A fact sheet about

What masking costs you

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What masking is, what it can cost you, and one way to notice it.



Key points

- Masking, also called camouflaging (definition below), means hiding or changing how you naturally are so that you fit in.
- It uses energy the whole time you do it, often without you noticing, so the cost tends to turn up later.
- Autistic and ADHD adults describe two costs: tiredness and losing track of who you are. Autistic adults say that, over time, it can also build into burnout.
- A first step is to notice where you mask the most, and what it takes out of you.

What masking is

You get through a family dinner and it seems to go well. You laughed in the right places, kept your hands still and looked people in the eye. Then you sit in the car and need twenty minutes before you can communicate again. Or someone asks what you would like to do on your day off, and you realise you are not sure any more.

It can be hard to link either moment back to the dinner, or to years of dinners like it. But both can be part of what masking costs.

Masking means changing how you come across so that you fit in with what other people expect. Researchers often call it camouflaging, and it is common in autistic and ADHD adults. It can look like copying other people's faces and voices, or rehearsing what to say. It can also mean holding back stimming, forcing eye contact or laughing at jokes you did not follow.

ADHD adults mask too, though research on them is newer. They may act as if they are following, hold back from cutting in, or plan far ahead so that nothing slips.

And this mechanism can apply to you even if you are not assessed as ADHD or Autistic.

People mask for good reasons: to fit in, to make friends, to keep a job or to stay safe from teasing and worse. So masking is not a flaw in you, and this page does not ask you to stop. You can read more about why masking is hard to stop here.

What masking can cost you

The first cost is energy: watching yourself all day takes effort: your face, your voice, how much you have shared and how you are sitting. Autistic adults say the longer they mask, the harder it gets to keep going. Many need time alone afterwards to let out what they held in. In one survey, the amount of time people spent masking seemed to be what harmed them most. You can read more about how time with people drains your social battery here.

Masking can also cost you your sense of who you are: after years of playing a part, some autistic and ADHD adults say they lost track of who they are and what they like and need. One person said their real self felt like it was "floating somewhere above me like a balloon". In another survey, autistic adults who masked more also felt less able to be their real selves, and they had lower self-esteem.

Over time, the cost can build into burnout. Autistic adults name masking as one of the loads that builds up into burnout. Across many studies, more masking also went along with more anxiety and low mood. These studies cannot show which comes first, but the link has been found many times. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

Most of this research is about autistic adults, and much less is about ADHD and other neurodivergent adults. More broadly, research on autism, ADHD 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.

The one thing to try: notice where you mask most

The cost of masking is easy to miss while you are paying it. So this step looks back at the day, not at the moment itself.

For the next week, ask yourself two things at the end of each day:

- Where did I hold myself in the most today?
- How did I feel an hour after I left: wiped out, flat, fine or something else?

It might be a family lunch, the shops, a phone call with a relative, a group chat, school pick-up or a meeting. One or two words for each answer is enough, and "no idea" is a fine answer too.

You can keep these notes in the Understanding Zoe app and look back on them at the end of the week. Often one place or one person stands out, and that shows you where the cost is highest.

You do not have to change anything yet. Knowing where the cost is can help you plan rest after that place. It is also the first step if you later decide to mask less somewhere. But being able to mask less is a privilege. For many BBIA and LGBTQIA+ people, and others in marginalised communities, it may not be safe to unmask, and masking less may not be possible. Where you do have a choice, it is yours to make. You can read more about how to unmask safely here.

All of this is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Looking closely at the cost can bring up sadness or anger about years of hiding, and that is a fair way to feel.

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 masking has worn you down for years or you have only just started to notice it. 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 look at what masking costs you and what you might want to change, 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 are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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