

Face masks with windows mean more than smiles to the deaf

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Image 1. Ingrid Helton, costume director for the San Diego Opera, talks while wearing one of her mask prototypes with a window in San Diego, California, on June 3, 2020. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. Helton's face masks are popular with family and friends of people who are deaf, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. Photo: Gregory Bull/AP Photo

Michael Conley has been feeling very alone recently. Conley is a deaf man. He reads lips to understand what people are saying to him. However, he has not been able to read lips lately. This is because many people are covering their faces with masks. People are wearing masks to slow the spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 is also called coronavirus. It is a new virus. The virus spreads when an infected person breathes out. There are tiny virus particles in their breath. Someone could breathe them in. If they do, they could get sick. Health officials ask that people wear masks. It reduces the spread of the virus.

People who are hard of hearing and deaf communicate in many different ways. Some might learn to read lips. Many people also use American Sign Language (ASL). It is a way to communicate using gestures and signs for people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

For both reading lips and ASL, being able to see someone's face and facial expressions is critically important. Particularly for ASL, facial expressions play a role in grammar and wording.

Helping Lip Readers See Mouths Move

Conley works at a science center. Chris LaZich works with him. She introduced Conley to Ingrid Helton. Helton is a costume designer. She made masks with plastic windows around the mouth. Hearing people can wear them. That way, lip readers can see mouths move.

Helton made her own business selling the masks. It is called Happy Laugh Masks. Other businesses are selling similar masks with windows. The masks have been very popular. There are around 48 million Americans who are deaf or hard of hearing. Many of their friends and family members are buying the masks. However, many other people are buying the masks, too.

Teachers want the masks to help students who are learning English. It helps to be able to see how speakers pronounce words. Hospitals and businesses want the masks to help improve communication. They want people to be able to see the smiles of health care workers.

Anne McIntosh is a hearing-impaired doctor. She created a company called Safe'N'Clear. Her company created a windowed mask before COVID-19. The window does not fog up from people's breath. For a long time, lip readers have struggled in hospitals. Many hospital workers wear masks. Lip readers could not understand them.



Problem Has Gotten Worse

The problem has only gotten worse during COVID-19. People who are hearing-impaired sometimes need an interpreter. The interpreter helps them communicate. However, interpreters cannot go into the hospitals right now. They might catch or spread COVID-19.

Now, people are wearing masks outside of hospitals, too. This makes communication even harder for deaf people like Conley.

McIntosh said store owners like the masks, too. The masks keep employees safe. They also allow customers to see employees' smiles.

Conley was nervous to go to stores or restaurants. He would not know if someone was talking to him. He would not know what they were saying, either. He carries paper and pen with him. That way, he can ask people to write down what they are saying. This means touching the same paper, though. This can be an uncomfortable thing to ask someone to do. Touching common surfaces can spread germs. Spreading germs risks getting COVID-19.

Once, someone at the grocery store was packing up Conley's groceries. He refused to use the pen and paper to communicate with Conley.

Conley said these situations made him feel less confident.

Now, Conley is grateful for the people who have helped him. The people who work with him plan to wear Helton's window masks to work. That way, Conley can understand what they are saying. Conley feels more confident now.

He and LaZich met up to try out the masks. Conley could easily read LaZich's lips. Through her mask's window, LaZich smiled at him.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph below from the section "Problem Has Gotten Worse."

Conley was nervous to go to stores or restaurants. He would not know if someone was talking to him. He would not know what they were saying, either. He carries paper and pen with him. That way, he can ask people to write down what they are saying. This means touching the same paper, though. This can be an uncomfortable thing to ask someone to do. Touching common surfaces can spread germs. Spreading germs risks getting COVID-19.

What is the MAIN idea of this paragraph?

- (A) Michael Conley wants people to stop wearing masks.
- (B) Communication has been difficult for Michael Conley.
- (C) Germs are easily spread by touching surfaces.
- (D) People are nervous about catching COVID-19.

- 2 A main idea of the article is that face masks with plastic windows can help people who are deaf.

Which key detail from the article supports the article's MAIN idea?

- (A) Viruses spread through tiny particles.
- (B) Hearing-impaired people rely on lip-reading.
- (C) Hospital workers want patients to see them smile.
- (D) Some hearing-impaired people need interpreters.

- 3 According to the section "Problem Has Gotten Worse," WHY does Michael Conley carry a pen and paper with him?

- (A) to help stop the spread of COVID-19 germs
- (B) to keep track of the places requiring masks
- (C) to communicate with people who wear masks
- (D) to write down important information each day

- 4 According to the section "Helping Lip Readers See Mouths Move," WHY are teachers buying Happy Laugh Masks?

- (A) The masks do not fog up like regular masks fog up.
- (B) Some students in a class might be hearing-impaired.
- (C) Language learners need to see teachers pronounce words.
- (D) Students might be fearful if they are unable see their teachers smile.