

The Office of Patient Experience's mission is to ensure consistent, relationship-centered care by partnering with caregivers to exceed the expectations of patients and families.

Creating Empathic Communication through Masks

Scenario

Masks are necessary to protect the safety of our community, yet research has shown patients may not perceive providers as empathic when they're masked. Masks muffle sound and interfere with typical ways to show we care.

- **Hear – Listen to Patient**

- Make eye contact (more important than ever)
- Practice open body language
 - Keep your arms uncrossed
 - Face the patient
- Smile, even though your mouth is covered, because people can “see” and feel your smile behind the mask
- Avoid multi-tasking to demonstrate active listening
- Pause at bedside; do not talk to the patient in the doorway while exiting
- Hear their entire story; don't interrupt
- Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues such as sighing or turning away from you
- Reflect back what you heard
 - “What I'm hearing you say is....”
 - “It sounds like....”
- Allow the person to clarify
- Say, “I know it is harder to communicate with this mask on.”

- **Empathize- Acknowledge Inconvenience and Difficulty of Situation**

- Verbally identify patient's emotion or situation
- Nod to acknowledge you are listening and understanding
- Say, “Communicating like this can make the experience more stressful.”

- **Apologize– Express Regret**

- Offer apology for situation
- Say, “I am sorry that communication is impacted by our masks.”

- **Respond – Take Action**

- Ask if there is anything specific they need
- Say, “I want you to know I care about you, and I want to communicate with you in a way that shows that. How may I help you today?”

- **Thank – Show Appreciation and Bring Closure**

- Acknowledge the circumstances
- Say, “Thank you for trusting me with this visit today. I really want to take care of your needs.”

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Specific Strategies

- **Body Language is Crucial**
 - Relax your shoulders
 - Keep your hands out of your pockets or off your hips
 - Avoid crossing your arms in front of you
 - Smile
- **Expressive Eyebrows**
 - Look at the eyebrows of patients and visitors to help guide information and be aware of your own
 - Raised eyebrows can show listening and happiness
 - Eyebrows pinched together can indicate sadness
 - Eyebrows in a "V" can mean angry
- **Volume and Tone of Voice Matters**
 - Speak up, especially if you are wearing a cloth mask, which can block sound
 - Modulate the tone of your words to help convey empathy
 - Watch how quickly you speak. Rushed speech behind masks can interfere with understanding and frustrate a listener.
- **Consider Space**
 - Maintain SAFE six feet
 - Remove physical barriers that may block view
 - Create a clear path
- **Explore Opportunities in Cloth Masks**
 - While you must maintain professionalism, consider if you can use masks to build a relationship with fabric or color choice
 - For example, if you work in pediatric unit, can you use masks with cartoons? Your mask choice can share something about you that may help build a relationship, like a favorite animal or a fun pattern.
- **Be Honest and Direct**
 - It's ok to explain you are concerned the mask may interfere with good communication and that you care

Other Resources:

You're Wearing a Mask, But What About Communicating? Some Tips:

<https://hartfordhealthcare.org/about-us/news-press/news-detail?articleId=25831&publicid=395>

Maintaining Our Humanity Through the Mask: Mindful Communication During COVID-19:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jgs.16488>

Effect of facemasks on empathy and relational continuity: a randomized controlled trial in primary care:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3879648/>

Transparent Surgical Mask to Improve Communication with Patients:

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/articles/transparent-surgical-mask-to-improve-communication-with-patients>

Ways the hearing impaired can communicate when face masks keep them from reading lips:

[https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/blog/ways-the-hearing-impaired-can-coTransparent Surgical Mask to Improve Communication with Patientsmmunicate-during-covid19](https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/blog/ways-the-hearing-impaired-can-coTransparent%20Surgical%20Mask%20to%20Improve%20Communication%20with%20Patientsmmunicate-during-covid19)



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