

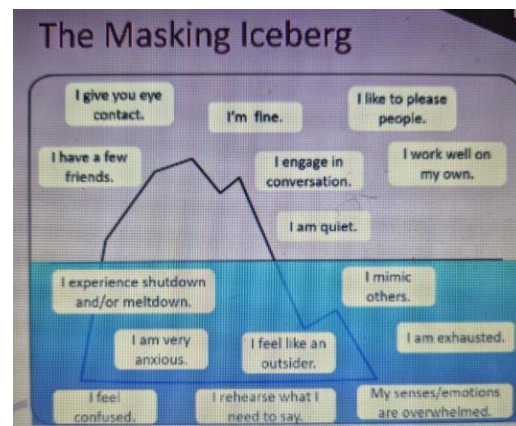
WHAT IS MASKING?

70% of people with an autism diagnosis mask. Masking means to disguise or hide parts of yourself in order to better fit in. This provides a form of self-protection as it helps appear more socially acceptable. Masking is exhausting as it happens of every minute of every day.

We all mask to a degree and this is normal –we adapt to certain situations to fit and conform to the situations around us. We project a different self when at work, at home, with friends etc. However when masking starts to have a negative impact on our wellbeing then this needs addressing and there are ways to support.

Masking may include:

- Not saying what's on your mind in case it is socially incorrect
- Hiding your true personality and interests
- Tolerating unsafe and uncomfortable situations
- Copying the expressions and body language of others to try and fit in
- Enduring sensations of overwhelm and melting down in private
- Forcing eye contact despite being uncomfortable
- Suppressing traits such as stimming
- Communicating in ways that feel unnatural
- Forcing your body to be still despite needing movement to focus



WHY DO PEOPLE MASK?

- To fit in and to avoid the negative reactions of others
- To meet social expectations and avoid rejection
- To fulfil a desire to feel "Normal"
- To avoid punishment and reprimand for behaving in ways that are viewed as different
- To keep jobs or increase employability
- To make or maintain friendships and relationships

TYPES OF MASKING

There are 4 main types of masking:

1. Instinctive – a survival mechanism when faced with situations that make them feel uncomfortable
2. Subconscious – this is when masking is internalised over time and can be a response to negative responses to "autistic" behaviour over time
3. Ingrained – this is a learned response or one that is taught to them
4. Conscious – this is when the person actively recognises that the current situation requires a conscious response to make them feel safe

What can happen if not addressed / supported?

SHORT TERM:

Exhaustion
Extreme fatigue
Reduced window of tolerance – leading to outbursts more quickly
After school explosions (see other parent leaflet for support)
Anxiety
Shut downs / zoning out / disengaging

LONG TERM:

Mental health impacts
Extreme vulnerability to exploitation
Depression
Person may engage in risky behaviours
Social fatigue – so withdraw and isolate themselves as the pressure to "conform" is too much
Impact on self care – may not wash, brush teeth, wear clean clothes etc.

WAYS TO SUPPORT

You cannot teach a person to “UNMASK” but we can support them by helping them feel safe enough to show their authentic self. We can do this by:

- Observing the child in social situations – are they looking uncomfortable?
- Provide quiet and calm areas to “Unmask” in throughout the day
- Develop the child’s emotional literacy so they can articulate how they feel and the support they require
- Reduce some of the overload through the use of visual timetables and picture prompts
- Build positive relationships that help the young person feel more comfortable
- Allow opportunities for movement breaks and self regulation – all join in together to reduce the feeling of being different
- Help them understand social situations – address any misconceptions but point out what they did well, what went wrong and how they can deal with it next time. This must be done in a supportive way so that they feel able to navigate the social situation next time rather than feel a need to mask for fear of reprimand.
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OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/scotland/embrace-autism/masking>

<https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/autism-space/health-and-lifestyle/autistic-masking/>

<https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/guidance/masking-and-identity>