

Masking at Work: Practical Examples

FACTS - Neurodiversity & Workplace Inclusion | Employee and manager guide

Masking can involve consciously or unconsciously changing or concealing natural communication, movement, sensory responses, or support needs to meet workplace expectations. It may be a way of staying safe, avoiding judgement or fitting in. It is not always a choice, and people may not notice how much energy it takes.

What colleagues see is not necessarily what the employee experiences. The following are illustrative situations, not diagnostic signs. Not everyone who is neurodivergent masks, and no one should be expected to disclose a diagnosis to be treated respectfully.

Twelve everyday examples

1. Eye contact in a meeting

What others may see: The employee maintains eye contact and nods throughout.

What may be happening: Eye contact may require conscious effort and make it harder to process what is said.

What could help: Allow listening without requiring eye contact; share an agenda and written notes.

2. Rehearsing before a phone call

What others may see: The employee sounds confident and prepared on the telephone.

What may be happening: They may spend considerable time scripting possible questions and answers and feel exhausted afterwards.

What could help: Offer email or scheduled calls with the purpose explained in advance.

3. Hiding sensory distress

What others may see: The employee remains at their desk in a busy open-plan office.

What may be happening: Lighting, competing conversations or smells may be painful or overwhelming, but they avoid drawing attention.

What could help: Offer quieter spaces, appropriate headphones and changes to lighting where practical.

4. Suppressing movement or tics

What others may see: The employee sits still in meetings and appears composed.

What may be happening: Suppressing stimming or tics may increase discomfort, distraction or exhaustion; some tics cannot be suppressed.

What could help: Normalise safe movement, breaks and flexible seating; do not comment on tics unnecessarily.

5. Pretending instructions are clear

What others may see: The employee says “yes, that makes sense.”

What may be happening: They may not have processed ambiguous verbal instructions but fear appearing difficult by asking again.

What could help: Give clear priorities and written steps; invite clarification without criticism.

6. Joining social breaks

What others may see: The employee joins lunch conversations every day.

What may be happening: They may feel a strong need for quiet recovery time but worry that leaving will seem rude.

What could help: Make social activities genuinely optional and respect quiet breaks.

7. Copying colleagues' expressions

What others may see: The employee mirrors humour, tone or facial expressions.

What may be happening: They may be consciously monitoring how to respond rather than relaxing into conversation.

What could help: Accept a range of communication styles and avoid judging difference as disengagement.

8. Working late to hide difficulties

What others may see: The employee always meets deadlines.

What may be happening: They may spend unpaid extra hours checking details, organising tasks or compensating for executive-function difficulties.

What could help: Review workload, written priorities and realistic deadlines rather than relying only on output.

9. Concealing overwhelm

What others may see: The employee stays calm during an unexpected change.

What may be happening: They may be close to shutdown or distress but feel unable to say so in front of others.

What could help: Give notice of changes when possible and an agreed private way to request a pause.

10. Avoiding requests for support

What others may see: The employee rarely asks their manager for help.

What may be happening: They may fear that asking for adjustments will lead to negative assumptions about competence.

What could help: Offer confidential, routine adjustment discussions before a crisis develops.

11. Performing an expected social style

What others may see: The employee makes small talk and smiles at customers.

What may be happening: The effort of continuously monitoring speech and expression may use much of their available energy.

What could help: Permit recovery breaks, alternative duties where feasible, and respectful communication choices.

12. Appearing organised through hidden systems

What others may see: The employee seems effortlessly on top of emails and appointments.

What may be happening: They may depend on multiple private reminders, rehearsed routines and constant checking to avoid mistakes.

What could help: Support accessible reminders, checklists and predictable workflows without stigma.

What masking can cost

Masking can sometimes help someone navigate an environment that feels unsafe or unpredictable. Sustained masking may also be associated with mental fatigue, stress, reduced capacity after work and difficulty identifying or communicating support needs. Effects vary; it is important not to assume that every neurodivergent person experiences masking in the same way.

What managers can change

- Offer written, spoken and one-to-one communication options.
- Agree predictable priorities, realistic deadlines and advance notice of changes.
- Allow quiet breaks, movement and sensory adaptations where practicable.
- Ask about barriers and effective adjustments without insisting on personal disclosure.
- Avoid using eye contact, small talk or a particular social style as a proxy for engagement.
- Review whether apparently strong performance is being sustained through excessive hours or exhaustion.

A practical conversation

Instead of: “You seem fine - why would you need an adjustment?”

Try: “Are there parts of the day that take more effort than others? Would any changes to communication, environment or priorities help?”

Employee reflection: optional prompts

- When do I feel I am performing a role rather than communicating naturally?
- Which environments or tasks take extra energy that others cannot see?
- What helps me recover after socially or sensory demanding work?
- Which adjustments would reduce the need to conceal discomfort or confusion?
- What would I feel comfortable sharing with my manager?

Notes / changes I would like to try:

A note about workplace rights and support

Some neurodivergent employees meet the definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 in England, Scotland and Wales. Where the legal duty applies, employers may need to make reasonable adjustments. Adjustment conversations should consider individual needs, not stereotypes. Access to support should not depend on being at crisis point.

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Educational resource. Examples are illustrative and are not a diagnostic checklist, medical assessment or individual legal advice.