Keeping your COVID mental health…healthy!

**NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION (Masks and all)**

Nonverbal communication in the community and workplace is extremely important.

Whether you’re trying to do in life or work, from talking to friends and colleagues, to communicating with people in the Radcliffe community and beyond interview, what you convey beyond words can determine the difference between success and failure, greater confidence, and in feeling safer and more in control.

This makes [communication in the age of Covid-19](https://thehill.com/changing-america/opinion/502144-how-covid-19-is-changing-the-way-we-communicate) more challenging for the obvious reason that masks, a necessary component of fighting the pandemic, hide the parts of our faces that display facial expressions — particularly those *micro expressions* that we use without thinking to convey as well as perceive sincerity, trustworthiness, and good intentions.

In situations where there’s a difference between what’s spoken verbally and what’s displayed nonverbally, people instinctively lend [greater weight to the latter](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ejsp.2420010307).

Unfortunately, if your expressions are concealed by a mask this can happen more often.

Of course from a public health and government perspective, **wearing masks** **is a must** in the pandemic, and we are informed by government that we mustn’t stop doing so just because they present certain challenges.

Here, then, are some tips for how to communicate effectively and build rapport while still doing your bit to keep everyone safe, based upon government instructions

**IMPORTANT** Government instruction is open to change at short notice both nationally and in respect of Radcliffe and the wider Greater Manchester area. Please keep checking the Outreach community & Residential website and social media platforms for up to date information and signposting.

**Avoid Clear Masks Unless Necessary**

Clear masks may seem like a good solution, but some people find them unsettling, and they also tend to fog up. However, a situation when it may still be worth using clear masks is when the [person you’re speaking to is deaf](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52764355) or zoom/teams call may include deaf individuals. Otherwise, it’s usually best to stick with regular non-clear masks and compensate for the covering up of your micro expressions by using the other suggestions provided here.

**Practice Your “Mask Voice”**

The quality of your voice makes a big difference in how people respond emotionally to what you say, and this is true in both personal and [professional interactions](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10919-007-0038-2).

Even if we say the exact [same things but in different tones](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-57532-001), people will respond differently and when we wear masks, our voices must play an even bigger role than usual.

Many people have a phone voice, equally we can also have a “mask voice,”. To help with this consider using **P.A.V.E.** in getting your message across, I.e. At Bury market, public spaces etc.

**Pause:** Normally, visual cues of the mouth help us to see when a speaker is pausing for a response. Since we can’t see that now, make a conscious effort to noticeably pause here and there, to give people opportunities to jump in or respond. This also breaks up your message into digestible chunks.

**Accentuate**: Avoid monotony (boring voice) by emphasising/stressing key phrases and information, but don’t always emphasise in the same way. Use different intonation.

**Volume**: Masks have a slight muffling effect try to speak up without shouting, which in itself can cause distress.

**Emotion**: In appropriate moments, try to make your voice more expressive by conveying positive emotions like humour, excitement, awe, gratitude, and sympathy. Do this in moderation since you don’t want to come across as if you’re performing auditioning for acting role.

**Practice Active Listening**

Now that you’ve adjusted your voice, you can also adjust the actual words you use.

This starts with what is called active listening.

When your conversation partner is speaking, show interest by periodically nodding and making sounds of understanding like “Mm hmm.”

If the speaker pauses but isn’t finished talking, you can again affirm understanding or interest with phrases like “I’m listening” or “And then what happened?”

If the speaker expresses emotions, especially negative ones (e.g. frustration or disappointment), paraphrasing can be a powerful way to affirm their feelings. You can start with a phrase like “So do you mean…” or “What I hear you saying is…” and then say what you think they’re feeling with your own words instead of just parroting what they said.

This kind of active listening and paraphrasing helps build rapport and [increases your perceived likeability](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10904010903466311).

**Use Gestures and Body Language**

We read body language, whilst we listen to words, body language is as important.

Try to [make full use of gestures](https://hbr.org/2019/05/when-you-pitch-an-idea-gestures-matter-more-than-words) while speaking to convey meaning and emotion, a little more than usual wouldn’t hurt. Obviously, you don’t want to overdo it, to the point where it distracts or looks like a mime.

A good rule of thumb would be to increase the level of your gesturing by about 10%.

Since we can’t shake hands at the moment, one gesture you could use, often to build rapport is waving your hand when greeting people.

The ritual of handshaking goes back centuries and served important psychological functions, for example, showing that you weren’t carrying any weapons and could therefore be trusted.

While the reason for handshaking has evolved, the importance of it has not. A friendly, animated wave can go a long way towards conveying that same sense of goodwill.

**Mirror Your Counterpart**

Mirroring is a non-verbal behaviour that involves imitating the body language of a person or group of people with whom you are interacting with. I.e. Having a chat over a cup of tea with friends (no more than six)

A lot of mirroring happens naturally and unconsciously you do it anyway! However, studies have shown that it helps build rapport between individuals, and the practice of doing it intentionally has become more popular for this reason during COVID-19

As with gesturing, however, you don’t want to [overdo it to the point](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-dark-side-of-mirroring-tactics-1476219571) where it becomes noticeable or unnatural. In this case, less is more.

**Keep the Two T’s Aligned**

The “Two T’s” stands for the “toes and torso.” During interactions, your feet have a [natural tendency to reveal](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/spycatcher/200911/what-the-feet-and-legs-say-about-us) what’s really going on in your mind.

So if you’re in a meeting but are hungry, your toes might start pointing in the direction of the door. This can be subconsciously interpreted as a lack of interest so keep your toes and torso aligned and facing the person or people with whom you’re interacting.

Side note: if you notice the other person’s toes facing away from you, you definitely don’t want to mirror them, but do read this and it may be the time to bring the conversation to an end. Accepting that there are many reasons people may wish to move on from the conversation. I.e. Prior appointment or needing the loo.

**Smile with Your Eyes**

Smiling is an extremely important form of nonverbal communication in all places personal and/or professional.

Smiles with eyes that look angry, fearful, sad, or neutral are [perceived as not happy](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001691817305450) and, therefore, not seen as being friendly, the friendliness we associate with happy smiles.

When we’re wearing masks it is therefore even more important to learn to “smile with your eyes” if you want to create friendly positive feelings.

Simply put, when you smile there’s a wrinkling that occurs at the outer edges of your eyes. This happens more naturally and noticeably for some people than others, why not try intentionally wrinkling your eyes when you’re wearing your mask, even if it feels awkward at first. To get it right, practice in front of a mirror with your mask on.

As long as you’re actually smiling with your mouth when you do this, it should look natural.

**Know When to Zoom or teams**

Generally speaking, in our pre COVID world 2019BC (**B**efore **C**ovid) real time person-person communication was preferable to video conference.

There are still situations in which Zoom/Teams or other tools make more sense, such as working from home, if you’re part of a high-risk group or living with someone who is.

Remember COVID is looking likely to be around for a while yet, and masks are here to stay for the foreseeable future. But the time and effort you put into these tips won’t just pay off during the pandemic. They will hopefully continue to help you communicate more effectively when we’re all able to show our full faces again. Which hopefully wont be to long and we can see you all at Outreach Community and Residential services.