MASKING THROUGH THE WORKING DAY

Looking Capable While Becoming Increasingly Depleted

Space to Breathe Therapy | Disability in the Workplace & Career Support

A person may meet deadlines, appear friendly and composed, and still use an enormous amount of energy hiding distress, adapting communication, or tolerating an inaccessible environment. Observable performance does not tell us the full cost of getting through a working day.

What masking can involve

Masking describes conscious or automatic efforts to conceal, suppress or alter behaviours, emotions, communication or sensory responses to meet perceived expectations. Examples include forcing eye contact, rehearsing conversations, copying social cues, suppressing movement or stimming, hiding anxiety, appearing cheerful, or not asking for a break. Masking is often discussed in autism and ADHD, but the pressure to hide distress can occur in other circumstances too.

Why might somebody mask?

Possible reasons include fear of criticism, previous experiences of discrimination, uncertainty about disclosure, pressure to look professional, a wish to protect privacy, or an environment in which differences are not welcomed. Masking can feel necessary or protective; the aim is not to insist that someone immediately stops.

A workplace question worth asking

Rather than asking only whether someone can perform a task, ask whether doing so in the current conditions is sustainable and what additional effort remains invisible.

This guide offers education and reflection. It is not a diagnostic test or an assessment of any individual employee.

1 | THE HIDDEN WORKING DAY

Before work

Preparing scripts; anticipating social demands; planning travel and sensory exposures; deciding what can safely be disclosed; using energy before the shift even begins.

During work

Monitoring facial expressions and voice, appearing attentive through discomfort, deciphering implied instructions, suppressing natural movement, managing interruptions, tolerating sensory overload and trying to hide fatigue.

After work

The effort can emerge as exhaustion, silence, reduced speech, irritability, tears, headaches, loss of capacity for chores, a need for solitude, or difficulty recovering before the next working day. These reactions are not inevitable or exclusive to masking.

A successful day can still be costly

Strong results and positive feedback may disguise the effort required to deliver them. “They seem fine at work” does not tell us what support they need, or what happens after they leave.

Reflection | Where does the effort go?

Which part of the day asks you to perform the greatest amount of visible calm, social ease or adaptability?

2 | AN INTERACTIVE SELF-CHECK-IN ON PAPER

For each stage of the day, consider available energy from 0 (empty) to 10 (plenty). This is a personal snapshot, not a clinical scale.

Before starting work: ____ / 10

First part of the day: ____ / 10

Midday: ____ / 10

End of shift: ____ / 10

After returning home: ____ / 10

Behaviours that may use extra energy

Tick or circle the ones that are relevant: forced eye contact; scripted conversation; hiding sensory discomfort; staying still; suppressing emotional responses; appearing cheerful; not asking for clarification; not taking needed breaks; hiding difficulties with processing or speech.

What is hardest for others to see about the effort involved?

Notice the pattern, not a target score

A fall in energy may reflect many factors besides masking, including workload, health, sleep, travel, sensory demands and recovery time. The purpose is to notice possible supports, not judge personal resilience.

3 | WHAT WORKPLACES CAN CHANGE

Reduce the need to perform

Offer clear written instructions; make eye contact optional; avoid treating one communication style as proof of engagement; use predictable agendas; enable written or asynchronous responses; make expectations explicit and provide psychologically safer feedback.

Reduce sensory and cognitive costs

Consider quieter settings, reduced glare, seating choice, noise management, fewer interruptions, focused work periods, flexible breaks, remote or hybrid arrangements where appropriate, and realistic workload priorities.

Create genuine choice

Ask what helps rather than deciding for the employee. Respect confidentiality, allow people to disclose only what they choose, and do not require visible distress before taking a support request seriously.

UK workplace context

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers and applicants in relevant circumstances. Adjustments depend on the individual and the barrier. Access to Work may offer additional support for eligible workers, but does not replace employer responsibilities.

Useful communication examples

“Please send the action points in writing so I can process them accurately.”
“I can meet this deadline with fewer interruptions or a clearer priority order.”
“I may appear calm when overloaded. A quiet break helps me return to the task.”

4 | MY WORKPLACE SUPPORT PLAN

Use these prompts personally or in a voluntary conversation with a trusted manager, adviser or support worker. Share only what feels safe.

The situations in which I mask most often are:

The signs that my energy is becoming depleted are:

The adjustments that would reduce the hidden effort are:

What I would like colleagues or managers to understand:

My first manageable next step:

5 | RECOVERY, REVIEW AND SUPPORT

After-work recovery

Recovery may involve reduced sensory input, rest, familiar routines, food and drink that are accessible, time without social expectations, or practical support with tasks. Individuals vary, and recovery should not become another performance requirement.

Review what happens before the crash

Consider whether particular meetings, noisy periods, unpredictable changes, social interactions or commuting are associated with greater exhaustion. Can the barrier be changed earlier in the day?

For managers

Invite specific adjustment requests, avoid comparisons with other employees, check what the person wishes to share, and follow up to see whether changes actually help. A person need not justify support by becoming visibly distressed.

My review

One situation I want to make more sustainable:

One workplace change I can request or explore:

A supportive person or service I could contact:

Closing thought

The goal is not to demand that every person “unmask.” It is to make workplaces safer, more accessible and less exhausting, so people have more choice about how they work and what they share.

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