

Masking and Mental Health

Presenter: Jacquelyn Fede, PhD



What is it?

What does it look like?

Why?

Is it a good thing?

Mental health

Support

Masking... what is it?



Context

Definition

Harsh Reality for Autistic people:

Elevated risk for mental health conditions (Cage et al., 2019)

Higher suicidality (66% vs. 17%) (Zahid et al., 2017)

More autistic traits? Even higher risk!

- Mental health conditions (Pelton, 2017)
- Suicidality (Takara, 2014)



**Masking: Autistic people
develop ways to fit in**

Strategies to blend in

A camouflage or disguise

Being able to "pass" as
neurotypical

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Is it a good thing?

Your thoughts?

Can you think of Pros
and cons?

Why mask?

What say you, Autistics? Why do you mask??

There are MANY reasons (Cage et al., 2019)!

- to be taken seriously
- to fit in
- to get a job
- to be able to get along with peers/co-workers
- to reduce awkwardness (for others)
- to perform well at work
- to NOT be called out / to go unnoticed

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What does it look like?

Masking can take many forms

Can be learned implicitly through observation of peers, pop culture / media

Can be learned explicitly and linked to goals/objectives

To others:

Common
Strategies

What you may see:

Hovering near others

Relying on others to talk or lead / always following

Neglected not rejected

You may not notice at all

PARENTS often report lower social awareness

Better in games with rules than "free-form"

*Some are so good they are described as
charismatic and very in tune to social

Common Strategies:

- Resisting / holding in natural responses
- Not letting energy or emotion show at all ("stoic")
- Mimicking / memorization
- Researching pop culture / engaging in non-preferred convos
- Resisting one's own needs and preferences
- Going with the flow / anything not to stand out
- Attempting to control all aspects of a social situation
- Participating in activities and conversations not of interest

***Note**

Important Note!

It is not just one of these!

Masking is the combination of these strategies (and more) for prolonged periods of time

Several, all and others are used

They are often used for long durations

They are expertly crafted and highly accurate

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Autistic people who engage in more stereotypical behaviors (e.g., flapping, rocking): more mental health symptoms; more suicidality

Autistic people who mask (hide or suppress those traits) and appear more NT?

??

???

More mental health symptoms and conditions

Higher rates of:

Depression (Stewart et al., 2006)

Anxiety (Gillott & Standen, 2007)

Social Anxiety (Maddox & White, 2015)

Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress

(Kupferstein, 2018)

Contributes to shorter lifespan of autistics
(AJPH, 2017)

More Outcomes associated with Masking

More frequent suicidal ideation (Cassidy, 2014)

Higher rates of suicide (Hirvikoski, 2016)

Predictor of missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis (Lai, 2015)

Associated with "Autistic Burnout" (i.e., extreme fatigue and inability to function) (AWN, 2018)

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Why the Connection?

Cutting edge research says:



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Theoretically...

Not natural; forced

'When X, then A or B and never C, unless Y, but not when Y and W occur together, unless also D.'

High vigilance all the time - constantly planning

High cognitive demand, high stress, lots of energy
Stress --> Cortisol

Constant reminders that the real you is not okay.

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Support:

How Can I Help?

What Can I do?

1

2

3

4

5

Validate!

All behavior serves a function and may be the way an autistic person communicates their energy or emotional state.

Strive to understand NOT change.

Learn from the experience of autistic people rather than comparing to NT experience

**If someone is "taking off the mask," what you thought you knew might not be valid

Question!

Be critical of any programs, therapies, interventions, strategies and plans that attempt to get rid of or reduce different behaviors.

There is a lot of emphasis on "normal," but this is the root of the problem BOTH for those who do and do not mask!

**Damned if we do, damned if we don't

Feed the Need!

Don't hold hostage the very activities and coping mechanisms an autistic person uses to regulate.

Token economies and reward systems are common in behavior management and often use key needs as rewards

e.g., food, physical activity, rest, solitude, stimming, breaks, interests

Advocate and Educate

Fight to ensure autistic people have the supports they need and that their way of being is understood by those around them

- Take the time to understand the person

- Know their needs and profile

- Know their environments and activities and where modifications can occur

****Two-way street!**

Use Caution!

"Taking off the mask" is a privilege

Some are not in a position to do so

Some have masked so long, they don't know what is the mask and what is their true self

It can take years to assemble and master the mask

It can be very difficult to take off; even when desired by the individual

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