

NAIT Guide to Autistic Masking

Introduction

The following is a short summary about autistic masking, written in partnership with autistic people, for professionals to increase awareness of this phenomenon and to signpost to further reading for those who wish to know more. It can be helpful for people involved in diagnostic assessment and those around autistic people day to day, to understand why it happens, how tiring it can be, and to create environments which are accepting of differences in a way that individuals can feel safer being themselves.

In the undiagnosed, masking can lead to the possibility that diagnosis is missed. Even if the need for diagnostic assessment is recognised, masking means that professionals need to look beyond the words people say or initial impressions.

What is autistic masking?

- Autistic masking involves covering up or suppressing natural and actual internal feelings, preferences, and reactions to sensory, communication and social experiences, also referred to as 'autistic traits'.
- It is a coping strategy for many individuals.
- Sometimes this is a deliberate decision but often, particularly in younger people, it is unconscious or not deliberate.
- It can serve a necessary purpose but is also immensely tiring and comes at a cost to mental health and wellbeing.
- This is a particular phenomenon in autistic people because they live in a world where they don't have the 'predominant neurotype', and which is not always accepting of diversity and difference.
- Masking can help individuals avoid feeling as though they stand out and they might adopt behaviours and responses observed in the 'neuromajority'.
- Nearly 75% of autistic people (male and female) surveyed, report masking all or some of the time to avoid being perceived as visibly autistic.

Why does autistic masking happen?

Masking tends to happen as a coping or self-preservation strategy, and as a kind of 'stigma management' individuals use to avoid being judged negatively for being themselves, and to prevent discrimination and harassment.

What might we notice if someone is masking?

The conversation partner or observer is often unaware that someone is masking. It is possible that individuals mask most or all of the time in some contexts and you may only know them with this demeanour.

When we know someone well, they might tell us about things they do, or we might notice them using a range of strategies, tactics, and processes:

- A rehearsed repertoire of social responses, to greetings, questions, conversations, or overtures others make

- Forced or copied smiles, eye contact, gestures, expressions
- Hiding, minimising, or diverting others from topics of interest they think they are perceived to get too focussed on and/ or engaging in activities and conversations that are not of interest to them but known to be/ thought to be preferred amongst other people
- Stopping themselves from 'stimming' or self-stimulatory actions. Stimming is a positive regulation strategy for many autistic people, but they worry that it will be perceived as weird or unacceptable around other people. Some individuals might use more subtle versions or just not have access to this self-regulation support. Examples of stimming include using preferred repetitive movements or noises, such as hand flapping, rocking, or humming.
- Going with the flow so as not to stand out and resisting own needs and preferences
- Hiding reactions to sensory experiences which are painful or distressing
- Relying on others to talk and make decisions in a group
- Attempting to control all aspects of a social situation to create a greater sense of predictability
- Copying other people's words, actions, accent and non-verbal communication from real life or from TV or popular culture

Is masking a good thing or a bad thing?

Masking can feel like a necessary strategy in the short term, for example individuals might use it to

- Avoid negative attention, stigma or bullying
- Feel like they fit in and are included in a friendship group
- Feel accepted
- Succeed in social settings of school, the community or work
- For personal safety to avoid harassment

Some autistic individuals have told us that masking is an essential coping strategy with positive outcomes, however for many it is not a positive outcome, and it comes at an extremely high cost.

One autistic person told us, "I find a lot of triage-type questions or profiling questionnaires do a poor job accounting for this as they assume the respondent is able to be 100% truthful. The CAT-Q is a notable exception to this."

Regular masking can have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing because it requires 'relentless vigilance' (Fede & Laurent).

It can limit access to appropriate physical and mental health care. Regular masking can have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing because it requires 'relentless vigilance' and impacts self-esteem and self-identity (Fede & Laurent).

An autistic person has told us, "I often find myself instinctively wanting to please professionals by under reporting the severity of pain, illness, or distress."

How can masking affect mental health and wellbeing?

It is widely understood that masking can increase stress and impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing.

- Increased stress and anxiety
- Exhaustion because masking takes so much effort

- Autistic meltdowns or burnout when this all gets too much
- Feeling like a fake or that you're not true to yourself
- Feeling isolated
- Low mood or depression
- High rate of self-harm
- Increased risk of suicide

What about Camouflaging?

The term camouflaging is often used to mean the same things as masking, although Laura Hull and colleagues, describe three subcategories of camouflaging in their assessment tool 'Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire' or (CAT-Q), suitable for people over the age of 16 years. The three subcategories are:

- **Compensation:** Strategies used to actively compensate for difficulties in social situations.
Examples: copying body language and facial expressions, learning social cues from movies and books
- **Masking:** Strategies used to hide autistic characteristics or portray a non-autistic persona.
Examples: adjusting face and body to appear confident and/or relaxed, forcing eye contact
- **Assimilation:** Strategies used to try to fit in with others in social situations.
Examples: Putting on an act, avoiding or forcing interactions with others

What supports might be helpful?

The most helpful support is based on good understanding of the individual, how autism affects them and relevant adaptations in everyday naturally occurring environments. Support provided should be anticipatory, rather than reactive, individualised and relevant to the context people are in. The following may be helpful but not all will be relevant for all people at all life stages.

Safe supportive environment

- Provide a social environment which is supportive, understanding and accepting of difference, so that autistic individuals don't rely so much on masking as a coping strategy. This largely involves the people around them reflecting on their own actions, communication, and mindsets.
- Listen to words people use but also notice, observe and reflect.
- Normalise conversations about social differences and social expectations.
- Listen and provide information and support to siblings and the wider family.

