

# The ChronicleHerald

## Mask anxiety is a real thing, but it can be treated

*Bill Spurr*

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Hundreds of people who attended a rally for Indigenous justice in Halifax on Saturday wore masks. Some people have mask anxiety. - Francis Campbell

In the old west, it was the gunslingers wearing masks that caused anxiety in others. In the time of pandemic, putting one on is causing for the wearer a condition called mask anxiety.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a registered psychologist and Dalhousie University professor, hasn't treated a case of mask anxiety, but thinks it's a plausible condition because of the social impact of masks.

"Humans are social detectives who are always searching for clues in verbal and non-verbal behaviour," Sherry said. "Masks may elicit negative responses from other people because as creatures that pay attention to verbal and non-verbal clues to understand people, those cues are less available to us from somebody who wears a mask.

"So, part of mask anxiety may be that a masked man or a masked woman can elicit from other people a more negative response because they're harder to read."

Physically, one of the challenges of wearing a mask is that it restricts inhalation and exhalation, which has the potential to limit airflow.

"That can trigger natural bodily alarms," said Sherry. "In other words, our brain will react poorly to any circumstance that restricts airflow, and what may happen when airflow is restricted is that our bodily alarm, what some people call our fight-or-flight system, gets activated.

"In technical terms, we're talking about the sympathetic nervous system and that ... system reacts strongly when there are alterations to inflow and outflow of oxygen and carbon dioxide. And if a mask does that, it's going to trigger a range of bodily responses which might include symptoms of fear or panic or anxiety. It might include bodily responses like (increased) heart rate or sweatiness or light-headedness."

While wearing a mask is obviously preferable to developing COVID-19, Sherry recommends being supportive of anyone suffering from mask anxiety because, he says, people aren't motivated by rejection or criticism.

In the same way that people who fear dogs or heights need treatment, the standard therapy for someone suffering from mask anxiety is a four-step process called systematic desensitization.

The first two steps are to provide education on what a human fear response is, an evolved mechanism that helps keep us safe, and the provision of basic skills to promote relaxation.

After that comes the "Buckley's" part of the intervention, in that the steps taste awful but they work.

Exposure is progressively exposing a patient to feared and avoided situations in a paced way. In the case of mask anxiety, that might mean starting out by breathing through a snorkel, then breathing through a straw, then wearing a mask in the house, then at the grocery store, for example.

"In time, you would have people in a progressive way take on more and more in terms of confronting feared and avoided situations," Sherry said

Lastly is a step called generalization, making sure the person can function in a range of contexts.

"People with mental health challenges are often stigmatized and criticized quite unnecessarily as excuse makers." Sherry said. "At the same time ... you need a forward-thinking, tough-minded willingness to confront the situations you fear and avoid."