

Understanding Masking

Karen Mills, AP Cymru

Thursday, 26th of June 2025, 10:00am – 12:00pm



About the Session

Drawing on lived experiences, current research, and real-world examples, this session will deepen your understanding of the pressures and constraints that neurodivergent young people face when having to conform to neurotypical, societal norms. As parents and carers, you will be given easy-to-apply and effective tools and techniques - helping you create an even more supportive, empathetic and inclusive environment for all neurotypes. The session will also give you the opportunity to ask our ND experts any questions you have, specifically on the unique challenges that you face.



About the Presenter

As a neurodivergent person, and mum of two neurodivergent young adults, Karen understands the challenges and opportunities that come with navigating a world designed for the neurotypical. Drawing from both her personal experiences and professional insights, Karen empowers audiences to embrace the beauty of diverse minds and recognise the transformative power of inclusion.



To book your free place please use this link:

<https://events.teams.microsoft.com/event/2ca70e09-3b37-453f-b605-30a8b47e3e70@6850a7f1-4cc1-4482-a1c1-79439f679966>

(Please note: this session is for parents & carers only)

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Our Why...



AP Cymru – The Neurodiversity Charity was set up in 2008.

‘Everyone deserves to feel *safe*, that they *belong*, and that they *matter*.’

This is still at the  of everything that we do.

What we do...

Parent Mental Health & Wellbeing Support

Clinics & Workshops

Empowering Parents

Family Activity Sessions

Training & Consultancy Services



Our charity is currently supporting **1,811** people across South Wales!



Housekeeping



Confidentiality



Cameras on or off – your comfort is important.



Mute your microphone please

By the end of our session, you will:

- Understand what masking is and how it ‘usually’ presents.
- Have ideas of how you can support your child to “unmask”
- Recognise why we mask
- Feel confident to support your child using our “5 Steps to Unmasking”

What is Masking?

IT'S WHEN WE HIDE PARTS OF WHO WE ARE TO
"FIT IN" WITH THE WORLD AROUND US.

Recognising and unlearning it is the first step to
accepting who we truly are.

<https://embrace-autism.com/cat-q/>

Why do people mask?

- Survival
- Desire to fit in
- Not wanting to be told off
- Rewarded for compliance

We often don't realise that we are doing it. We have learned to mask to feel safe, accepted or to avoid being judged.

What could masking look like?

- Forced eye contact
- Suppressing their stims
- Copying the speech and/or behaviour of their peers, rehearsing sentences for social situations (scripting)
- Hiding their special interest
- Concealing sensory overload

Signs your child/young person maybe masking:

- Being perfect in school and then having a 'meltdown or shutdown' at home.
- Physical and/or mental exhaustion after social time.
- Changing the way they look or act, speaking in a different accent.
- Repeated shutdowns.

Consequences of masking:

- Burnout from constantly hiding our true authentic selves
- Emotional and Physical Exhaustion
- Missed diagnosis because we don't "look autistic" or "seem ADHD"
- Loss of identity trying to be what we are not.

Masking can lead to burnout, anxiety, depression and a deep disconnection from ourselves.



THINGS TO CONSIDER

Sensory Overload

Sensory overload happens when the brain receives too much sensory input at once, making it difficult to process everything.

This can happen with loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, or too many people talking at once. It may cause stress, anxiety, or a need to withdraw from the situation.



Masking will externally ‘hide’ this emotional distress.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

Described as intense emotional pain triggered by perceived or real criticism, rejection, or failure. It's not a formal diagnosis but is commonly linked to ADHD affecting up to 99% of people.

- Extreme emotional reactions: Sudden, overwhelming sadness, anger, or shame, disproportionate to the event.
- Hyper-vigilance: Over-analysing social cues, misinterpreting neutral feedback as negative.
- Avoidance: Fearing rejection, they may withdraw socially or avoid new challenges.

These reactions can significantly impact self-esteem, relationships, and daily life. It's thought to involve differences in emotional regulation.

