

Putting on the mask

Everyone puts on a façade from time to time yet for socially marginalised groups like the autistic community, 'masking' can be a necessary survival mechanism – sometimes to detrimental effects

Words Emma Green

Masking, camouflaging, passing, adaptive morphing and concealing are just a few of the elaborate verbs used to describe the concept of 'image management'. Most people present different versions of themselves, depending on the situation they find themselves in - the persona they display during a job interview will probably look very different from the one they adopt during happy hour at a bar. After all, the need for social acceptance is a universal human desire. However, for autistic people, the pressure to mask and moderate their behaviour can feel like a never-ending performance.

Masking is a term that originated within the autistic community, but the concept can resonate with other neurodivergent or marginalised societal groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. It is the act of consciously (or unconsciously) suppressing one's natural behaviours (for example, autistic traits) to fit in with the norms and expectations of the dominant culture they exist in (for example, neuronormative society).

Masking can also include 'overcompensating'; the need to 'make up' for any perceived deficiencies by behaving in ways that seem overly practised or forced. This might include the deliberate cultivation of a 'perfect' persona to 'pass' for neurotypical.

Types of masking

While it's important to remember that not every autistic person masks, many of them do - and to varying degrees of intensity. These behaviours can vary widely depending on the individual, yet some common masking strategies

are widely observed within the autistic community.

One example of this is mimicking neurotypical social cues. These can include imitating a tone of voice, forcing eye contact, or mirroring another person's body language or gestures. Some autistic people may adopt social scripts and rehearse specific responses to social situations, even if these responses aren't natural to them. Neurodivergent people learn how to mask through mirroring the behaviours of others not just in real life but from what they observe in books, films, TV and on social media.

Another form of masking is adapting to social norms, such as acting in a certain way to fit in with a clique, forcing oneself to engage in activities other people might enjoy or hiding personal interests in favour of more 'socially acceptable' ones. Marie Kedward, a neurodivergent coach and personal leadership development mentor, spent most of her adolescence and early adult years trying to mask who she was before receiving her autism diagnosis at 33. "I had such a rough time at school, but then when I went to college, I started making friends





Embracing yourself

"Finding out that I'm autistic has been absolutely life-changing," says Kedward. "It's allowed me to really understand who I am and why I do things the way I do."

Now she is "newly out of the autism closet", Kedward has been able to remove a lot of her masking behaviours. "I'm not burning anywhere near as much energy in trying to be someone I'm not," she says. As a result, she no longer has to rely on self-soothing habits either. "I think unmasking has helped me to move on from alcohol addiction because I'm now comfortable with the person I truly am."

Kedward has now designed a life for herself which aligns with her preferences and values. Alongside quitting her corporate career to focus on coaching full-time, she now volunteers for her local RSPCA and RSPB groups. "I do things like bird ringing as my hobbies now because those things suit me, not going out clubbing."



and felt like I was fitting in," she explains. "I started dressing a certain way and going out just because I thought that was the thing you were supposed to do."

Autistic people can also use behavioural masking strategies such as suppressing stimming behaviours or hiding their sensory sensitivities to appear 'more normal'. They might also engage in emotional masking techniques such as concealing heightened emotions like frustration or putting on a false display of happiness or confidence. Emotional masking can also manifest in fawning behaviours – for instance, avoiding expressing opinions and only saying or doing what they think will please others.

Why do autistic people mask?

Masking can be seen as the vast discrepancy between a person's innate preferences and what they present to the outside world. From a

young age, autistic people frequently get the message that instinctual ways of being do not align with societal expectations. Therefore, they often feel that they must mould themselves to fit with the neurotypical ideal, therefore keeping themselves safe from social ostracism.

"Kids can often tell when you're a little bit different; they can sniff it out," says Kedward, who was badly bullied in secondary school. "I think a lot of my masking behaviour was about hiding away and trying not to stand out."

Other times, autistic people feel they need to mask to be deemed competent in environments where communication skills are highly valued. They may also mask to attain positive outcomes such as making friends, finding a romantic relationship or advancing in their chosen career.

Before founding her coaching business, Be Well and Flourish, Kedward worked in procurement. "I was quite successful in my corporate career and rose up the ladder quickly," she says. "I think that masking kept me under the radar just enough so that I was able to progress in my career."

Other benefits of masking that are often cited by the autistic

"A lot of my masking behaviour was about trying not to stand out"



community can include increased protection and safety, avoidance of unwanted attention and stigma, and being able to navigate social situations more smoothly.

The psychological toll of masking

While masking can be advantageous in the short term, consistently suppressing one's preferences and needs over time can have significant long-term consequences.

Sometimes, the disparity between an autistic person's public and private behaviours can result in what has been termed the 'Coke Bottle Effect'. Often observed in autistic children who mask all day at school and then have emotional outbursts once they return home, many autistic people can experience meltdowns or shutdowns after masking for a prolonged period. This behaviour can include lashing out at others, becoming irritable or withdrawing once they are in a private and safe place.

Masking regularly can lead to 'autistic burnout' - a term coined to describe the extreme exhaustion that comes from constantly trying to maintain a façade. This can result in chronic fatigue, social withdrawal, physical ailments such as headaches and muscle tension, skill regression and a reduced ability to mask autistic traits, leading to noticeable social and professional struggles.

The constant suppression of authentic expression can lead to a disconnect between a person's true identity and how they present themselves to the world. Over time, an autistic person might feel as if they are pretending to be something they're not, fuelling a fear that they might be 'found out' by others and disliked for who they really are.

Masking is also linked to adverse mental health outcomes such as chronic stress, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. "Looking back, I think masking was the reason I was so drained a lot of the time," says Kedward. "I was a binge drinker, diagnosed with depression and anxiety and getting to a point where I didn't really want to be alive anymore. I suspect the energy consumption from masking contributed quite heavily to all that."

Masking also plays a role in why autistic females are typically diagnosed far less (or much later on) than their male counterparts. Girls are more inclined to develop advanced masking strategies as they tend to prioritise friendships and relationships more than boys and often have stronger social mimicry skills. Although there is an increasing awareness and understanding of masking amongst professionals, too many autistic people, especially girls and women, are still failing to receive a proper diagnosis or the support they need, as they can appear 'too competent' or 'not autistic enough'.

Until society becomes more accepting of autism and neurodivergence in general, autistic people will continue to have to make the hard choice between having to mask to fit in - or prioritising their mental health by unmasking.