

Getting Comfortable in Your Mask

How our Bodies Feel Stress

In times of high stress, we naturally feel in danger when really we are just having different or new feelings. Having to wear **PPE (Personal Protective Equipment)** is an example of this.

We wear PPE to protect ourselves and others in times of high risk of infections such as with COVID-19. During these times we are already a little more “on alert” than normal. Our body is paying more attention to lessen the risk. This is the body’s natural way of helping. It is normal when our heart rate starts to rise during these times. However, our brain may think this normal response is more dangerous than it really is, when in fact it is just different.

When wearing PPE we may be more aware of what our body is feeling such as being warm or sweating. PPE covers your face in ways you may not be used to. This can cause us to feel we are not getting the amount of air we need. As we begin to be more aware of feeling different, it may cause us to be more concerned for our safety.

Some ways to be comfortable and breathe easier in (PPE)

1. Take Time to Feel the Mask Before You Put it On

If you are feeling nervous about wearing a mask, try this:

- Hold it up to your face to know how it feels against your skin.
- Hold the mask in front of your mouth and feel what it is like to breathe against it.
- Now you are ready to put the mask on your face.

2. Breathe Slowly in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Breathe slowly before putting it on and when wearing it. Follow these steps to keep calm:

- Put your hand on your belly. Slowly breathe in for 3 to 4 seconds. Feel your belly rise.
- Hold the breath for 1 to 2 seconds.
- Now, slowly breathe out, taking 3 to 4 seconds. Feel your belly drop.
- Try this again. This time, when you breathe out, see in your mind the word “calm” or think of a calming phrase.
- Keep using slow calming breaths when wearing your protective mask.
- Do not worry about the number of seconds as long as your breathing is slow.

3. Remind Yourself That You Are Okay

Some things to say to yourself when feeling upset or stressed when wearing PPE:

- I will focus my attention on the task in front me.
- I will do the best I can to help my patient.
- The mask is here to protect me.

Getting Comfortable With PPE

Here are more ways to help you get comfortable and lessen stress from wearing PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). These are simple but very effective ways that use a tool called **“exposure and desensitization”**. You can try these on your own or with a clinical coach.

Desensitization is a way to lessen negative feelings, fear or stress. After being exposed many times over (repeated exposure) to what causes these negative feelings, you can slowly begin to have less stress about it than before.

Graded or Slow Exposure

We can train ourselves to be more comfortable in PPE by giving our brain and body time wearing it. The more you wear it, the more you will get used to it. You will begin to find wearing PPE to be normal. The level of stress will naturally go down. This is called **graded or slow exposure**.

Activities to Get More Comfortable with PPE

Try these activities until your stress level goes down. Then, keep doing them for at least another 5 minutes. It may take up to 30 minutes. Repeat each a few times.

1. Start by wearing a mask in places other than where you must wear it. If you do not have a mask outside of work, use something with the same feeling of being covered like a scarf.
 - Put on a mask, face shield or other items that make you feel the same as when are using PPE at work. Sit in a chair until your stress goes down. Repeat.
 - Wear the items when walking around. Do this until your stress goes down. Repeat.
 - Wear the items when exercising until your stress goes down. Repeat.
2. Next, try wearing a mask doing an activity that makes you have the same feeling of stress in your body as when you must use PPE.
3. Keep it on during times of higher stress in your home environment. Slowly you will feel more comfortable and the stress will go down.

More Resources

For private counseling, referrals and other support services, contact:

- **Centers for Disease Control:** Disaster Distress Helpline
Open 24 hours a day and 7 days a week **1 (800) 985-5990** or text TalkWithUs to 66746
- **National Alliance of Mental Illness:** <https://www.nami.org/findsupport>
The NAMI Helpline can be reached Monday to Friday, 10am to 6pm Eastern Time
1 (800) 950-NAMI (6264) or text NAMI to 741741
- **Physician Support Line** www.physiciansupportline.com
Open 7 days a week, 8am to 12am (midnight) Eastern Time **1 (888) 409-0141**

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