



Masking

Resources:

[keeping-it-all-inside.pdf](#)
([autisticgirlsnetwork.org](#))

[What is Masking? | Charlie Health](#)

[fitting the mask](#)
([autism.org.uk](#))

[Autistic people and masking](#)
([autism.org.uk](#))

Book- Taking off the Mask
(Belcher, 2022)

Masking is an umbrella term that refers to behaviour strategies or coping mechanisms used by children and young people to **conceal their true thoughts, feelings, difficulties or identity** in order to conform to neurotypical societal expectations and norms.

Masking is commonly associated with **autism** but is also found within other **neurodiverse and marginalised populations**.

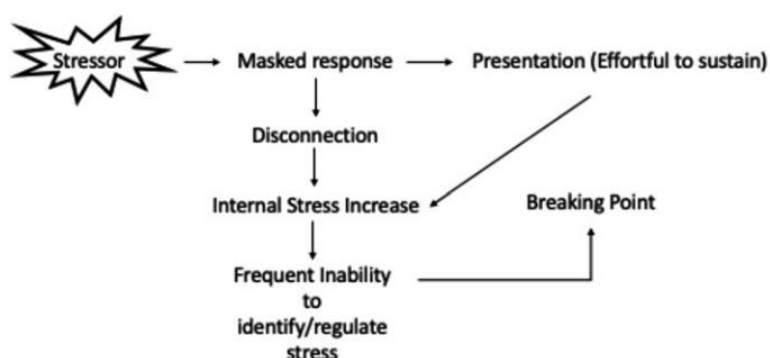
Masking can occur due to **fear of stigma, shame, judgement or rejection**. It can be a conscious or subconscious decision to mask.

Neurotypical people also mask or alter their behaviour depending on circumstances, but the difference is that they **don't have to hide who they are for fear of victimisation or being perceived as "other"**. Still nowadays 80% of the stereotypical traits associated with autism are rated negatively by non-autistic people.

Warning signs

- **Inconsistent emotions:** emotions may seem incongruent with their circumstances and experiences.
- **Discrepancy between public and private behaviour:** may show more signs of sadness or distress in private.
- **Withdrawal or isolation:** may avoid social interactions to protect themselves.
- **Sudden changes in behaviour or personality**
- **Facial expressions may appear forced:** they may try to force a smile or try to maintain neutral facial expressions.

How masking may occur...



An example...

K a 8 year old autistic child is in school.

In their class their classmates are being noisy, they know they have to be sitting down on their chair, it is hot and they have to wear a jumper, K has to speak with their partner to complete the next activity.

Several of these could be stressors for K. K could be masking their typical responses which could involve moving around the classroom or wanting to take their jumper off or preferring not to speak with a partner, instead they comply with what they feel is expected of them.

They are masking their presentation; this is effortful and will not be pleasant. This will lead to a disconnection from the situation for K and the level of stress they feel could increase which could lead to them becoming more easily stressed by other things happening around them or other situations.

How could I find out if a child or young person is masking?

1. Try to understand the child or young person's experience of education – Gathering Learner Voice PowerPoint
2. Emotion scale to be used at various points throughout the day.
3. Social Communication Differences tracker used in a variety of situations across the school day.
4. Provide parents with a diary to complete, making links between behaviours at home and triggers from school.

Myth Buster

- **Only girls mask**
This is not true; masking is an experience across all neurodiverse people.
- **Autistic people present the same way in all environments.**
This is not the case, autistic people may adapt their behaviour depending on the environment, it is typical that the more comfortable they feel in an environment or around certain people the less they will feel like they need to mask who they are or how they feel.
- **Masking is desirable or not a problem.**
This is not true; masking can lead to long term negative consequences for neurodivergent people (further explored later on). Suppressing a feeling of being ashamed or stigmatised for who they are can lead to mental health difficulties in the long term.
- **Masking always looks like someone who is quiet, introverted and compliant.**
This is not true; masking is about hiding their identity or needs and that can also be achieved through being overly extroverted or behave in a way that means they will be made to leave the environment or the situation by presenting as challenging to adults.

What can I do to help?

1. Use non-judgmental, open communication.
2. Respect individual differences and encourage use of positive language when talking about autism and social communication differences.
3. Be patient and flexible.
4. Hold whole school events to advocate for inclusivity.
5. Offer practical support.
6. Encourage self-advocacy.
7. Seek professional support.
8. Review setting's behaviour/relationships and bullying policy to ensure disability discrimination is addressed.
9. Allow time with a trusted adult to build relationships in order to share thoughts and feelings.

What is the role of Doncaster EPS?

1. Provide tools to help identify masking.
2. Provide advice and support for individual cases via consultations and SEND Reviews
3. Training and advice for school staff around individual cases
4. To raise awareness through a whole school approach to reduce the stigma and shame that drives masking and how it can affect children and young people long term.

Possible consequences of consistent masking

For the individual	For the community	For society
<p>Feeling that they are “wrong”, “bad” or “not good enough”. This could lead to low mood, low self-esteem, and a negative perception of themselves.</p> <p>Difficulties with forming and sustaining authentic relationships as a result of hiding one’s ‘true self.’ Hiding one’s true self, and avoidance of school, can also result in feelings of isolation.</p> <p>High level of anxiety and difficulties managing stress. Not having learned appropriate coping mechanisms. This can lead to autistic burnout/breaking point.</p> <p>Not enough mental energy for engaging with learning and reaching their full academic potential.</p> <p>Collectively, these barriers can result in long term challenges, such as trauma, unidentified mental health difficulties and difficulties in sustaining employment.</p>	<p>Increased rates of emotionally based school avoidance due to anxiety and stress.</p> <p>Adults involved in the care of those masking may not be able to identify need and unintentionally contribute to feelings of distress or dysregulation.</p> <p>A lack of understanding may lead adults around the individual masking to project intent behind presentations, e.g., “they are trying to upset me.”</p> <p>Lower academic attainment due to energy and attention directed at navigating autism-related needs, rather than classroom demands.</p>	<p>Consistent masking indicates that an individual is in need of support. A lack of understanding around masking may result in an absence of support. This represents a societal inequality and highlights a need to develop more understanding for marginalised groups.</p> <p>Missed opportunity for autistic strengths to be recognised and used leads to the maintenance/continuation of a society which marginalises the ‘other’.</p> <p>Not understanding signs of masking can lead to others treating those with ASD as though they were neurotypical (see Milton’s ‘double empathy problem’).</p> <p>If this continues, those who mask will continue to hide their ‘true selves’ and experience shame.</p>