

# MASKING



- In Autistic individuals masking is the effortful use of expected social mannerisms through suppression of one's natural external behaviors and imitation of the social behaviors of others.
- Examples include: forcing oneself to hold eye contact, hiding stimming behaviors, reducing visible reactions to sensory sensitivities or planning a conversation before it begins.
- Masking is used by all individuals in certain social situations, such as a job interview. In Autistic individuals, masking often becomes an unconscious and habitual behavior.

- Masking often begins as a tool to form friendships with non-Autistic individuals or reduce unwanted attention from others.
- Some Autistic persons can become quite skilled in social imitation through observing facial expressions, mannerisms, posture, or colloquialisms used by those around them. Others may study social interactions through media or practice in the mirror in order to develop masking skills.
- Autistic individuals often use masking to increase feelings of safety and acceptance in classrooms or workplace settings.

- Systematic reviews have highlighted some specific subgroups of Autistic people most likely to use masking behaviors.
- Females are more likely to exhibit masking, especially those who report high levels of self-monitoring.
- Masking is also more often seen in those employed in hard science fields of study or work settings.

- Although Autistic masking can have functional uses, multiple research studies have connected the long term effects of masking with increased reports of anxiety, depression, and feelings of suicidality. Many studies also report feelings of chronic exhaustion.
- BIPOC women are especially impacted by the psychological costs of masking. This may be attributed to the simultaneous need for masking and "code-switching", or altering behavior and language to conform to cultural norms of dominant white spaces.

- Educators can play a critical role in the healthy social development of Autistic individuals by utilizing strategies to monitor the short and long term impact of masking.
- When teaching social skills to Autistic scholars, remember to balance encouraging a student to "fit in" with others while also staying true to their own needs and interests.
- Notice when your Autistic scholars may be experiencing the negative costs of masking. Provide spaces for them to recharge or a take a break from "wearing their mask". This may look like time to engage in their special interest without judgement or time off from group assignments.
- Demonstrate acceptance in the classroom by respecting the interests, mannerisms, or communication style of all scholars.
- Remember that all scholars are forming their unique identities and deserve relationships that value who they truly are.

**How can we create space for our Autistic scholars to be their authentic selves?**

## References

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