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A Piece of My Mind

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Unmasked Facies

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Raise your eyebrows. Now, screw your eyes up tight, like they have soap in them. Now, please lower your mask briefly, so I can see the rest of your face." The patient slowly lowers their mask to reveal the lower half of their face. I used to breeze through this part of the cranial nerve examination—the part assessing cranial nerve VII (the facial nerve), which supplies the muscles of facial expression. I would quickly move on to, "Give me a big smile. Now puff out your cheeks. Say, 'Aah.'" It was all just part of my standard routine.

Now when I ask patients to perform this step of lowering their mask, I pause briefly, understanding that I am asking something more of them. The request implies a new level of trust between us to remove the barrier (even if only briefly) that has provided life-saving protection over these last two years. It feels like a moment of intimacy.

I am always surprised by what I see and how my imagination never fully predicts the reality of their exposed face. Did I predict that they would have a mustache? Or would I have guessed the bright color of their lipstick? Did I expect to see the wrinkles at the corners of their mouths indicating a lifetime of smiles, or the furrowed lines above the upper lip of one immersed in worry? So many unique features that in prepandemic days would be caught in the instant of our first handshake and subconsciously form an initial impression of the person in my mind's eye. Now, I just get little privileged glimmers of a face, in one small portion of my examination, which is otherwise hidden.

As a movement disorders neurologist, I miss being able to evaluate people's faces for the duration of

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rigidity or tremor, it can help to seal the diagnosis. Only now, after being deprived of seeing most of my patients' faces for most of the last two years, I am beginning to grasp the full value of facial expression.

For now, I search deeply for the clues above the mask; the decreased blink rate, the absence of a twinkling of the eyes, or the lack of disarming creases at the edge of the mask when I try to crack a joke. Eyes that stare at me blankly, as if in disbelief. But what am I missing behind the mask? A wry smile, showing a sense of humor that I am unaware of, or a tightening of the lips, conveying anxiety that I don't pick up on? Maybe there is more expression there than I think. How much of the face do we need to assess facial expression?

This question comes to me at other times outside of my clinical practice. My two children have lived almost their entire lives in the pandemic, with the world hidden behind a mask. I cannot help but wonder how this absence of facial expression, this paucity of smiles in their young lives, might leave its mark on them in the future. Kind strangers we meet in the elevator try to smile at them extra hard, in the hope that their big friendly eyes might make up for the fact that my children cannot see their smiling mouths.

Now, with permission from state governments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we begin to lower our masks as a whole population. In the research laboratory where I work, just last week, we were told that the mask requirement has been lifted. Still people nervously keep their masks on, unsure of any unspoken rules, not wanting to make others uncomfortable. But gradually we start to see more of each other's faces. There are people who started working in the lab since the pandemic began whose lower face I had never seen. I find myself taken aback by the intimacy of seeing their faces, a uniquely pandemic-era experience. I relish this new and rewarding sense of connectedness to others. It had been there before the pandemic, I was just unaware of it.

In Parkinson disease, loss of dopamine signaling in the brain results in abnormal patterns of muscle activation throughout the body. The face, containing more than 30 muscles that generate wide-ranging expressions from despair to anger to joy, is particularly vulnerable to this neurochemical imbalance. Although patients do not typically complain that they have "lost facial expression," they do share with me that people think they are angry when they are not, or depressed when they are not.

During this pandemic, we have all lost facial expression. It has been 2 years of the entire world having a masked facies. Has this lack of exposure to facial expression contributed to the sense of isolation that many of us feel? Has it deprived us of shared emotions, of empathy or led to misinterpreted feelings? On the other hand, perhaps we have also gained a new type of intimacy and deliberateness in our interactions, which get us beyond the immediate biases of seeing someone's whole face. I find I spend more time really learning about who the person is. I truly savor moments of shared laughter. It will take time for us to recalibrate to the richness of full facial expression. As we begin to reveal ourselves to others

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