

## Masking



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It's likely that school/work and other social situations will be exhausting for Autistic people, due to the social requirement by family and the world to fit in. Masking is when an Autistic person puts on a socially appropriate face and attitude to get through a situation. This might mean he or she has to suppress

### In the Loop About Neurodiversity

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Social masking is when autistic people attempt to appear neurotypical by hiding their autism such as suppressing stims, forcing eye contact, and meeting other social norms, even if it makes them feel uncomfortable. While social masking can help in social situations, autistic people would prefer not to resort to social masking, as it can cause anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and even psychological harm. Someone who is socially masking may be smiling or appear to be fine, but may be screaming internally or in distress from having to suppress who they are. Let's create a culture of autism acceptance so autistic people can feel free to take their mask off and be themselves in social situations.

#MemeMonday #TaketheMaskOff #EmbraceNeurodiversity #AutismAcceptance

## What is masking?

Masking is often the unconscious act of covering up and suppressing our autistic traits and replacing them with neurotypical (or nonautistic) behaviors.

Our masks are not one giant, whole piece, but rather several different tinier pieces that each cover up a part of who we are.

It's the intrinsic parts of who we are that are being forcibly stopped from surfacing and being able to not only breathe, but thrive.



their urges to scream, hit or push others as they know they might get in trouble from teachers, parents or peers if they do these things. As much as it's not ok for anyone to push or hurt others, suppressing urges such as these (masking) can also be problematic and lead a person to have difficulties later in life when they force themselves to mask in more and more situations. It's important that the person has the opportunity for loud

and silly play or interaction to enable other needs they have, such as those regarding feel and noise and physical energy.

Children and adults who mask in order to manage neurotypical needs/demands and/or

Is masking unhealthy?

Very much so, yes.

Masking can lead to meltdowns, shutdowns, autistic burnout, and can affect our views, ideas, thoughts, and values for the rest of our lives.

Masking is also the number one reason autistics go under and misdiagnosed.

Imagine having to bury every single part of who you are. Imagine having to carefully apply unfamiliar individual pieces of a mask because you were taught that who you truly are is not understood or accepted or good or right.

Imagine not being able to be you.

It's like telling a human being to stop acting like a human and pretend to be a lobster. It's uncomfortable, it hurts, it's draining, and it's suffocating.

social pressure will often have meltdowns as a result of the masking. Masking is exhausting and can lead to feelings of a need to sleep for hours (for some) or explosive meltdown energy (for others). It's common to see an increase in meltdowns after a child has recommenced the school year (example) or started attending a program or started working as they are forced to suppress their urges to manage the environment.

The best way to manage meltdown behaviour is to explore possible times that the person may be being forced to mask and try to reduce the necessity for them to mask.

### Ways to tell that someone is masking include:

- Sensory, motivational or other assessments which have vastly different results at home and at school / work / day service. This is likely to mean that the person is suppressing their urges at one of these environments. This is why you cannot see the same sensory need and/or function of behaviour.

What does masking look like?

- Suppressing stims
- Hiding your emotions
- Acting like your peers even when it is uncomfortable and doesn't make sense
- Putting on fake facial expressions
- Not asking for help
- Pretending to enjoy something you dislike (or vice versa)
- Withholding meltdowns (extremely dangerous)
- Finding yourself lying more than usual (covering up your bluntness)
- Forcing hurtful eye contact
- Apologizing excessively for poor memory or any other autistic trait you have that is impossible to mask
- Having to forcefully stop yourself from oversharing on a special interest
- Attributing certain unmaskable traits to "being a perfectionist" or "just anxious"
- Having to pretend to not be overstimulated (leading to burnout)

- Increased meltdowns after commencing a school year / new job / socialising.
- Increased anxiety around socialising.
- Scripting in social situations (e.g. a script for the shop attendant, a script for the chemist, a script for the phone call). Scripting is often a way of masking, a way of managing situations using practiced strategies.
- Lots of apologising, or changing what the person said (e.g. correcting themselves).
- Fidgeting in a way that makes it look like the person is suppressing their stims.
- The person explains the process they had to follow to 'force' themselves to turn up (this can indicate they don't want to be there and are masking to endure the situation).

## Why mask?

Society struggles to understand many neurodiverse accommodations such as stims, fidgets, noises people like to make to feel comfortable. Autistic people can get awkward looks from people, not be invited to places, have people complain about noises they might be making to make themselves feel comfortable be asked to stop doing things that others might find annoying.

## Why do we mask?

Most autistics learn to mask at a very young age, whether we are told directly to "stop moving our hands and sit still", we simply observe our surroundings and make our own conclusions on what is 'socially acceptable', or we are put through abusive therapies that condition us to become more "normal" (whatever the hell that means).

We mask because we are taught that how we were programmed at birth is wrong, and so we must try our very best to fit in with the rest of society.

