Masking in Daily Life

Understanding the hidden effort behind appearing “fine”

What does masking mean?

Masking is the conscious or automatic effort to hide, suppress or change natural behaviours in order to meet other people’s expectations. In autism and ADHD, this can include monitoring facial expressions, copying social cues, forcing eye contact, sitting still, hiding sensory discomfort, rehearsing conversations or concealing confusion.

Masking can be hard to recognise from the outside. A person may seem sociable, organised or calm while working intensely to manage their words, movement, attention and emotions.

Why might someone mask?

People may learn to mask to avoid criticism, bullying, discrimination, exclusion or misunderstanding. It can become a protective response at school, in workplaces, with family, in healthcare or in unfamiliar social situations. It may also be so habitual that a person only notices it when they feel exhausted afterwards.

Adaptation versus relentless masking

Most people adjust how they communicate in different settings. The key difference is often choice, safety and cost. Ordinary adaptation may feel flexible and sustainable; relentless masking may feel compulsory, require continual self-monitoring and leave little room for rest or authenticity.

The hidden cost

Sustained masking can use significant attention and energy. Some people report fatigue, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, irritability, headaches, sensory overwhelm, loss of confidence or feeling disconnected from their needs. These experiences vary, and masking itself is not a diagnosis.

Why coping can collapse at home

A person may use most of their energy to get through a demanding day, then become quiet, tearful, irritable or unable to make decisions once they reach a safer environment. This does not mean they were pretending earlier. Their capacity may simply have been depleted.

Key reminder: masking may be protective. There is no obligation to unmask.

Recognising your masking patterns

These activities are invitations to explore, not tests. Skip anything that does not feel useful or safe.

Activity 1 • My everyday masking map

Where does masking happen for me? Tick, circle or write about any that apply:

☐ Work or education ☐ Appointments ☐ Social events ☐ Family ☐ Online ☐ Other: _____

What do I find myself monitoring or hiding?

_____

_____

What feels protective about masking in these situations?

_____

_____

What does it cost me during the day or afterwards?

_____

_____

Activity 2 • A gentle energy audit

For each situation, mark an energy cost from 0 (none) to 5 (very high). There are no right answers.

Situation	0	1	2	3	4	5
Conversation or small talk	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Meetings / classrooms	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sensory environments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hiding movement or feelings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unexpected changes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What drains my energy most? What helps me replenish it?

_____

_____

Notice the pattern rather than trying to achieve a better score. A high score may show where more recovery time or adjustments are needed.

More choice, less pressure

Reducing the load does not have to mean completely unmasking. Small changes can create more room to breathe.

Practical ways to reduce the load

Before: Preview plans, ask for clear information, choose quieter times, prepare a short communication script or plan a sensory-friendly route.

During: Allow movement, take breaks, use written communication or headphones where appropriate, and leave early if needed.

After: Protect decompression time, reduce extra demands, eat and drink as needed, use comforting sensory input and avoid judging yourself for needing recovery.

Reasonable adjustments and support

Workplaces and education settings can sometimes reduce barriers through written instructions, predictable schedules, lower-sensory spaces, flexible communication, advance notice of changes and protected breaks. In the UK, some disabled people may be entitled to reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, depending on their circumstances.

Supporting someone who masks

Believe what they tell you about their internal effort even when they seem to be coping. Ask what would help instead of assuming. Respect preferences around eye contact, movement, quiet time or communication. Avoid pressuring disclosure or unmasking, especially where it could create social or practical risks.

Activity 3 • My low-pressure support plan

One setting in which I might feel safer making a small change:

_____

One adjustment, boundary or recovery break I could try:

_____

What might make this change feel safer?

_____

Who, if anyone, could support me? What would I want them to know?

_____

_____

A compassionate closing thought

You do not have to prove how hard you are working to deserve support. The aim is not to stop adapting overnight, but to notice what you need, protect your energy and find moments of greater comfort and choice.

Note: This is an educational and reflective resource, not a diagnosis or substitute for individual clinical advice. If masking is contributing to significant distress, a suitably qualified professional can help explore support options.