our or other people’s judgements affect us when wearing a mask. Accepting these feelings of mask anxiety as valid is one of the first steps to finding a way to work through these feelings together.

## Tips for making mask wearing more comfortable

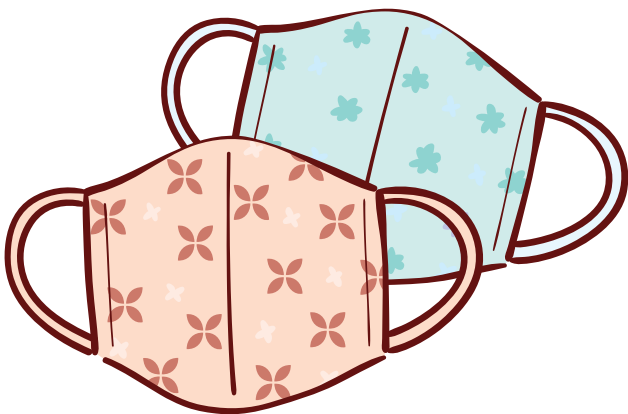
When we think about wearing a mask, it's important we consider what we do before, during and after the experience. All these stages offer opportunities for us to manage our negative emotions around wearing them.

### Practise wearing a mask

Before you have an opportunity to wear a mask, it can be helpful to **ease into it**, by trying to:

- Practise wearing a mask at home.
- Own your mask! Choose or make one that represents you – buy in your favourite colour or make your own. Select masks to match your outfits. Use a freezer paper stencil to transfer a design and decorate with felt pens or fabric paints (remember to buy or make a mask with at least three layers for it to be effective).
- Spray your mask with a calming scent (like peppermint or lavender) or your fragrance.
- Make sure your mask fits properly and is as comfortable as it can be.

*Remember to share how you are feeling with friends and whānau and let them know how they can support you.*



*Make mask wearing fun – imagine you're a superhero who is brave and must wear a mask.*

## Before you leave the house or car

- Practise slow, long, deep breaths.
- Check you've got your mask.
- Have extra masks in your bag or car.
- Practise positive self-talk or repeat a mantra that reassures you about wearing a mask.
- Remind yourself why you'll be wearing a mask and think of those you're trying to protect.
- Get fresh air before and after wearing a mask.

## While wearing a mask

If you start feeling panicky or feel that it's harder to breathe, or if seeing others in masks makes you feel anxious, you could:

- Step outside or into a less busy place, remove your mask and take a few deep, calming breaths.
- Use breathing techniques (there are some great breathing apps like [Hikitia te Hā](#) that could help) or use self-soothing strategies.
- Be mindful of your current situation – like Hannah says, *"When my body response is activating fight, flight, freeze or flop – I look around and remind myself where I am, who I am now, that others are also wearing masks..."*
- Focus on your senses – use a stress ball, listen to calming music, touch something familiar and soothing, smell something calming, or suck mints or chew gum.
- When using public transport or in a waiting room – distract yourself by listening to music or reading a book or something on your device.
- If you can, close your eyes and focus on something other than the mask. Or, focus your attention elsewhere by concentrating on what you can see or hear.
- Keep the rest of your body as cool as possible.
- Give yourself a break – acknowledge it is hard, but remind yourself that it will pass.
- Tell yourself "I am safe" – there is no

evidence that mask-wearing restricts the flow of oxygen and carbon dioxide. You can breathe safely while wearing a mask.

- Reassure yourself about the “why”: that you don’t want to get COVID-19; and that you’re helping your whānau and community by wearing one; like Pāyal says, *“I remind myself that wearing a mask is all about community care. It makes me happy that I’m helping to look after others”*.

## Have a mini-break

If you need to wear a mask for long periods of time, like on public transport, at work or when shopping, try to:

- Go outside during breaks and get some fresh air.
- Reduce the time spent with a mask on as much as you can by not using public transport or shopping during busy or peak times.
- Visit a quiet part of your workplace and remove your mask for some deep breaths.

## After wearing a mask

It may have been challenging to wear your mask, but congratulations – you did it! Remember to acknowledge your feelings and accomplishment when you take it off. To treat yourself afterwards, you could:

- Do something relaxing like breathing or stretching, or self-soothing exercises.
- Enjoy a refreshing drink, read or watch a TV show, or reward yourself with a treat.
- Sit outside in the fresh air with a friend or whānau members.

