

Masking Through the Working Day

LOOKING CAPABLE WHILE BECOMING INCREASINGLY DEPLETED

What colleagues see is not always what the person is experiencing

A person can look completely capable at work while using enormous amounts of energy to maintain that appearance. They may smile when expected, make eye contact even when it is uncomfortable, rehearse what to say before speaking, copy the communication style of colleagues, suppress movement, hide sensory distress, force themselves through social interaction and carefully monitor how they are being perceived. From the outside, they may simply look professional. On the inside, every interaction may require conscious effort.

This is often described as masking. It is frequently discussed in relation to autism and ADHD, but people can also mask anxiety, depression, trauma, grief, chronic stress and other difficulties. Masking is not simply pretending. It can develop because a person has learned that showing their natural responses leads to criticism, misunderstanding, exclusion or unwanted attention.

The question is not 'How can they look fine if they are struggling?' The more useful question is 'How much energy is it taking them to look fine?'

Masking can become automatic

Some people know exactly when they are masking. Others have done it for so long that they no longer know where the workplace performance ends and they begin. They may have learned to study other people's facial expressions, prepare safe phrases for small talk, hide confusion, laugh when they do not understand a joke, tolerate painful sensory input or wait until they are alone before allowing themselves to react.

For someone diagnosed with ADHD or autism later in life, recognising masking can be emotional. Behaviours once understood as 'trying harder to fit in' may suddenly make sense as years of adaptation. The person may also realise why seemingly ordinary working days have always left them so tired.

Masking is not always visible

A highly productive employee may be masking. The person who volunteers, presents confidently or manages other people may be masking. Someone can be skilled, experienced and genuinely good at their job while also finding the social and sensory expectations around that job extremely demanding. Competence does not cancel support needs.

Why people mask at work

Workplaces contain powerful expectations about what professionalism looks like: how much eye contact to make, how enthusiastically to participate, how quickly to answer, how to behave in meetings and what emotions are acceptable. When those expectations are narrow, employees whose natural communication differs may learn that fitting the template feels safer than being understood.

The Hidden Cost of Looking Fine

Masking uses attention. While completing the actual job, a person may simultaneously be monitoring their face, voice, body, words, timing and other people's reactions. That is a second workload running underneath the visible one. It can reduce the mental capacity available for memory, concentration, decision-making and emotional regulation.

The after-work crash

Some people hold themselves together all day and then collapse when they reach home. They may become silent, need darkness or quiet, sleep, cry, experience irritability, struggle to prepare food or be unable to tolerate further conversation. Family members can see a completely different person from colleagues. This can create misunderstanding: 'You managed all day at work, so why can't you manage this?' The answer may be that work used almost everything available.

A person may also spend weekends recovering rather than living. By Sunday evening, they begin preparing to perform again. Over time, a cycle can develop in which work is achieved at the expense of the rest of life.

When success hides the need for support

Managers often assess need through visible performance. If deadlines are met and behaviour appears professional, they may assume everything is fine. This can leave a masked employee in a difficult position: they may have to deteriorate visibly before support is believed. A healthier workplace can accept that someone may need an adjustment precisely because maintaining their current performance is costing too much.

Masking and sensory distress

Bright lighting, constant conversation, phones ringing, smells, temperature, movement and interruptions can all require suppression. An autistic employee may sit calmly in an environment that is physically overwhelming because they have learned not to show discomfort. By the time they leave, their capacity may be gone. Reducing sensory demand can therefore reduce the need to mask rather than merely helping someone recover afterwards.

Masking communication differences

Some employees force eye contact, stop themselves asking for clarification, avoid requesting written instructions or pretend to understand ambiguous language because they fear appearing difficult. Yet clearer communication often benefits the whole workplace. Allowing people to ask direct questions, receive information in writing and take processing time can remove unnecessary performance.

The aim is not to tell somebody to 'unmask' in an environment where they do not feel safe. The aim is to make the environment safer so that less masking is necessary.

Creating Workplaces Where People Can Use Their Energy for Work

Unmasking is personal. Nobody should be pressured to disclose a diagnosis, behave differently or suddenly remove strategies that have protected them for years. Instead, workplaces can look at the conditions that make constant self-monitoring necessary. Are employees judged for not making eye contact? Are quiet people treated as disengaged? Are meetings designed around quick verbal responses? Is socialising treated as evidence of commitment? Are sensory needs taken seriously?

Make room for different ways of working

Practical changes can include written agendas, processing time before decisions, alternatives to speaking in large meetings, predictable communication, quieter workspaces, sensory supports, flexible breaks and clear instructions. These are not about lowering standards. They allow people to spend more of their cognitive energy doing the job rather than performing an acceptable version of themselves.

Managers can ask better questions

Instead of 'Are you coping?', which often receives 'yes', a manager might ask: 'Which parts of your working day take the most energy?' 'Is there anything you are managing successfully but at a high personal cost?' or 'Is there something about the environment or communication here that makes your job harder than it needs to be?' These questions create room for experiences that performance data cannot show.

For the person who masks

Begin with observation rather than demanding that you change everything. Notice when you feel most performed. Which interactions require rehearsal? When do you suppress movement or sensory discomfort? Which colleagues allow you to feel more natural? What happens when you get home? What do you need to recover? This information can help you understand where adjustments, boundaries or different working practices might make the biggest difference.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There can be a strange loneliness in being praised for coping when you know how much it costs you to appear as though you are coping. People may see the completed work, the smile, the meeting and the conversation. They do not necessarily see the rehearsing, monitoring, suppressing, recovering or the version of you that has nothing left when the working day finishes.

I would not want the answer to be simply that you learn to mask more efficiently. I would want workplaces to become curious about why so much performance is required in the first place. Different communication is not bad communication. Needing quiet does not mean somebody is antisocial. Processing time is not lack of intelligence. A person should not have to exhaust themselves proving that they belong.

You can be capable and struggling. You can be successful and need adjustments. And you can look fine while needing somebody to understand the cost of looking fine.

A masking check-in: At the end of a working day, ask: What did I consciously manage about myself today? What did I hide because I did not feel safe showing it? Which part of the day took the most energy? What helped me feel more natural? What one change could reduce that cost tomorrow?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health or employment advice.