

Dear Readers,

## **Wearing a Facemask and Body Language**

**T**he Corona pandemic has changed our lives dramatically. Due to the nature of the disease causing a severe lung disorder and the method of infection, COVID-19 has even affected our daily ways of communication and interaction with our fellow human beings. In order to reduce infection we have been required to wear facemasks covering our nose and mouth and to keep a two-meter distance from each other. In fact today, many countries mandate wearing masks in public. Basically, this seems straightforward, but as we have experienced, wearing facemasks for many people has become very challenging and for some it seems almost impossible. But why?

As veterinarians, we are very aware of body language when examining and treating our patients. In particular, facial expressions can be especially revealing as to the feelings and state of mind of the animals we attend too. A dramatic example of this is the assessment of pain in animals by carefully viewing their facial appearances. This has been studied in depth in the field of laboratory animal medicine and applied effectively in rats, mice and rabbits in the form of a Grimace scale. It was Darwin who in 1872 famously wrote, "...the young and the old of widely different races, both with man and animals, express the same state of mind by the same movements". For example, we can see this in congenitally blind babies showing the same facial expressions as sighted babies. Also, in congenitally blind runners and sighted runners, show the same facial expressions whether they win or lose.

We inherently practice a careful observation of facial expressions when talking or interacting with our fellow human being. It is an essential means of communication. We judge what is being said to us, not only by hearing but also by seeing and absorbing the context of how the sounds are being made, regarding how the lips and mouth are moving and the emotional circumstances. This all together, gives us information about how the person we are facing to feels towards us and their intent towards us. This represents to what we use as our non-verbal communication. Learning how to read emotions from a face can aid social interaction, avoid misunderstandings and help a group function efficiently and harmoniously.

Therefore, wearing a facemask disturbs some very basic innate mechanisms which some of us have great difficulty in overcoming despite the knowledge that we may be putting ourselves in danger. An example I saw on television, a large demonstration in Australia, where people were objecting to the use of facemasks. Behind them was a big poster with the words "Give us back our freedom". Of course, no one has taken their freedom from them, yet wearing a facemask may give some the feeling that they have been robbed of their basic innate rights, which have being withheld from them. So deeply, that some are troubled and distressed to the extent that they even dare to disregard the safety of wearing masks and in so doing endanger their lives and others about them!

As the pandemic continues, the facemask looks unlikely to leave anytime soon. Given that reality, it might also be a case for us to learn to adjust for the benefit of all. I appeal to all to take care and look after yourselves. These are indeed difficult times, which are extraordinary. I hope that in the long run we will be able to look back at this pandemic and reminisce about how we overcame this novel and unique contagion.

Wishing all our readers Season Greetings and a Happy, Healthy and Blessed New Year.

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