

Masking

Masking or camouflaging can be described as hiding, disguising, or suppressing parts of yourself that others may find unusual to fit in better with the people around you. People do this without thinking about it to connect with other people, but this can be harmful to people's mental health and wellbeing.

Masking is an unconscious strategy that everyone develops to connect with other people from an early age. It can be a useful strategy in certain situation. However, for autistic people this strategy can be particularly harmful to their mental health due to the extent and ingrained nature of masking. This is because they may feel pressure to fit in and hide their autistic traits.

Masking can look like

- Suppressing stims
- Hiding a special interest
- Mimicking behaviour such as non-verbal behaviour
- Rehearsed social scripts for certain situations
- Forcing eye contact
- Intense internal self-monitoring
- Taking the persona of another person
- Hiding distress to certain sensory stimuli
- Trying to hide and blend in and not contributing to conversations
- Hiding your true feelings and emotions

Often people aren't aware that they are masking and it is often an unconscious response to social trauma. It is often only when people start thinking about the fact that they may be autistic that they recognise how much they mask in their daily lives.



"I have spent my entire life masking my autism – continuously being aware of what my face is doing and how others may perceive me is exhausting."

The effects of masking

Research shows that masking can have a harmful effect on people's mental health including increased anxiety and depression. Masking is exhausting and the strain of trying to adapt to fit into a world that thinks differently can lead to 'burn-out' and mental health crisis.

In addition, masking stops people developing their true identity and many people feel that they don't know themselves. That they have been portraying who they think they should be and don't know themselves and even their true likes and dislikes. It can also lead to people feeling socially isolated where they feel no-one knows their true identity, including themselves.

Masking can also mean that it may be more difficult for health professionals to identify autism and this may lead to missed diagnosis or mis-diagnosis with other conditions such as mental health conditions.

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"Trying to control my facial expressions and body language and gestures to appear more neurotypical is just plain exhausting . But because I've spent a lifetime doing this, my autistic self remains predominantly hidden, especially when around other people. Because of this, people question my autism or assume I'm only 'mildly' autistic.

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"There are so many people who have been conditioned throughout their lives to think that the way they communicate, the way they react to things, the way that they express their sensory needs are wrong. So they have had this masking taught to them, and it's ingrained in them. So it's not as simple as saying "You can drop your mask with us." Because some people can't. They've been so conditioned to have it up.

Masking and you

It can be helpful to think about your own masking or camouflaging behaviour. This can help you to get to know yourself better and be a better advocate for yourself. Here are some ways which you can start to do this.

1. Your masking behaviours

It is useful to start thinking about identifying your masking behaviours. A great place to start is with the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q) which can be accessed here <https://embrace-autism.com/cat-q/>.

2. When and why you mask

To think about your masking further it may be useful to think about a situation when you have masked and think about

- the environment, who was there what was expected of you
- how you felt at the time
- what you did in that situation
- how your body felt
- how you felt afterwards

Doing this over a period of a few weeks will help you to think about how often you mask and the effect it may be having on you.

3. Reconnecting with yourself

Masking can prevent people from getting to know themselves and what makes them happy and what is soothing for them. This means that it is important to think about this. Sometimes it helps to think about what you did as a child and what made you happy, what activities did you like and what helped you when you felt upset? Are there any activities that you do now in private but not in public? Explore what makes you happy and what is soothing for you.

4. Deciding to unmask

It is a big step to decide that you want to mask less and can be a very anxious time. But if you want to explore unmasking a good way of doing this is to start small and test out different situations

- write down before-hand what the behaviour you want to express/ change is in a certain situation
- what you think will happen
- what you are going to do
- what happened
- reflections on how it went

By doing this you will learn what you are comfortable with and can test out different situations and with different people.

Note- It is very important when exploring your own masking behaviour and if attempting to change this in any way to take your time and take care of yourself. Ensuring that you share any worries with someone who is close to you or a health care professional.

Useful links

It you would like to learn more about masking and explore what this might mean to you here are some links to some other useful resources that autistic people have told us are helpful.

- **Book**- Taking the mask off by Dr Hannah Louise Belcher
- **Journal Article**- Development and Validation of the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q), Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders ,
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-018-3792-6#SupplementaryMaterial>
- **Website**- <https://embrace-autism.com/cat-q/>