## Wearing a mask at medical appointments

Presently, you need to wear a mask when visiting a healthcare service. If you have a face mask exemption pass, you may want to let the service know when making your appointment, and ask them about any protocols they might like you to follow. The combination of wearing a mask and social distancing can muffle or soften voices, making it hard for both you and the health professional to communicate. We acknowledge that, for some of us, seeing a health professional wearing a mask can also trigger traumatic events from our past.

To help with communication between yourself and the health professional, you could try:

- Writing down how you are feeling, or keeping a diary or notes in your phone’s calendar which you can easily share.
- Speaking as clearly and slowly as possible.
- If suitable, and you’re comfortable with it, meeting virtually.
- If appropriate, asking if you can use social distancing measures or meet outside.
- Bringing a friend or whānau member who can listen alongside you and take notes.



## Mask exemptions

You may be exempt from wearing a mask if you cannot wear one safely or comfortably due to personal circumstances, a disability or health condition.

The updated Ministry of Health-issued Face Mask Exemption Pass can make it easier to show that wearing a mask is unsuitable for you. The new exemption pass shows that you are legally exempt from wearing a face mask, and should have access to the same goods and services as people who can wear a mask. Your new card will also have your name printed on it and is unable to be used by others.

We acknowledge some of us are uncomfortable with asking for an exemption, and those of us with mask exemptions can feel anxious and judged, and may feel pressured to justify themselves when out.

*As Rana says, "I feel like people are mad at me for not wearing a mask, even though I really struggle with it due to autism sensory overload."*

If asked why you're not wearing a mask, you could:

- Show your face mask exemption pass.
- If you feel able to, explain why you're not wearing a mask. Say something like *"I'm exempt for health reasons"* or *"I have a good reason that you can't see. Please be kind"*.
- Write your reason on a piece of paper or as a note in your phone, so you can easily show it.

*Mask wearing can be hard and challenging. If you're struggling with wearing your mask, remember to be kind to yourself. Whenever you can, take a break, step outside, remove your mask and take a deep breath.*

## Supporting a loved one with mask anxiety

If a whānau member or someone you care about has difficult thoughts or challenges when wearing a mask, there are ways you can help support them. You could:

- Acknowledge that their feelings are valid, and that you are there for them. Ask how you can support them.
- Offer to get their groceries or other items or go with them to busy places, like shopping centres or the supermarket.
- Catch up in the park rather than somewhere you need to wear masks.
- Communicate as clearly as possible when wearing a mask. As your smile and facial expressions are hidden, try using your voice, eyes, hand gestures and body language. Ask what other types of communication might help.
- Ask if you could help by going to appointments with them. You could take notes or be there as support.
- If they have trouble breathing or become anxious, go outside or to a quiet place where they can remove their mask and take some deep breaths. You could also try distracting the person by getting them to focus on something else.
- Reassure them that they're wearing a mask for the right reasons. Thank them for working so hard to keep you and others safe.
- If your child is anxious about wearing a mask, talk positively to them about why wearing one is important. Reassure them, make mask wearing fun and show them that you're okay with wearing one.

## For more information or further support and advice:

- Text or call 1737 for free, trained counsellors who are available 24/7.
- Call 0800 ANXIETY (269 4389) for specific questions around your or your loved ones' anxious feelings.
- Visit [mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz) for resources or information.
- For whānau support visit [yellowbrickroad.org.nz](https://www.yellowbrickroad.org.nz).
- For information and support for youth visit [thelowdown.org.nz](https://www.thelowdown.org.nz).
- Reach out to your local Māori health provider or iwi, hapū or urban Māori health services.
- Call Asian Family Services on 0800 862 342 if you are looking to reach out to someone from a similar culture or are not fluent in English.
- Call Vaka Tautua on 0800 825 282 to have a phone talanoa/conversation about what you or your loved are going through from a Pasifika perspective.
- Visit [www.likeminds.org.nz/justask](https://www.likeminds.org.nz/justask) – for information for whānau and friends of people experiencing mental distress.
- Visit [Covid19.govt.nz](https://www.covid19.govt.nz) and search "masks" for more information on requirements or how to wear masks.



## References

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[Covid19.govt.nz](https://www.covid19.govt.nz)