

# Masking in Daily Life

Hiding who you are to fit in can be exhausting

**Masking** is a term often used for consciously or unconsciously hiding, suppressing or changing natural behaviours to meet social expectations, avoid criticism, stay safe or appear to cope. Autistic and ADHD people may describe masking, but people mask for many reasons. It is not dishonesty; it can become a learned strategy for belonging and protection.

## What masking can look like

Masking is much broader than pretending to be happy. It can mean rehearsing conversations, copying expressions or tone, forcing eye contact, holding back stimming or movement, monitoring volume, hiding confusion, laughing because others are laughing, suppressing distress, automatically saying 'I'm fine', or agreeing because saying no feels socially risky.

Someone may look calm and sociable while internally asking: What should my face be doing? Am I talking too much? Did I misunderstand that? Do I look interested enough? Am I being rude? What should I say next? Continuous self-monitoring can use enormous mental energy.

## Why people mask

Masking may develop after bullying, correction, exclusion, punishment, misunderstanding or repeated messages that natural communication is unacceptable. Some people learn that appearing more conventional helps them get through education, work or relationships. Others have masked for so long that identifying their own preferences can be difficult. Ordinary social adaptation is not automatically harmful; concern grows when adaptation is relentless, fear-driven or leaves little room for rest and genuine needs.

## The hidden cost

| What others may see | What may be happening underneath                               |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quiet and agreeable | Fear of disagreement, rejection or being considered difficult. |
| Very sociable       | Intense monitoring, rehearsing and copying social cues.        |
| Always coping       | Needs hidden until shutdown, overwhelm or exhaustion.          |
| Flexible            | Suppressing sensory, communication or routine needs.           |
| Calm at work        | Holding everything together until reaching a safe place.       |
| Perfectionistic     | Trying to prevent criticism or hide difficulty.                |

## Masking and exhaustion

Masking can require attention, memory, inhibition, emotional regulation and constant decision-making. Add noise, unpredictability, sensory processing and executive-function demands and the total load can be considerable. Some people need hours or days to recover after social contact; others notice irritability, reduced speech, tearfulness, headaches, difficulty deciding, sleep disruption or a strong need to be alone. Significant or persistent fatigue can have many causes and should not automatically be attributed to masking.

## Finding a safer balance

The goal does not have to be 'stop masking'. In some environments masking may feel necessary or protective. A more useful question is: **Where can I reduce the amount of performance I have to do?** Notice where you mask heavily and where you feel safer. Those differences can reveal where energy is being spent and where small changes might create relief.

## Try an energy audit

**Before:** How much preparation, scripting or worry is involved? **During:** What am I controlling or hiding? **After:** How long does recovery take and what helps? **Cost:** What happens when demanding situations stack up? **Adjustment:** What one change could reduce the load?

## Small ways to reduce the load

Use communication methods that work for you where possible. Ask for written instructions, agendas or processing time. Take sensory breaks. Schedule recovery after high-demand situations. Allow natural movement when safe. Prepare a phrase for when you need thinking time. Reduce unnecessary eye contact rather than forcing it. Tell trusted people what helps. At work or in education, appropriate adjustments may reduce the need to mask by changing the environment rather than requiring the person to appear unaffected.

## Unmasking should not become another performance

There can be pressure to 'unmask', but authenticity is not a test. Someone may choose to mask in one environment and not another, may not yet know what feels natural, or may need privacy and safety. The aim is greater choice: recognising adaptation, understanding its cost and having places where less adaptation is required.

## Reflection: what belongs to me?

I notice I hide or perform... \_\_\_\_\_

I learned I needed to do this because... \_\_\_\_\_

I mask most when... \_\_\_\_\_

My body tells me I am reaching my limit when... \_\_\_\_\_

I feel safest with... \_\_\_\_\_

One thing I would like permission to stop forcing is... \_\_\_\_\_

One adjustment that could save energy is... \_\_\_\_\_

## For family, friends and colleagues

Do not assume that because someone managed an event, shift or conversation they found it easy. Avoid praising someone for 'not looking autistic'. Ask what makes communication easier, give clear information, respect recovery time, and do not require eye contact as proof of listening. Believe expressed sensory or processing needs even when they were not visible earlier.

### A message to leave with

If you have spent years learning how to be acceptable to everyone around you, discovering what feels comfortable for you can take time. You do not have to change everything or suddenly know who you are without the mask. Start with safety. Notice the cost. Make room for your needs. Find people and places where your nervous system does not have to work quite so hard to belong.

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