



UNDERSTANDING AUTISTIC MASKING



Autistic **masking**, also referred to as **camouflaging**, is a coping strategy used by autistic individuals to conceal their traits and behaviours in order to fit into social environments.

This can involve mimicking neurotypical behaviours, suppressing autistic traits, and strategically navigating social interactions to avoid stigma or misunderstanding.

1. KEY FEATURES OF MASKING

Autistic masking can include:



Mimicking social behaviours such as eye contact, facial expressions, body language, opinions, interests, and conversational norms.



Suppressing self-stimulatory behaviours (stimming) like hand-flapping, moving, or rocking.



Forcing oneself to tolerate sensory discomfort (e.g., wearing uncomfortable clothing, enduring loud noises).



Putting self in uncomfortable or unsafe positions, or imitating others to blend in and avoid being perceived as different.



Rehearsing social interactions or scripting conversations in advance.



Overcompensating in communication or communicating in a way that is unnatural to them to avoid misunderstandings.



Melting down in private or with a safe person.

2. WHY DO AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS MASK?

Autistic people may mask for various reasons, including:



Social acceptance: to avoid bullying, exclusion, or negative judgment.



Professional success: to meet workplace expectations and maintain employment.



Safety and self-protection: to avoid discrimination or harassment.



Lack of awareness of their own autism: some individuals, especially those diagnosed later in life, may have learned to mask unconsciously.

3. THE IMPACT OF MASKING

While masking can help navigate social situations, it can have significant negative consequences:



Increased stress and anxiety: the effort required to mask can be exhausting.



Autistic burnout: chronic exhaustion resulting from prolonged masking.



Identity confusion: difficulty distinguishing between one's authentic self and the masked persona.



Mental health struggles: including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.



Delayed diagnosis: masking can obscure autistic traits, leading to late or missed diagnoses, particularly in women and nonbinary individuals.

4. RECOGNISING AND REDUCING THE NEED TO MASK



Encourage acceptance

Creating autism-friendly environments helps reduce the pressure to mask.



Self-advocacy and support

Therapy, peer groups, and autistic-led spaces can help individuals unmask safely.



Education and awareness

Fostering understanding among educators, employers, and the general public can lead to more inclusive interactions.



Creating safe spaces

Environments where autistic individuals feel accepted as they are can alleviate the need to mask.



CONCLUSION

Autistic masking is a complex coping mechanism with both adaptive and harmful effects. While it may help autistic individuals navigate social expectations, prolonged masking can lead to mental and physical exhaustion. Recognizing, validating, and supporting autistic individuals in being their authentic selves is crucial for their well-being and quality of life.

REFERENCES



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REMEMBER

You don't have to mask to belong. Your authentic self is enough.