

# WEARING PROTECTIVE MASKS DURING THE PANDEMIC, ASSERTIVENESS AND COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS: DOES COMMUNICATION MATTER?



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## INTRODUCTION

- The pandemic SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) has taken many lives and compromised long-term health in many people around the world. Wearing protective masks has been recommended as one of the preventive measures [1] (protecting both self and the others).
- However, challenges in adherence to this measure were noticed, even when this measure was legally demanded.
- How much can we influence each other when it comes to respecting protective measures by assertive communication?

## AIM

The aim of the study was to explore:

- The preference, the use and the effectiveness of different ways of communication regarding wearing masks (assertive, aggressive, passive/defensive),
- the relationship between these attitudes and behaviors, ability to discriminate what assertiveness is, and cognitive distortions.

## METHOD

### Participants

- 564 participants from general population in Serbia
- Gender: 24,3 % males, 75,7 % females
- Age: mean age 36.39 years (SD 10.15)
- Living with partner (58.2%)
- Education: graduate or postgraduate education level (60%).

### Instruments

The participants filled out the anonymous online questionnaire, comprising :

- the socio-demographic items
- items on **wearing protective masks** (behaviors and attitudes, including the communication with others regarding wearing masks)
- items on the **ability to discriminate between different communication behaviors** (from the Test of Discriminating Assertive from Aggressive and Defensive Verbal Behavior; Zdravkovic&Krnecic, 2002; modified) [2].
- Cognitive Distortions Questionnaire** – CD-Quest, de Oliveira, 2015; modified scoring [3]

## RESULTS

**Table 1.** How frequently have you worn the protective mask properly, from 0 to 10?

Pandemic period	M	SD	Median
1) March - August 2020.	8.00	2.91	10
2) September 2020. – February 2021.	7.42	2.94	8
3) March – August 2021.	6.42	3.23	7
4) September 2021. – February 2022.	5.24	3.48	5
5) March – August 2022.	3.25	3.284	2
6) September 2022. – January 2023.	1.79	2.913	0

**Table 2.** How would you approach another person not wearing a mask in your presence?

Approach	N	%
I would say: <i>If I may kindly ask, could you please put on a mask (properly), for mutual safety from corona virus.</i>	321	56.6
I would say <i>nothing.</i>	144	25.4
I would say: <i>I would be grateful if you put on a mask, I have a chronic patient at home, so I am afraid of bringing the infection to him / her.</i>	92	16.2
I would say: <i>Put on the mask (properly), the way you're acting is not acceptable!</i>	10	1.8

**Table 3.** What kind of communication would be most effective if you were approached by another person asking you to put on a mask?

What approach would be effective?	N	%
I would respond best to: <i>If I may kindly ask, could you please put on a mask (properly), from mutual safety from corona virus.</i>	362	63.8
I would respond best to: <i>I would be grateful if you put on a mask, I have a chronic patient at home, so I am afraid of bringing the infection to him / her.</i>	172	30.3
I would <i>never put on a mask or distance myself, however I was approached.</i>	17	3.0
I would respond best to: <i>Put on the mask (properly), the way you're acting is not acceptable!</i>	8	1.4
I would <i>definitely put on a mask, no matter how I was approached.</i>	5	0.9

**Table 4.** Associations of attitudes and behaviors related to communication about masks, cognitive distortions and the ability to discriminate what assertiveness is

- Participants with assertive approach had higher rates of **mind-reading, labeling, and what-ifs** than those who would not have any reaction to someone without a mask (Chi2kw 9.371 to 10.613; p<0.05, intergroup comparisons p<0.008\*). Those who would respond best to defensive approach had higher rates of **unfair comparison** than those who would respond best to assertive approach (Chi2kw 8.754; p=0.033, intergroup comparisons p<0.008\*).
- Participants who would approach the other assertively and defensively had **better discrimination of assertive from aggressive and defensive behavior** than those who would not have any reaction (Chi2kw 17.147; p=0.001, intergroup comparisons p<0.008\*). Those who would respond best to defensive approach had **better discrimination of assertive from aggressive and defensive behavior** than those who would respond best to assertive behavior or in whom no approach would have an effect (Chi2kw 17.821; p=0.001, intergroup comparisons p<0.008\*).
- Those who would respond to assertive approach, wore a mask more often in several periods of the pandemic (even in the past year) compared to other groups (Chi2kw from 8,419 to 15,751; p<0.05; p<0.008\* for intergroup comparisons).

## DISCUSSION

- About a half of the sample prefers an assertive response when it comes to communication related to wearing masks, both in their own response and in the response of others. Ways of responding and attitudes regarding what kind of communication would be most effective are related to cognitive distortions and the ability to discriminate assertive from aggressive and defensive responses.
- A significant number of participants who stated that they would put on a mask at the assertively communicated request of the other, wore a mask more often during different periods of the pandemic (even in the third year of the pandemic).
- Assertive communication attitudes and behavior among citizens could be considered a potential instrument for encouraging protective behaviors in the population such as wearing masks during a pandemic, and can be of significance public health importance in future situations where there is a need to wear masks.

## REFERENCES

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