A fact sheet about

Unmasking safely

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Unmasking safely

Why unmasking takes two, when the mask keeps you safe, and where to start.



Key points

- Unmasking means letting go of some of the hiding and changing you do to fit in, so that you can be more like yourself.
- It depends on the people around you as well as on you. Autistic adults say they drop the mask most easily with people who accept how they are. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.
- For some people masking keeps them safe, and for some, unmasking is not possible at all because nowhere feels safe enough. Where, when and whether you unmask is always your call.
- A safe place to start is one setting, one safe person and one small thing dropped.

Why unmasking takes two

Maybe there is one friend you can sit with in silence, or a cousin who never minds if you rock or pace. With them you share your interests for as long as you like, and nobody comments. Then at a family party or a work lunch, the mask goes back on.

That gap is worth noticing. It shows that being yourself depends on who is in the room, as well as on you.

Unmasking means dropping some of what you do to fit in: forcing eye contact, holding back stimming, hiding your interests or rehearsing every reply. It does not mean dropping all of it, in every place, at once.

Autistic adults were asked when they could be themselves with other people. They said it happened with people who accept that there is more than one way to communicate. Those people did not push for eye contact or make fun of them. It also helped when people asked what they needed and took them at their word.

With those people, they said they could stim, look away, give shorter answers and share their interests. They felt more free and less tired, and they felt closer to the other person. So unmasking may go best

where the other person meets you part of the way, which is why people say it takes two.

Finding your people can help in another way too. In one survey, people who felt part of the autistic community felt better overall. But it did not make masking any less harmful, so the places where you still mask still matter.

Research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

When the mask keeps you safe

For some people, masking keeps them safe. At work, many neurodivergent adults say they mask to protect their job and how others see them.

If you are BBIA or LGBTQIA+, you may also face unfair treatment for more than one part of who you are. In one study, some Black autistic young adults said they were treated unfairly both for being Black and for being autistic.

So unmasking is not always a choice. Being able to unmask safely is a privilege, and for many BBIA and LGBTQIA+ people, and others who face unfair treatment, it may not be possible. Where you do have a choice, keeping the mask on in one place and taking it off in another is a fair way to live. You do not owe anyone your unmasked self.

The one thing to try: one setting, one person, one small thing

Pick one person you feel safe with first. It might be a partner, a friend, a sibling, a housemate or another neurodivergent person who just gets it. Then pick one place you are often together, like their kitchen, a walk or the car. Last, pick one small thing to drop there, for example:

- stimming, rocking or fidgeting the way you want to
- looking where it feels easier, instead of at their face
- letting them know you need some quiet, instead of pushing through
- sharing your interest for as long as you like
- not filling a silence

If it feels easier, you can let them know first, like "I'm going to look away more, it's not about you". Other people would rather just do it.

Afterwards, notice how it felt: lighter, more tired, a bit exposed or a mix of these. You can keep a note in the Understanding Zoe app of where you dropped the mask and how it went. Look back on it before you try a new place or a new person.

Autistic adults who came through burnout have said that doing things their own way, and unmasking, helped them recover. But this step has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

It may feel strange at first, and some days the mask will come back on its own, which is okay. You can read more about why masking is hard to stop here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether you have been thinking about this for years or have only just started. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you work out where it feels safe to be more yourself, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you would like to mask less at work, you can read more about agreeing changes at work here.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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