

# The Lone Ranger in Covid Town

Dr Aspa Paltoglou (pictured), a Chartered Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, on continuing to take pandemic precautions.

14 August 2024



*Human kind cannot bear very much reality'*

*The Four Quartets, T.S.Elliot*

It's been around five years since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Sometimes, I hear people refer to our current time as 'post-Covid'. I don't agree with that.

As far as I can tell from the scientific papers and data, [we are still in a pandemic](#). And so I still hold Covid-19 mitigations: [I mask with FFP3 respirators](#), I carry a small air purifier, I don't eat in restaurants, and generally I tend to avoid busy indoor places if I can help it. I also use a [nose spray](#) and a [mouthwash](#) that appear to reduce viral load. Covid-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus; it is a highly contagious, airborne virus, that can be suspended for hours in the air like smoke. Handwashing, although a good thing to do for a variety of reasons, is not the most relevant precaution as some suggest. Obviously I vaccinate against Covid-19 whenever possible, but as far as I know the vaccine on its own does not yet protect you from getting Covid-19 or from Long Covid (although it seems to reduce the severity of the acute disease), so the strategy needs to be ['vaccine plus'; the vaccine only as part of a suite of measures](#).

Because most people around me seem to consider Covid-19 a thing of the past, I am usually a lone masker everywhere I go. As a Psychologist, how do I explain that? And how can I live that way?

## **Being 'Covid-cautious'**

The answer is: with great difficulty. I don't enjoy wearing respirators. I really struggle with being the only masker and carrying a very small but annoyingly noisy air purifier, it's simply excruciating at staff meetings. I feel like I have a facial disfigurement. I miss talking to my colleagues and to

students without wearing a mask. I miss going to restaurants and coffee shops with friends and family.

But at the same time, I don't want to be infected by Covid-19, and increase my chances of developing Long Covid, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, dementia and so on. With every additional Covid-19 infection, even if it seems mild, the probability of getting Long Covid is increased, even for those with no prior illnesses. Some consider Covid-19 like a cold or the flu, but this is misleading and minimising. It looks like Covid-19 is a devastating vascular, multisystem, inflammatory disease and can cause [serious organ damage even when it is asymptomatic](#). [Some scientists have made comparisons](#) at a viral level with HIV in the 80s, when there was not yet effective anti-virals. (Talking about cold and flu, I must say I have enjoyed not being ill for the last five years; I used to be ill once or twice a year before.)

From where I'm standing, sometimes the world feels roughly divided in two camps: those that want/have to forget about Covid-19, and those that still try to be careful and still wear masks. As a Covid-cautious person, and a Psychologist, I'm interested in the individual differences in attitudes, affect, and cognitive biases that could have something to do with the variability in how people respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, [Frangaki and colleagues \(2021\)](#) showed that individuals high in optimism bias showed lower engagement with Covid-19 mitigations, i.e. engaged in more risky behaviour, than those low in optimism bias; conversely, those participants high in Covid-19-related anxiety and high perceived severity of the situation engaged more with Covid-19-related mitigations.

Could empathy be of relevance here too? [I found a study suggesting that empathy for vulnerable people might be related to higher mask wearing](#). I think as a society and individuals we should always do our best to protect the most vulnerable. But if I am completely honest – and I'm not proud of this – I am not doing it out of empathy for others. Mainly, I am doing it for selfish reasons. Because I know that it has been established that the virus that causes Covid-19 is a [biosafety level 3 pathogen](#), and it has detrimental effects for everybody, whether they have prior illnesses or not.

I often worry how other people perceive me as a lone masker. Faces and facial emotions are very important for communicating with each other. So, when a face is altered or covered in some way, that can have negative effects on social acceptance. [Bylianto and Chant recently showed](#) that masked faces are judged as less approachable and trustworthy than unmasked faces, and smiling whilst wearing a mask does not increase approachability or trustworthiness. I do wonder, though, whether the participants of this study tended to be individuals high in optimism bias and less Covid-cautious? Perhaps those who are still masking to avoid Covid-19 might have shown different pattern of results?

It is very difficult to do something that goes against 'group wisdom'. People are social animals. We want to be accepted in the group; we don't tend to want to stand out. The classic psychological research on social conformity by Solomon Asch is very relevant here. The results are typically interpreted as showing that people will ignore a blatant falsehood in order to conform to the popular wisdom and pressure. Interestingly, [some researchers](#) suggest that Asch's study doesn't only show evidence for social conformity, but also for people's tendency to stand their ground even if it means going against the popular (yet false) wisdom of influential people around them. In terms of Covid-19, I think the blatant falsehoods are ideas such as that the Covid-19 pandemic has

finished, that contracting Covid-19 is not that bad for you, that hand-washing is an effective strategy against Covid-19, that getting vaccinated against Covid-19 is enough.

I also think we have often been presented with a false dichotomy – the idea that we can protect people's health, or the economy, but not both. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that protecting the health of people has positive effects on the economy, and the reverse; [a recent report in The Economist highlights the huge cost of Long Covid to the economy](#). Since there is no known cure for Long Covid and its effects on the economy have been devastating, I think it is important to make sure Covid-19 infections are avoided as much as possible.

However, if masking is too difficult, because other people don't do it, then you might stop doing it too, to maintain your psychological equilibrium. You might even try to avoid thinking about Covid-19 altogether. [Avoidance is one of the strategies individuals use to deal with trauma, and the Covid-19 pandemic is definitely a collective trauma. However, research suggest that avoidance is not an ideal way to deal with a trauma](#), or Covid-19, as [repeated Covid-19 infections can lead to cognitive and psychiatric problems too](#), compounding the problem further.

I often think that if more people masked, then masking would become normalised and more people would conform to wearing a mask. A [recent study](#) showed some evidence that social conformity can influence mask wearing; they showed that the higher the proportion of customers wearing respirators correctly, the higher the chance that new customers would also wear respirators correctly. On the other hand, social pressure (number of customers per square meter) seemed to have the opposite relationship, suggesting a problematic free-riding behaviour. Is this behaviour due to the false idea that one-way masking is enough? Or perhaps unmasked customers felt less pressure to mask when hidden among many people? It is difficult to know, as this was an observational study and people were not asked afterwards for reasons why they were masking or not masking.

Personally, it gives me immense comfort and relief to see other maskers around me – not only because I know two-way masking is much more effective than one-way, but also because it reminds me that there are other people like me in the world that still mask to protect themselves and others from Covid-19 infection.

So, on one hand, not masking and being infected with Covid-19 can be harmful in so many ways. On the other hand, I know that being a lone masker is difficult, and I suspect it can be psychologically harmful. Lone maskers need psychological and community support to continue masking and reduce the psychological harm involved in going against the grain. Here are my suggestions.