

**The  
Advonet  
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health  
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

# Autistic Masking and Mental Health

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## What is masking?

Masking consists of **learned** and **practiced behaviours** to allow you to better fit into neurotypical spaces, such as mirroring other people's communication styles, using rehearsed conversations or scripts, avoiding stimming and other visible self-regulatory behaviours, and allowing others to take the lead in conversation or avoiding talking about special interests or topics that you may normally engage with more strongly.

Masking may also present as attempting to conform to other people's expectations, or what the individual thinks is what others expect from them or find acceptable, which can take many forms depending on the person and environment they find themselves in, and can become quite difficult to disentangle from themselves.



Masking is often a subconscious act which means that you might not notice yourself doing it.

Masking can also be referred to as “**camouflaging**”.

These terms are often used interchangeably in everyday life, but research refers to different types of camouflaging, describing masking as one of these subtypes. It can be helpful to understand all the types of camouflaging.

## **Compensation**

Copying and mimicking non-autistic social norms. This can include scripting and observing other people or analysing characters in media. An autistic person who is compensating may not necessarily hide their autistic traits.

## **Masking**

Hiding and repressing autistic traits. This can include monitoring your own facial expressions, body language and eye contact. You can be hyperaware of the impression you make on others and try to blend in.

## **Assimilation**

Trying to fit in with others by performing and pretend. This often involves adopting a persona and not being yourself. It is similar to masking, but rather than covering up traits, you present as someone else. This can have a significant impact on an autistic person’s sense of self and mental health.

## Why do autistic people mask?

to avoid bullying

to compensate for communication differences

to avoid stigma and discrimination

to blend in

to make and keep friendships

to avoid rejection

to meet expectations

to get or keep opportunities in work or education

to be accepted

because it's routine

to avoid punishment

Masking can be a **conscious strategy** or a **subconscious response**.

Both conscious and subconscious masking can be helpful and/or can have negative consequences. For some autistic people, masking can be essential for survival. For example, autistic people living in insecure housing or Black autistic people who are at a higher risk of police brutality.

Many neurodivergent people receive repeated messages that autistic communication or behaviour is 'weird' or 'wrong', which can lead to anxiety around fitting in. Masking is often employed in an attempt to reduce this.

Subconscious masking is often a learned response to avoid stigma and invalidation or discrimination. This can develop at an early age and often stems from repeated social trauma and ostracisation. Working to be able to unmask can be particularly difficult, because it can become a deeply ingrained part of someone's sense of self.



Masking can be a barrier to diagnosis as the autistic traits are hidden. Late diagnosed autistic people are more likely to mask their autistic traits than those diagnosed in childhood or as a teenager.

## What is the impact of masking on mental health?

Despite helping autistic people to navigate situations, research shows that masking comes at a high cost.

As masking requires suppression of visibly autistic behaviours and changing your behaviour to fit neurotypical norms over prolonged periods, masking is energy intensive. This increases the likelihood of meltdown, shutdown and ongoing burnout.



Masking reactions to sensory overwhelm can be particularly tiring as the masking is accompanied by difficult sensory inputs.

Many autistic people who mask a lot report disconnection within relationships due to a lack of authenticity. Masking can also cause disconnection from your own wants and needs. This can result in a loss of self-identity.

Autistic people are at a greater risk of mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety and PTSD. There are also higher rates of suicidal ideation in autistic people. Research shows that masking is one factor which contributes increased suicidality in autistic people.

# Unmasking

Taking time to unmask when you feel safe to do so can make a major difference to mental wellbeing and avoiding burnout.

## Find Community

It can be easier to unmask if you are with people who you feel understand you and your needs. For a lot of autistic people, connecting with other autistic people can mean less social pressure to mask. Unmasking is easier in a safe environment.

## Engage with interests

Masking can often lead people to abandon hobbies, activities and interests that they used to enjoy. It can be helpful to reconnect with these past interests, even if they seem “immature”. For example, collecting teddies, doing puzzles or researching dinosaurs.

## Be gentle

Unmasking is not always an easy process. As you are more open and authentic about your needs, things may become more difficult and you may need new strategies. Schedule plenty of time to recover and stim freely. It is okay to take things slowly with this self-discovery journey.

Unmasking at work may be more challenging due to a possible lack of understanding from other people. This could lead to stigmatisation of autistic behaviours and sensory differences, or in more extreme cases discrimination.

The Equality Act (2010) provides legal protections against discrimination. The Act describes nine protected characteristics including 'disability'. The Act also requires employers to make reasonable adjustments for a disabled employee or job applicant.

If you are in a supportive and accommodating environment, you may want to explore unmasking around colleagues. If you don't want to, or don't feel safe to do this, consider finding time during breaks and after work where you can decompress.

Training is available on autistic communication and sensory needs

Fidget tools are widely accepted

Access To Work may be able to fund training, equipment or support

Active seating may allow you to stim in less obvious ways

An Occupational Health assessment can recommend adjustments

Discuss with your manager about your specific needs

Be clear about your communication preferences

Find or create a quiet space to retreat to



Helen Ellis, one of the authors of **Autism and Masking**, gives the following advice:

“Decide for yourself when and how you want to mask, have the confidence to be your authentic self but also don’t put yourself down for strategically retreating behind the mask occasionally!”



# Additional Resources



◇ **Autistic Masking** - Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose

**Taking Off the Mask** - Hannah Louise Belcher

**Autism and Masking** - Felicity Sedgewick, Laura Hull and Helen Ellis

◇ **Self-Care for Autistic People** - Megan Anna Neff



◇ **Masking Resource List:**

<https://theautisticadvocate.com/autistic-masking/>

**Cat-Q Camouflaging Self-Assessment:**

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

**Intersectionality of Masking and Codeswitching:**

<https://neuroclastic.com/long-read-autistic-while-black-in-the-uk-masking-codeswitching-and-other-nonfictions/>



◇ [The 4 Types of Masking](#) - I'm Autistic, Now What?

[Autistic MASKING: how do we do it and should we stop?](#) - Yo Samdy Sam

[I'm autistic - here's why I decided to stop masking](#) - BBC Ideas

◇ [Maria - Autistic Masking \(Animated Short Film\)](#) - Third Eye Animation



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