Dr William Dodson <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/history-of-rejection-sensitive-dysphoria/>



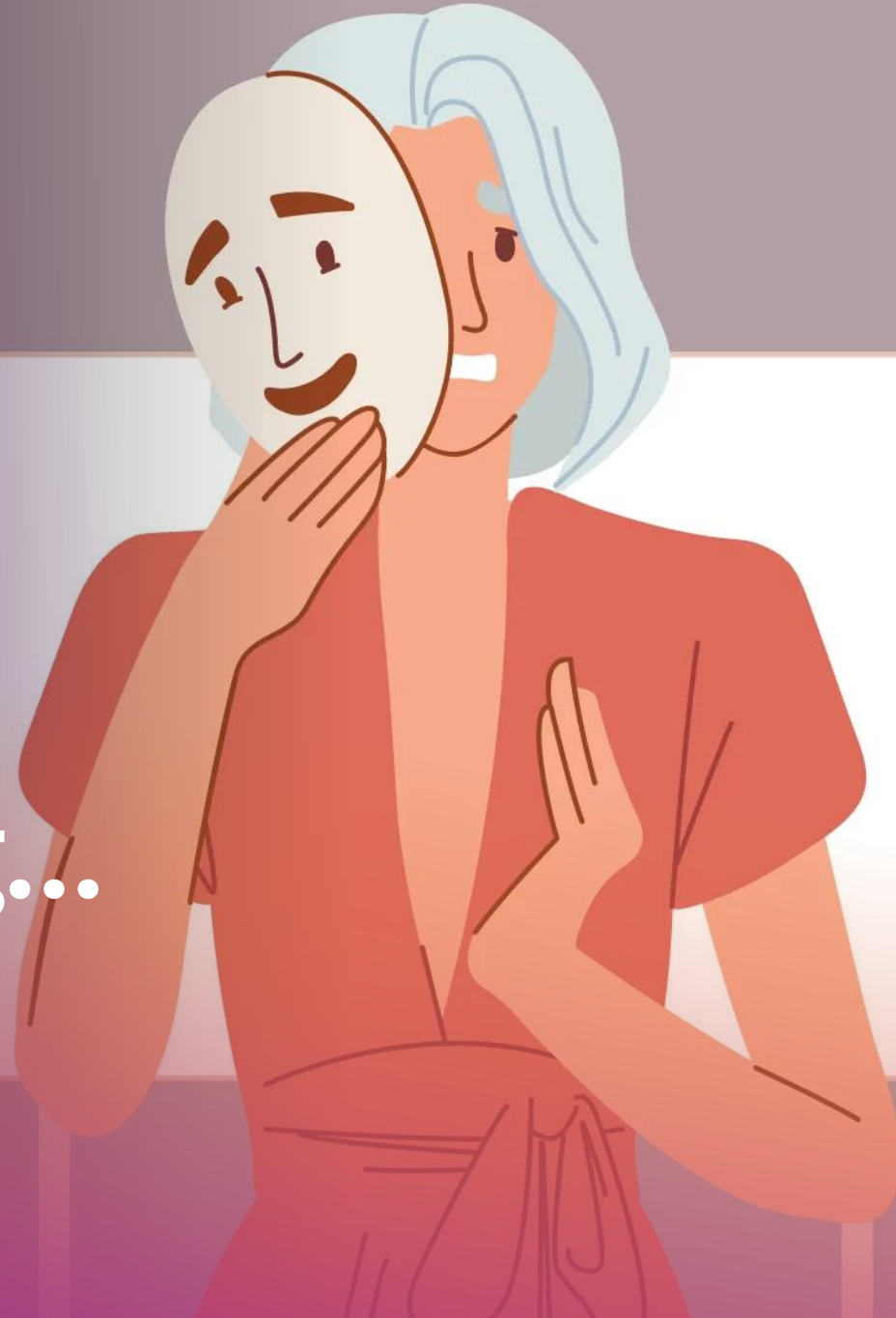
Common Signs Of Burnout!

