

Masking

There is a lot of talk about what masking is and why autistic people mask in the first place. The following will hopefully help you understand what we mean when we talk about autistic masking, why it can be so difficult to spot, and what it means to take the mask off.

Masking is when you hide parts of who you are in order to fit in. It can be adopting a personality that doesn't quite match who you really are. This is something we all do to some extent – the person we project when we are at work is unlikely to be the person you project when you are out with your friends or on a date! But the amount that autistic people mask can create all sorts of problems, and the reasons why we mask are often different.

Masking can start at a very early age. Many autistic people realise even as young children that they are quite different from others. When others notice those differences, this can often lead to not being included in games, invited to parties, being asked to join in in any form. So, the autistic person very often makes the decision to show that they do actually belong to that group, or they can feel pressured into hiding how different they are so that people stop calling them "weird" and start including them. Autistic masking can be a form of self-preservation, a way of not being seen as too different. This is done in lots of different ways.

Masking can mean observing others to copy the way they socialise. We will look at autistic social skills later in the month but watching how other people interact with each other and attempt to copy that.

Masking can mean feigning interest in something to be included in conversations. As a girl growing up in the 80s and 90s I had very little interest in New Kids On The Block, East 17 or Take That, yet I learned the names of the band members and listened to their music so that when the other girls in my class spoke about them I knew who they were talking about and could join in. Spending time watching TV shows so they can take part in conversations, taking up a hobby they have no interest in, watching a sport they don't care about – these are all things that many autistic people have done in the attempt to fit in with others.

Masking can mean wearing uncomfortable clothes. Due to sensory issues around touch, some fabrics are really difficult for some autistic people, yet if everyone in your social group is wearing them, many autistic people have put

up with the discomfort in a bid to fit in and appear like everyone else. The same goes for wearing make-up – some autistic people love it, but for some autists, the feel of it on the skin and the fact their face looks different can be really difficult. Yet clothing and make-up can be heavily linked to our identity.

Masking can mean giving eye contact when you don't want to. For many autistic people eye contact is difficult and may actually be painful. For some we cannot concentrate on what you are saying if we are giving eye contact – so we trade off being able to engage properly in the conversation for looking like we belong in the conversation. Some autistic people can give eye contact quite happily but may not realise the social norms of when to look away and come off as aggressive or romantically interested when they are actually feeling relaxed and with no romantic interest.

Masking can mean ignoring your sensory needs. Pretending that you don't constantly hear the humming of the electricity in the walls, or that the material is not scratchy, or that you are fine with hugging their friends or shaking hands when actually you aren't.

Masking can mean spending a lot of energy on hiding your stims – those stims that help you regulate emotions, sensory input, help you concentrate, just to appear more 'normal'.

Masking can mean working so very hard on projecting the 'socially acceptable' version of you that you melt or shutdown as soon as you get home from school or work. It can also mean that you mask so hard for such a long time, it is hard to work out who the real you is. What does the real you like? What does the real you want to wear; how do you want to spend your time?

It can be very difficult to tell if someone is masking as the whole point is that others don't know! So how can you tell if someone is masking? What can you do to help them from masking so much? If you are living with someone who is masking their autism a lot, it can be really hard to tell if they are masking. If it is your child who is masking at school, it is possible that they will either meltdown or shut down after school. If it's a partner who might be masking, think about how they feel after socialising, after work, after a trip to the supermarket. Are they exhausted? Are they able to talk? Do they need some time to themselves? The process of hiding stims, processing all the sensory input is exhausting.

There are pros and cons to dropping the mask – it is not a simple decision, and dropping it completely is not for the faint of heart. It can lead to questions about why you are behaving in certain ways, potentially appearing rude to people who do not understand autistic communication styles amongst other things. We learned to mask in a large part so that we are less isolated. But it can also be incredibly liberating and affirming. It might be that, at least to begin with, it is easier to find 'safe' places to explore dropping the mask.

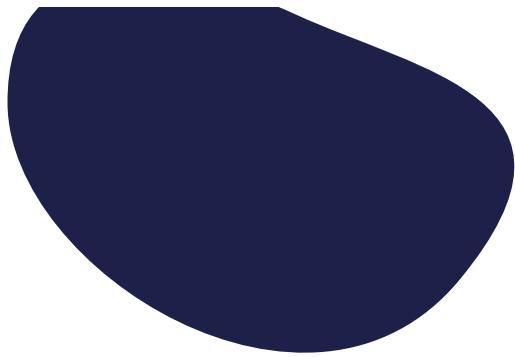
If you have autistic people in your life, there are lots of things you can do to support them to drop their masks when they feel comfortable doing so. With the autistic people you know think about:

- using language to describe autism that doesn't increase stigma to promote positive sense of self.
- allowing them to stim – seriously, join in with stimming, it can be great fun.
- encouraging them to engage in special interests of their choosing, not just what their friends like.
- encourage wearing clothing that feels comfortable rather than trying to look like they fit in.
- supporting them to self-advocate in schools and workplaces to ensure the environments support sensory needs – discuss it altogether as different autistic people have different needs and will benefit from different reasonable adjustments.
- supporting them to use things like ear defenders, headphones, fidget objects, and sunglasses in public – supporting sensory differences means not having to mask those differences in places where adjustments can't be made.
- finding ways to express affection that supports their sensory preferences – which might mean less physical contact. There are lots of ways to express love without hugs
learning about autistic social skills so they can socialise in a way that suits them.
- helping them to find the autistic community either online or locally – having role models who accept and support their autistic identity can be transformative.

When people feel valued and accepted as their authentic self, they do not have the same need to suppress or hide aspects of who they are. Presenting autistically, communicating autistically, playing autistically, when all these things are accepted and supported, the difference it makes to mental health and wellbeing can be immeasurable.

It can be really difficult to stop masking as it can become second nature but dropping the mask can be a large part of self-acceptance. It is accepting that you react to things differently, that you may socialise differently, that you may be interested in different things, or with a different intensity. It is accepting that maybe you will come across as slightly odd at times. Or very odd. It is accepting that you are uniquely yourself, and that is a good thing. The vulnerability that goes along with dropping the mask can be difficult, but for many people it is worth the effort, even if they only drop it in certain places, with certain people.

By Marion



Autistic people are all the same

There is a broad spectrum of people who are autistic, and even though many may share similar traits – no two people are the same...

Find out more (<https://differentminds.scot/lived-experiences/autistic-people->



A website created by The Scottish Government written in partnership with autistic people.



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