Recognise moments of challenge

- Understand that asking people directly what helps can feel challenging.
- Be prepared to adapt when individuals are tired, frustrated or overwhelmed.
- Be accepting that sometimes someone is 'just not up to it'. Listen to and notice what is difficult.

Building self awareness of what works

- Provide a range of opportunities with trusted people, to explore what aspects of different environments are preferred.
- Show individuals their experiences are respected and they can expect to be heard.

- Understand that individuals might have strong ideas about what will help, and others will not know what might help and need developmentally appropriate information and experiences to build this awareness. We need to listen to words people use but also notice, observe, and reflect.
- Teach and accept the value of stimming. Provide spaces which encourage autistic people to stim freely, without judgment or stigma.
- Be aware that people may have had negative messages about stimming or other regulating activities and been told not to do them. They may need to be explicitly offered opportunities to use familiar regulation strategies when we see it might be useful, e.g. “Why don’t you try rocking?”.
- An autistic partner told us, “When the environment around us allows us to stim freely, it invites us to try out new stims, maybe we’ll find a new stim that helps us regulate – that can only be a great thing!”
- Support awareness of the individual and those around them of their self-regulation strategies and how particular engagement with others supports mutual regulation.

Understanding neurotype

- Understand difficulties initiating. Don’t wait for people to tell you there is a problem. Check in and offer safe opportunities to express needs and preferences.
- Understanding communication preferences, sensory preferences and thinking styles.
- Understand the benefits of predictability, e.g. doing things when you say you’ll do them, setting clear expectations and providing advanced warning of changes to expectations if possible.
- Take an anticipatory approach. Think about adaptations to everyday contexts (e.g. home, school, work and leisure) which support the participation of autistic individuals.
- Where possible, make unwritten rules explicit.
- Create an environment where it is understood that everyone has needs and other autistic people use masking too.
- Be aware that it may not be helpful to tell people that you think they are masking. Conversations about masking should be handled carefully and respectfully, following an individual’s lead.

Pursue desirable interests and activities

- Enable individuals to pursue desirable interests and activities by making time and transportation (if needed) available. These may be idiosyncratic.
- Family members, partners, friends and professionals can help individuals by encouraging them to focus on and enjoy their special interests.
- Show support by engaging with individuals and asking them about their interests, enjoying those interests with them, or validating their interests in other ways.
- Support people to spend time with people with shared interests.
- An autistic partner told us, “Having a visible box of fidget toys is something I find helpful, it’s a cue that this person/environment is safe to be myself”.

Schedule downtime

- Encourage autistic individuals to prioritise downtime and ask them what they need you to do to reduce the demands on them. Some individuals may not yet be able to tell you. Ask people who know them well or observe what they seek.

- Family members, partners, and friends can help their autistic loved ones by encouraging them to focus on and enjoy their special interests.
- Show support by engaging with autistic family members or friends, by asking them about their interests, enjoying those interests with them, or validating their interests in other ways.

Personal stories:

We asked some autistic partners about their experience of masking.

Personal story 1

“My relationship with masking is a complicated one. Being diagnosed with autism in adulthood, for me, meant that I had been masking for a very long time and didn’t know it. It’s something we are encouraged to do, even though we are not overtly told to do it. Certain behaviours are encouraged and others discouraged. Now, I find myself masking, particularly at work, sometimes I am aware of it and intentionally masking, other times I am not. I know that it’s exhausting, completely exhausting. When I get home, I am often too tired to do anything, cook, answer the phone, reply to a friend’s text message. Even watching a new TV show or a new episode of a familiar TV show is too much, I’ll re-watch an episode I’ve seen before, possibly hundreds of times before! I’ll go to bed early. As a one-off, this might be something we all do, it’s manageable, but for me, and many other autistic people this is a regular occurrence. That’s where the problem lies, because we’re no longer living, there’s no energy left for that. What we’re doing is surviving, I got through the day because of masking but at a huge cost. It might seem like a helpful solution, but it’s just a patch. The real problem is that we live in a world which is not always accepting of diversity and difference, and that’s what needs to change. I mask for you, not for me. I mask so my family know I love them, so my friends know I care about them, so I can be taken seriously at work. I mask to avoid prejudice and discrimination.

Ultimately, if I were asked to stop and take down my ‘mask’, I couldn’t do it, I use it so frequently I don’t know where my mask ends and I begin.”

Personal story 2

Another autistic partner told us that masking is sub-conscious, occasionally useful, very tiring, and often deeply ingrained in the psyche of a person.

“The realisation I was masking came a few years after my autism diagnosis in early adulthood. I had been using various techniques all throughout my life with the general intention to blend into the background and just be like everyone else. Sometimes this masking would allow me to thrive in social environments such as school or the workplace, but it would always come at a cost hidden to all others. I was exhausted and often depressed, I’d come home from school with only the energy to be alone and often I’d have to have a nap – no one outside of my home knew the toll it would take.

I’m now over 10 years past my diagnosis, and I am more comfortable with who I am and what works well for me, yet I cannot stop masking. I have stimming behaviours which I’ve suppressed, I utilise carefully practiced conversations, and often remain unable to keep up with all the demands of life due to exhaustion.”

Useful links and references

<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/what-is-autistic-masking/>

<https://neuroclastic.com/masking-and-mental-health-implications/> (Fede and Laurent)

Listen to a personal experience about masking by [Iimmie](#)

Publications

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