

Masking is very common autistic trait. Masking is where a person will suppress 'autistic' behaviours and mimic neurotypical behaviours. It is a survival strategy to fit in.

Everyone, autistic or not, engages in masking of some sort. For example if you are anxious about a job interview, you may behave in a more professional but less natural way to get through it. For autistic people, masking is far more intense and it's nearly constant. An autistic person may mask every time they are in a social situation or at school, while a non-autistic person only does it some of the time.

Masking starts early

From a very young age some autistic children will realise if they mask they:

- Fit in better with other children
- They get in less trouble with parents / teachers / carers

This effectively teaches them that if they behave in the same way as those around them life outside the home is easier.

Autistic people will mask to go unnoticed, to please others, to make friends and fit in. Whilst masking may be more common in women and girls many boys do mask.

Types of masking

- **Instinctive masking:** hiding distress or pain if they feel threatened, for example in a bullying situation
- **Subconscious masking:** triggers bring on this kind of masking for example remembering that an authority figure shouted at them for stimming may make them stop stimming when around people that remind them of that situation
- **Ingrained masking:** a learned response, for example smiling when they don't want to
- **Conscious masking:** this is active masking when the person does not feel safe being their true self and so puts on a different persona or personas in order to 'pass' or fit in

Autistic children who mask do it unconsciously – they don't realise they are doing it. Even if they are spending all of their free time studying popular music, games, clothes, etc., they won't know that this is masking. They will think that everyone is doing this and that this is what is required in order to get through life.

Examples of masking

- Scripting and rehearsing conversations and jokes
- Playing past conversations over and over in their head to find ways to improve in the future
- Memorising social scripts in order to engage appropriately in 'small talk'
- Researching topics they think might appeal to the people they are mimicking
- Forcing themselves to make eye contact
- Studying others body language, clothing, facial expressions

The problem with masking

When masking a person becomes someone entirely different to their true self. In effect they are hiding their true self because they believe there is something wrong with the way they are naturally.

Masking is exhausting and will often lead to meltdowns / shutdowns and burnout. This is very damaging to a person's self-esteem and often causes mental health difficulties.

Masking at School

It is very common for autistic students to mask at school. A student who is masking is likely to be well behaved in class and seem to those around them that they are ok. However we tend to find that a student who masks at school will have more explosive behaviours at home, this is why communication between home and school is so important.

If a child has sensory processing differences (such as noise and touch sensitivity) they will be experiencing discomfort throughout the school day. Some children will mask this discomfort and be able to suppress it whilst in social situations. However once that child gets home (their safe space) they will often release the stress of that discomfort and parents will be reporting challenging distressed behaviours at home.