Further to this, much of autistic communication is quite purposeful and can come off as blunt and to some, a bit rude. Autistic communication is often provided without the 'bells and whistles' that neurotypical people apply, including smiles, pauses for feedback, gestures to keep things appearing friendly, subtle micro-communication prompts like touch and grins to help everyone feel happy. Most autistic communication is designed to communicate a message clearly, with purpose and doesn't include these neurotypical nuances.

## How do I know if I'm masking?

It can be incredibly difficult to know whether or not we are masking.

This is because masking is our normal. So normal, in fact, that it has become comfortable for us to mask and uncomfortable when we try to unmask.

In most of our cases, it can be a safe bet to say that most of the parts of our lives are hidden behind a mask.

This is where mindfulness comes in handy, as learning to evaluate the core pieces of who you are can be beneficial in discovering what is a part of that mask and what is really you.

Sometimes it's hard for some people to even know if they are masking as they can become so used to doing it to fit in and survive. However, masking is quite dangerous and can lead to severe depression, anxiety and burnout.

Masking is very common in day service, social environments and school. Sometimes the person does it to fit in, sometimes it's

forced of them due to set expectations and in some situations (mostly schools) the child is told things like "look at me when I'm speaking to you", "shake hands when you meet someone", "make eye contact", "say things in a nice way, you're too blunt and rude". All of these comments are effectively telling the person that who they are isn't right and they need to change. This leads to masking. The person doesn't need to change, the expectations of them is what needs to change.

### **Stopping the need to mask / unmasking**

It's important to identify masking and to help people to stop needing to use masks to manage life and situations. The way to stop the need for masks is to provide more freedom of expression with less judgement of the way a person needs to accommodate and regulate themselves. Sometimes people need to touch and smell things and sometimes people

## Learning to unmask

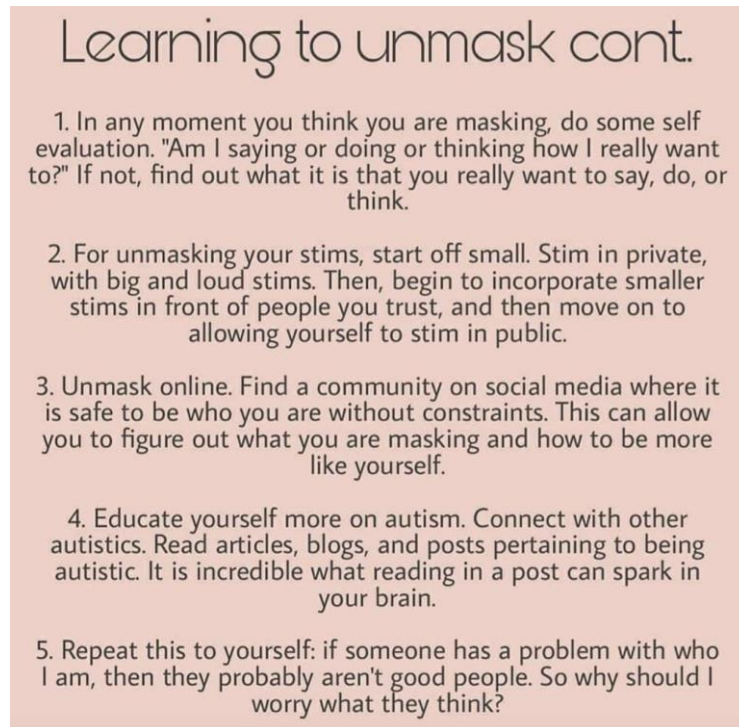
Learning to take off pieces of our mask is complicated and can take a very long time.

And even when we manage to take a piece off, we may end up putting it back on in the future for one reason or another (to get hired for a new job, for example).

There is no official or verified way to learn to unmask your autistic identity.

However, these are a few ways that have helped me:

communicate a little more bluntly than others are used to. It's better to work with others on why they perceive certain communication styles to be so blunt, rather than trying to force people to communicate unnaturally and subsequently need to mask.



**Some strategies might include:**

- If you're with a child, make sure you provide lots of opportunities for silly and outrageous playing. Autistic children need the opportunity to squeal and yell and sing at the top of their voices and throw things and bounce excitedly. It's important that there are regularly accessible opportunities for this to happen. Unrestricted expression of energy and excitement is very important. This might be loud and very busy, but it is very necessary to help children regulate.
- Try to help others to understand that we don't all have to act and talk the same. Blunt communication isn't necessarily rude in intention, regardless of how the person receiving it perceives it.

**Watch for signs of masking. If someone is masking, they have an unsolved problem and need help. Ignoring masking can lead to the person experiencing meltdowns and burnout.**

Help us move the change to non-ABA strategies by adopting brain-based and sensory based integration interventions.  
Join FB group "The OTHER Way" to find the community pushing this movement.

[The OTHER way \(public group\) | Facebook](#) \*There are no copyright restrictions on this work and you're welcome to share it.