

Communicating when wearing a mask: Tips for healthcare providers to enhance communication with their patients when wearing a mask

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Communication, a bi-directional act, helps people exchange information, ideas, share feelings and thoughts. Communication may be verbal (e.g. speech), non-verbal (e.g. Text messages, facial expressions, gestures, signs, pictures, emojis) or often a combination of both.

In view of the current COVID- 19 pandemic, it is recommended that all healthcare providers and patients wear face masks.¹ Using masks may interfere with communication in the following ways: (1) masks attenuate speech signals produced by the speaker thus making the speech sound soft (decreased loudness) and muffled (unclear production) (2) masks may render the voice of a person unnatural (3) masks will ‘mask’ a large part of our facial expressions which is an important mode of non-verbal communication. These issues are likely to lead to a communication breakdown, particularly in patients with neuropsychiatric disorders who may be cognitively impaired e.g. patients with schizophrenia.² Hence, healthcare providers can adopt simple strategies to enhance their communication and reduce communication breakdowns when interacting with patients.

Here we present a few tips for healthcare providers to enhance their communication with their patients (adults) when wearing a mask.

Communication Strategies

A. Speech Modification Strategies

B. Cognitive Linguistic Strategies

C. Alternative Modes of Communication

(i) Communication Signs and Gestures

(ii) Picture based communication

(iii) Written Communication

D. Environmental Modifications



*Mask images sourced from the web licensed under CC BY-SA; Clear window mask image sourced from <https://media.juiceonline.com/2020/04/astro-awani.jpg>

Communication when wearing a mask - Tips for healthcare providers (May 2020)

LiL' <http://ssm-lab.org/>, Dept of SPA, NIMHANS

A. Speech Modification Strategies*

Clear Speech
(pronounce your words clearly)

Talk Slower and Louder

Exaggerate your Intonation
(vary your tone based on the context)

Stress on Important Words while Talking

*Click <https://youtu.be/rT8oXFamDQU> for examples

B. Cognitive Linguistic Strategies ³

Active Listening

- Concentrate when talking
- Maintain eye contact
- Nod and respond when necessary

Sign Posting

- Give the individual an outline of the OP or IP procedures.
E.g. We will first take a history of your concern and then carry out the examination

Summarising & Chunking

- Highlight main points at several time points
- Break information into small and simple chunks

Checking /Feedback

- Frequently check if the patient can understand
- Ask yes/ no questions to check if patient understood
- Acknowledge the patient's feelings e.g."I understand you are feeling anxious today"

Repetitions & Paraphrasing

- Repeat key phrases
- Reiterate patient's speech
- Use simpler words
- Rearrange sentences for better understanding

C. Alternative modes of communication

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graph TD; A[C. Alternative modes of communication] --> B["(i) Communication Signs & Gestures"]; A --> C["(ii) Picture Based Communication"]; A --> D["(iii) Written Communication"];
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**(i) Communication
Signs & Gestures**

**(ii) Picture Based
Communication**

**(iii) Written
Communication**

C. Alternative modes of communication

(i) Communication Signs & Gestures

Non-verbal encouragement

- Show a thumbs up
- Express emotions through eyes & eyebrows
- Use hand gestures and body language

Some common gestures



hello



drink



stop/ wait



yes/ good

C. Alternative modes of communication

(ii) Picture Based Communication

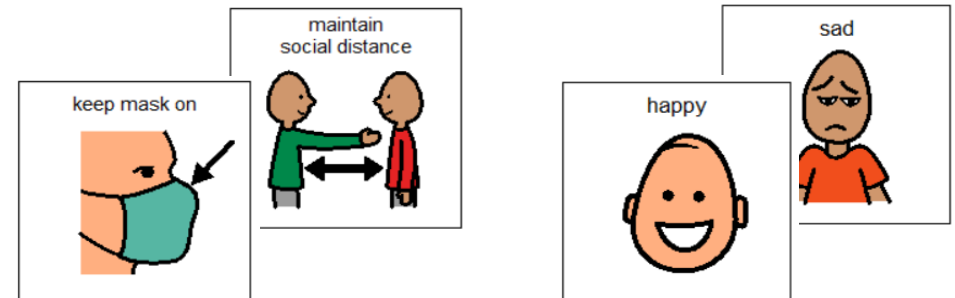
Communication cards
(e.g. emotion cards, instruction cards)

