

I'm Masking and I've Had Enough

A neurodivergent space to notice the cost of constantly appearing okay.

Masking can include monitoring your face, voice, movement and eye contact; rehearsing conversations; copying expected behaviour; hiding sensory distress; suppressing stims; forcing yourself through social situations; or pretending that something does not hurt. Sometimes it helps a person navigate an environment. It can also be exhausting.

No pressure to unmask

Being more visibly yourself is not always safe or comfortable. This resource is about noticing choice, cost and need — not telling you how you must behave.

I am pretending...

I am hiding...

What I wish I could stop performing

What Am I Pretending Is Okay?

Put down the things you keep minimising for other people's comfort.

SENSORY

Noise, light, touch, clothing, smell, crowds, heat, proximity or environments you endure without showing distress.

SOCIAL

Eye contact, small talk, tone, facial expression, laughing at the right time, knowing when to speak or appearing interested when exhausted.

EMOTIONAL

Saying 'I'm fine', hiding confusion, anger, fear, hurt, overwhelm or the need to leave.

What Am I Forcing Myself Through?

Notice the effort, not only whether you manage to complete it.

Something can look successful from the outside and still have a significant internal cost. Consider what happens before, during and after you force yourself through it.

Before — what I do to prepare

During — what I monitor or suppress

After — what it costs me

What Does Masking Feel Like in My Body?

The body may carry the effort even when nobody else notices.

Possible signs include tension, jaw pain, headache, nausea, shallow breathing, exhaustion, restlessness, pain, feeling unreal or detached, irritability, needing silence, crying afterwards, shutdown, needing to sleep or having no capacity left for anything else.

While I am masking, my body...

When I finally get away, my body...

The recovery I seem to need...

If Nobody Was Judging Me...

Imagine choice without demanding that you act on it.

I would move / stim / sit / stand like...

What would your body naturally do if you did not have to manage how it looked?

I would communicate like...

More direct? Fewer words? Typing? Less eye contact? Longer pauses? Saying 'I don't know'? Asking people to be clearer?

I would stop pretending...

What would you no longer hide, tolerate or perform?

Where Might I Need Less Masking?

Authenticity can be gradual, selective and context-dependent.

You do not have to unmask everywhere. Consider whether there are people, places or moments where one small reduction in performance might feel safe enough and reduce the cost.

A place where I feel safer being myself

A person I may be able to explain this to

One thing I want permission to stop doing

You Are More Than the Version You Perform

Understanding the mask can help you make more deliberate choices about when you need it.

A message from Maggie

Masking can become so automatic that you may not realise how much energy it takes until you finally reach a place where you can stop. You may have learned to appear fine because being visibly overwhelmed, confused, direct, quiet or different was not welcomed. There is no shame in having developed ways to navigate the world. But you also deserve spaces where your nervous system does not have to perform constantly. You can begin by noticing what you hide, what it costs and where you might safely give yourself a little more room to be as you are. You decide when, where and with whom that feels right.

Something I want to give myself permission to do

Words I could use with someone

Example: 'I look okay, but I am using a lot of energy to appear okay. I need some recovery time.'

Further reading

- Price, D. (2022). Unmasking Autism.
- Hull, L. et al. (2017). 'Putting on My Best Normal': Social Camouflaging in Adults with Autism Spectrum Conditions.
- Kapp, S. K. (ed.) (2020). Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement.
- National Autistic Society — masking and autistic experience.

For reflection and support. Unmasking is personal; safety, context and individual choice matter.