

Research finds link between sewing masks and well-being at start of pandemic

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A crafter uses a sewing machine to make a cloth face mask in Ames, Iowa, November 2021. Larger image. Credit: Rachel Cramer/Iowa State University News Service

During a critical face mask shortage at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, home sewers responded by pulling out fabric stashes, threading their machines and getting to work. Recently published research shows their efforts to protect health care workers and loved ones stemmed not only from altruism, but also a desire for some sort of control during an unprecedented time of uncertainty.

"COVID-19 felt like this huge, overwhelming problem, but making [masks](#) while stuck at home was something that could be done right away and directly help people. It gave handcrafters a sense of purpose and opportunities to make choices, which are strongly connected to health and wellness," said Ellen McKinney, one of the paper's authors and an associate professor of apparel, events and hospitality management at Iowa State University.

By interpreting public Instagram posts from March 7-28, 2020, McKinney and the other researchers uncovered five overarching themes in the face mask sewers' motivation: "Call to virtuous action"; "do it right"; "rising to the occasion"; "I'm ready for this"; and "this is helping me."

Call to virtuous action

Many mask sewers wrote "recruiting posts" on Instagram, which included phrases like "do your part" and "join the global effort." These posts framed mask sewing as a heroic effort to address an urgent need and often framed volunteering as part of a larger movement. The researchers emphasized a shared purpose and some level of control (e.g., choosing to volunteer time and materials to make masks) are linked to a person's overall well-being.

Do it right

Mask sewers on Instagram also shared how to make masks "correctly" by posting about the designs, materials or techniques they thought were best. Other posts encouraged crafters to donate their masks through organized sewing and delivery groups rather than contacting hospitals directly. The researchers said sharing this information gave home sewers a sense of perceived control of others, and in turn, the outcome in the fight against COVID-19.

Rising to the occasion

Under this theme, home sewers emphasized the personal sacrifices they made in order to help curb the spread of the virus. They often created Instagram posts about the number of hours they had put into mask-making or the number of masks they had donated. The researchers said the masks offered a tangible representation of their time and effort to control the spread of an invisible virus.

I'm ready for this

Many of the crafters expressed pride in being prepared to sew masks. For example, one Instagram post stated: "I guess it's true, have some crafty people in your apocalypse gang." The sewers said prior to the pandemic, their skills were often undervalued by society or that family and friends tended to view their fabric stashes and supplies as unnecessary. The researchers highlighted how making masks helped provide home sewers a sense of control over negative perceptions of their hobby.

This is helping me cope

During a time when millions of people suddenly had a lot of free time on their hands, sewing masks helped crafters regain a sense of personal

productivity and accomplishment. It also helped them manage their stress and anxiety by providing a positive distraction.

"For some people, sewing provided a break from the constant barrage of news about the pandemic, and I think doing something with your hands and being creative is a good way to get out of your head for a bit," McKinney said.

Handcrafters sewed masks to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and protect their communities during a severe shortage of personal protective equipment at the start of the [pandemic](#). But participation in the home sewers movement also offered various forms of control at a time when daily life and routines were completely disrupted. McKinney and the researchers said the findings from their recent paper expand the role of crafting as a coping tool for [stress](#) and [anxiety](#).

More information: Addie K. Martindale et al, 'I'm not a doctor, but I can sew a mask': The face mask home sewing movement as a means of control during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, *Craft Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1386/crre_00050_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/crre_00050_1)

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