

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## [Why a Mask is Not Just a Mask](#)

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April 17, 2020

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*Musings on Mental Health*

*To mask or not to mask. That has been an evolving question in the throes of COVID-19. Until now, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization have advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. National practices and recommendations have varied dramatically from the start. But the tide is turning, and we are seeing a convergence of policies recommending and mandating the wearing of masks around the world. Beginning this Wednesday, in Singapore everyone must wear a mask when they leave their residence else face a fine. In the US, the CDC reversed its earlier recommendations, and as of April 3, it now recommends that all Americans wear cloth masks when they go out in public. Enforcement is left to the states. In NY, an Executive Order goes into effect today that requires all people in New York to wear a mask or face covering when out in public and in situations where social distancing cannot be maintained.*



*But there's lots of pushback – from [policymakers](#) to [MLB players](#). My very first academic publication was on non-verbal facial expressions. I was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University working in Dr. Judith Hall's lab. We were interested in understanding gender differences in non-verbal behavior, particularly smiling behavior. I had no idea then that my first foray into psychological research would shed light on why putting on a mask raises issues for all of us.*

**1. Joy, anger, fear, surprise, sadness, contempt, disgust.** These basic building blocks of emotional experience are written all over our faces. Legendary psychologist [Paul Ekman](#) has devoted his life's work to studying non-verbal emotional expression across cultures. His research suggests that we can largely recognize how people around the world are feeling by simply reading their faces. All of humanity expresses these seven core feelings in ways that we universally comprehend. We depend on facial expression to know and understand each other. With physical distancing, increased anxiety, and disrupted routines due to COVID19, we are primed to seek emotional connection by simply seeing each other's facial expressions.

**2. Masks block a lot more than COVID-19 droplets.** We depend on non-verbal behavior, and particularly facial expression, to express ourselves and communicate to others. Those feelings above, and many more, get expressed on our faces. In some contexts, [non-verbal communication accounts for the majority of what we understand in our social exchanges](#). With our faces half-covered, we lose key non-verbal information, and other information, like raised eyebrows and shoulder shrugs become highly ambiguous without cues from the mouth. This loss of information is like talking on your phone in a zone with weak cell service. You know... those times when you only hear every third word and eventually the call drops. The effect leaves us feeling less able to communicate and less able to understand each other.

**3. Why kids find masks disconcerting.** Many young children burst into tears or recoil when someone wearing a mask approaches. It's so common that some elementary schools prohibit masks at the school Halloween parade. One reason for this is that the development of facial recognition is relatively weak in young children. According to University of Toronto psychologist, [Dr. Kang Lee](#), it is not until kids are about [14 years old](#) that they reach adult skill levels in recognizing faces. Before then, [kids tend to see individual facial features, rather than recognizing the person as a whole](#). By putting on masks, we take away information that makes it especially difficult for children to recognize others and read emotional signals, which is unsettling and disconcerting. These issues may be especially true for children with autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger's syndrome, who tend to have particular difficulties reading non-verbal cues.

**4. The politics of masks.** In the US, the mandate to wear masks has been met with some [backlash from Black men](#) who fear that wearing masks could expose them to harassment from the police. Aaron Thomas, a Black man from Ohio [posted a message on Twitter](#) that has been retweeted more than 17,000 times: “I want to stay alive but I also want to stay alive.” [Many have expressed fears that homemade masks, in particular, could exacerbate racial profiling and place Blacks and Latinos in danger](#). To my knowledge, this fear has not yet been realized, and optimistically, I am hoping that by putting masks on everyone, including my 88 year-old mother, we may have an opportunity to actually break this stereotyped response.

**5. Gender and facial expression.** This is where my career in psychology started. I coded scripts, entered data, and learned about research methods, psychology of women, and non-verbal behavior under the mentorship of JHU Professor Judy Hall. [My first publication ever](#) asked whether male and female authors differed in their writing about nonverbal behavior. Interestingly, the only way they diverged was that male authors described facial expressions much more often and in more detail than female authors. My second publication with Professor Amy Halberstadt and my college roommate and fellow research assistant, now clinical psychologist Dr. Cindy Hayes, found that [women spend more time smiling, and their smiling behavior is more congruent with what they are trying to communicate compared to men](#). True to form, as you can see in the photo above, my female friends are taking to decorate their masks with a smile.

*Around the world, we will be wearing masks for the foreseeable future. We can all hope that this public health strategy will help reduce transmission of COVID-19. But when we put on our masks to go out, we need to remember that as our masks intercept the transmission of coronavirus, they also intercept important non-verbal communications that are universal to our emotional connection. For all of us, wearing masks reduces the information we have available to express ourselves and understand others. It's sort of like trying to make your way to the bathroom with the lights out in the middle of the night. Kids and others in our community may find it especially disconcerting. Recognizing this should remind us to go easy with ourselves and others. And when we take our masks off at home, may the exchange of big smiles with loved ones be ever more sweet.*