Physical Signs	Constant exhaustion & sleep issues Frequent headaches, muscle/joint pain. Stomach problems, lowered immunity, high blood pressure
Emotional Signs	Feeling helpless, trapped, or defeated Self-doubt, feeling worthless, or a failure Detached, overwhelmed, demotivated, anxious
Behavioral Signs	Procrastinating, difficulty concentrating, decreased output Withdrawing from people/responsibilities. Relying on food, drugs, or alcohol to cope Irritable, short-tempered, increased tardiness/absenteeism

Spotting these signs is the first step. If you or someone you know is showing a few of these reaching out for help is a good idea. You're not alone!



5 Steps To Unmasking...



Step 1 – Set Your Own Pace

Unmasking is a big deal, so there's no rush. Take it slow and do what feels right for you. Your safety comes first, so if it's not safe to unmask right now, that's okay.

Prioritize keeping yourself safe until you're ready.



Step 2 – Notice Your “Alone” Self.



When you're by yourself, you're usually your most natural self. Pay attention to how you act when no one's watching. Do you talk to yourself, wear comfy "weird" clothes, or make specific movements?

Observing these things can show you what your unmasked self looks like.

Step 3 – Identify Behaviours You Do For Others

Think about what you do only to please others or to avoid judgment. Do you force eye contact, stop yourself from fidgeting, or constantly smile? If you're doing something just because you feel you "should" or out of fear, that's a sign of masking.

Recognizing these actions is a key step.



Step 4 – Challenge Internalised Beliefs

Masking



Sometimes, acting naturally might feel strange at first. This could be due to internalised ableism – believing that your natural behaviours are "wrong" because society labels them that way. If something feels good and natural, even if you've been told it's "weird," try to push past that discomfort.

Step 5 – Reconnect With Your Passions

Neurodivergent people are often told their special interests are a waste of time. But these passions are a huge part of who you are! Allow yourself to fully enjoy these activities, no matter how unusual they seem.

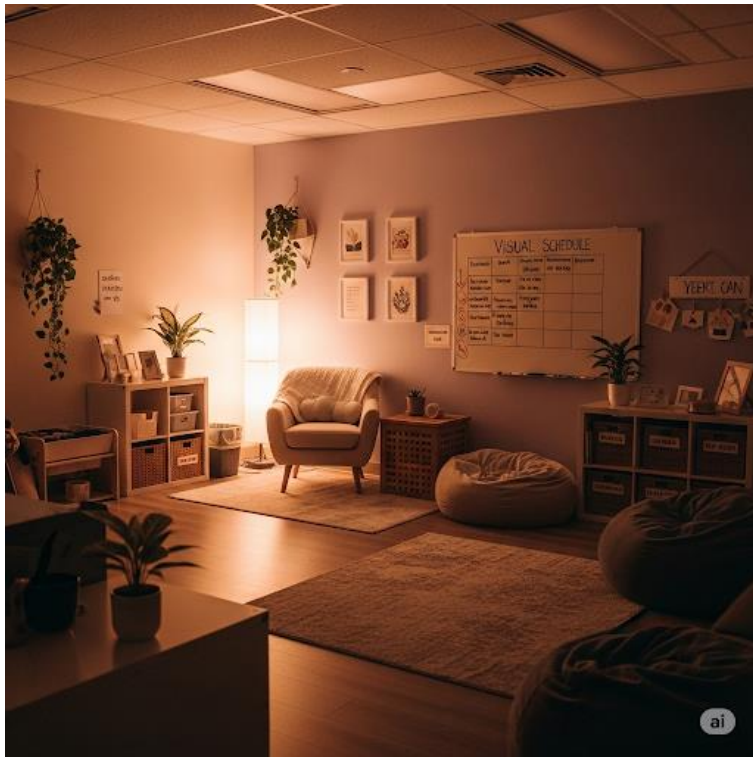
Embracing your true interests is incredibly healing and helps you connect with your authentic self.





**Unmasking the
real, authentic
you is the
beginning of true
freedom and
self-discovery.**

This space is designed to be calming and supportive, with elements like:



Soft, warm lighting

Minimal clutter

Comfortable seating

Clear visual cues



Thank you!

Feedback



www.apcymru.org.uk