Use topic based Communication Boards

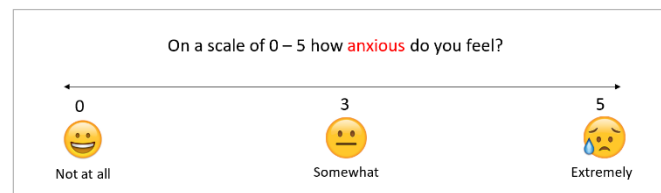
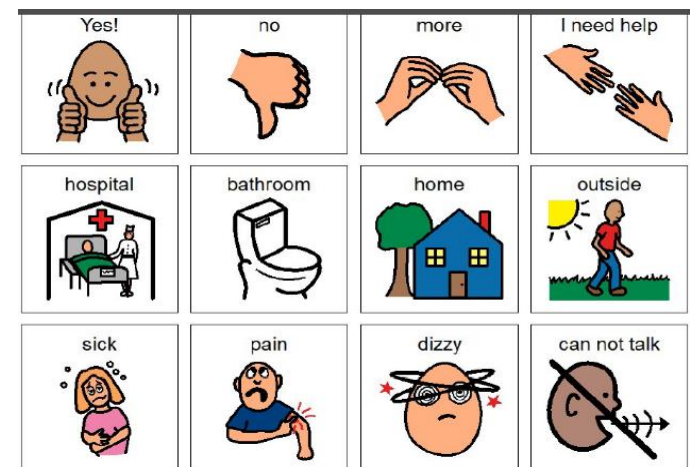
Reflect Feelings
- Use mood/emotion charts

AAC-applications
- <https://www.avazapp.com/>
- <http://jellow.org/>
- <https://www.mycoughdrop.com/>

Communication cards



Communication board



C. Alternative modes of communication

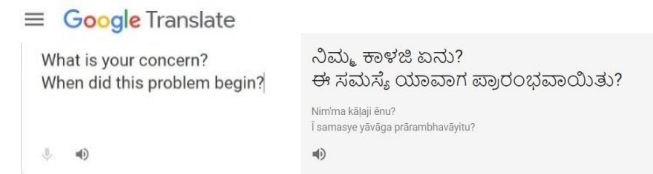
(iii) Written Communication

Portable White Board



Written cards and forms

Text to speech using apps such as Google Translate



Feedback forms



I can understand everything you say

If you don't understand my speech, ask me to repeat

Assessment Form

What is your concern?

When did this problem begin?

Are you on any other medications?

D. Environmental modifications

Ensure Speaker Visibility

Speaker and listener should face each other while talking

Ensure good room lighting for visibility of eyes and body language

Reduce Background Noise

e.g. close doors that open into a busy hall way, turn off noisy fans

Additional things to remember:

1. Make sure to wear your ID card in a manner wherein your photograph is clearly visible to the patient. Viewing your photograph can help reassure them that they are talking to a real person behind the mask.
2. Be a good model by making sure you wear the mask correctly and more importantly do not touch your mask frequently or remove it often (for details see <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>).
3. As a healthcare provider, you are likely to use face shields as well. Face shields may produce an echo when you speak which will affect the way a person perceives your speech. Be mindful of a potential possibility of your voice echoing and ensure you give adequate pauses for the speaker to process what you speak.
4. Pay attention to your body language while communicating and ensure that both your voice and body language gives the listener a reassuring impression.
5. Start your conversation with the patient and caregivers by saying things like
 - “this situation of using masks and maintaining distance may make it difficult for us to understand each other, so please be patient”
 - “please ask for repetitions”
 - “please ask for clarifications if you do not understand”
6. It is important to give the patient adequate time to express their concerns so that you can understand their needs as a whole.
7. Healthcare providers are likely to go through some difficulties in communication, in addition to all other things that they have to manage.
 - But try to be warm
 - Go an extra mile to reassure families that you have understood their concerns
 - Reassurance and patience may not be conveyed as easily as irritation and impatience– so the tone of your voice is important
 - Facial expressions are central to perceiving another person’s message and is a key contributor to good communication. However, when you wear a mask it is only the eyes and eyebrows that one can see, and not the whole face. One may widen their eyes to indicate surprise, to indicate anger, to indicate fear – we usually differentiate these emotions by looking at the entire face and by judging based on the tone of the voice. So, it is important to remember that in the absence of being able to see the entire face, the tone of your voice carries a lot of

meaning - something we may not pay enough attention during day-to-day conversation, but in this situation becomes absolutely essential.

8. You can seek specific training from a speech and language pathologist in order to modify your voice better.
9. Talking loudly and clearly to ensure smooth communication can lead to vocal fatigue. Health care providers must take care of their voice - ensure frequent hydration and adequate voice rest whenever possible.
10. In addition to the above-mentioned points, make sure you wash your hands regularly and maintain appropriate social (physical) distance, whenever possible, while interacting with patients.

Note: Although one can use many of these strategies with children, there are more specific and creative techniques that may be helpful in communicating with children. This document does not cover these aspects.

The team that developed this document is happy to answer queries, provide specific training to healthcare providers and tailor make tips depending on individuals you see in daily practice. We'd love to hear how you are getting on in this new world of wearing masks and please share your own tips and advice by reaching out to us at ssm.lab.lil@gmail.com or ssmeera@nimhans.ac.in .

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