

My Experience with Masks



Katrina C. Tarondo (@ktsnapshots) has congenital moderately severe to mild mixed hearing loss in both ears (she wears two behind-the-ear hearing aids), which is a component of her Rieger Syndrome. She currently works at an immigration law firm. Katrina is a Board Director at Hear Québec. Hear Québec has been a great place for Katrina to reconnect with the Hard-of-Hearing network. Katrina wants to pay it forward as she knows first-hand how important organizations like Hear Québec are to individuals with hearing loss and their loved ones.

Despite being born with a hearing loss, my hearing journey started later than one would expect. At age 6, I was in a mainstream school, finishing up grade one and not doing well, when the school decided to check my hearing. They noticed a problem and brought it to the attention of my parents. I was then tested in a hospital and was told that I had a congenital hearing loss. I have 30 percent loss in my right ear and 40 percent in the left. For my parents, this outcome was welcomed. Prior to my correct diagnosis, doctors attributed my delayed speech development to slow development and never thought it could be attributed to a hearing loss. To me, my life really started at 7 years old. I was later diagnosed with a rare facial syndrome called Rieger's Syndrome. This includes hearing loss, missing muscles in the eyes and an underbite. I obtained two behind the ear hearing aids and never looked back. I had a long road ahead of me with a lot of catching up to do. But with lots of support, and through hard work and determination, I was able to catch up academically, and by high school I surpassed many of my mainstream peers. There, I learned to self-advocate for accommodations and this became second-nature once I enrolled in CEGEP and later in university. My parents made sure I had all the resources I needed and they never treated me differently to my siblings. I was encouraged to strive

for whatever I wanted in life. The Montreal Oral School for the Deaf (MOSD) taught me the importance of working hard, made me aware of my strengths, and helped me work on my areas of growth. My hearing loss journey is very much a part of who I am, and with it comes different challenges as the world changes. The one change that made hearing more difficult during recent months has been the use of cloth masks during the pandemic. I knew cloth masks would be an obstacle to communication, but I did not know how much it would affect me and others with hearing loss until I had my first experience with them.





Normally, I do not have any issues when I am at the pharmacy. But about a month and a half into the lockdown, I finally had to get a prescription. I was confronted with the same social distancing barriers we are all experiencing. There was a table in front of the prescription counter; a pharmacist stood on the other side, behind a computer, wearing a face mask and a face guard. I had a hard time hearing her questions about my prescription which made me anxious. The pharmacist's speech was muffled due to the the mask and the distance. I rely on the hearing I have left with the help of hearing aids, but this situation was difficult. Also, I felt I had no privacy because there was a personal barrier that made me stay far away. The customer behind me was able to hear everything that was being said as the pharmacist had to speak up. Furthermore, no vibrating beepers were given out to customers, so I did not receive a signal when my prescription was ready. Unlike others, I had to stay close and listen intently for my name, which caused me further anxiety.

After sharing my experience, my family and friends also told me that they had similar difficulties hearing people with the masks. Masks muffle speech and also hide facial expressions which provide important visual cues when we communicate. This experience was important for me to share as it sheds light on other alternatives such as clear masks and visors, which are more effective in protection, breathing and talking. Seeing someone's face makes a huge difference in communication. I did not appreciate this as much until I experienced talking with masked people. Communication is not smooth and clear with cloth masks. They have become fashionable and

popular because they offer different designs, and so are more used than face shields. Fortunately, this is changing as experts (epidemiologists) highlight the fact that face shields provide more protection as they protect your whole face. A recent article by CBC News journalist Dianne Buckner discusses the new demand for face shields. Designers are now aware of the efficacy of face shields. For instance, Joe Doucet, a New York City based multidisciplinary designer has made face shields that mimic the look of sunglasses. Not only does his design protect you from the sun, but it also keeps you cooler in the summer compared to cloth masks. Many Canadian companies are following suit, making face shields more fashionable and comfortable so they feel more natural. Initially they produced face shields for essential workers, but now they are able to open the market to the general public. This will make face shields available to people who work with the public. Face shields have other advantages too. For example, for people who wear glasses, their breath is able to escape from the bottom of the shield, rather than from the top as with cloth masks. Face shields are also better for teaching in classroom settings.

For all these reasons, I urge you all to consider using face shields as an alternative to cloth masks when needed. The benefits are both for the user and their communication partner as shields ensure that communication is clearer, more understandable and therefore more accessible to all.

Hear Québec's Safe and Clear Campaign continues to grow and our message is being heard. We have also urged the mayor of Montreal to encourage the use of face shields so all citizens can enjoy communication accessibility.

