

AUTISTIC MASKING AND CAMOUFLAGING

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WHAT IS AUTISTIC MASKING?



The intentional or unintentional altering of behaviors to fit in with societal expectations/norms (to appear more "normal").

- Suppression or repression of certain self-regulatory behaviors (e.g. fidgeting, stimming)
- Forced difference in facial and bodily expression (e.g. smiling, maintaining eye contact, standing up straight)
- Forced difference in language or tone.

WHY DO AUTISTIC PEOPLE MASK?

01

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Engaging in masking behaviors in order to form interpersonal relationships is one of the most commonly reported reasons behind autistic masking (Hull et al., 2017).

02

UPBRINGING / CONDITIONING

Masking can start at a young age depending on familial dynamics, early schooling, and general socialization. An autistic child being told to act differently in public, and being punished for not, or being rewarded for doing so, can start a lifetime of hiding "inappropriate" behaviors.

03

STIGMA

For many capable of masking, the stigma from misunderstanding autism as a spectrum can make "acting allistic" a more favorable approach than trying to be better understood as the autistic individual they are.

05

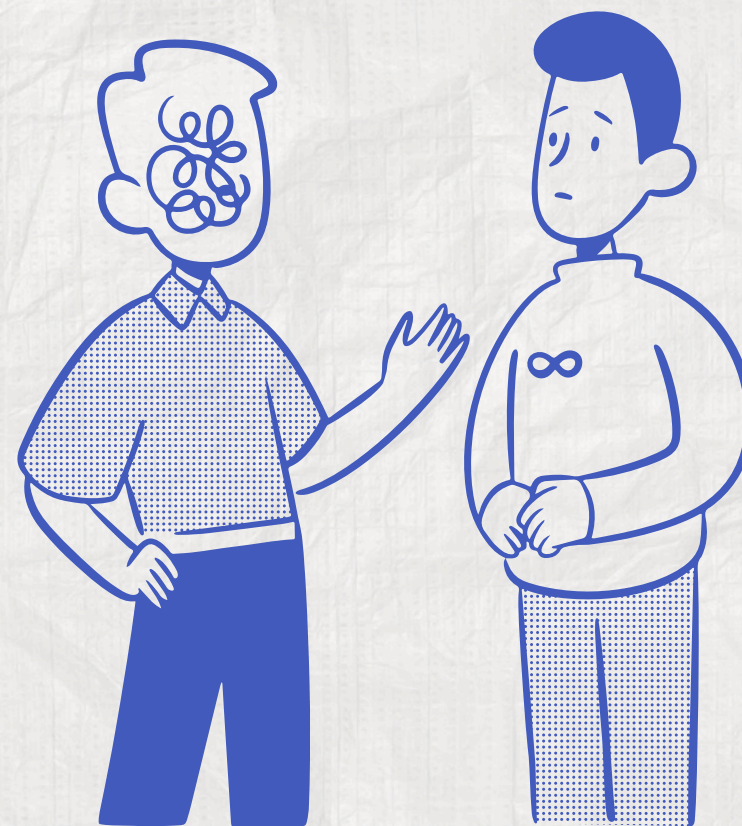
LINKS TO SOCIAL ANXIETY

Some studies suggest that camouflaging behaviors are more closely related to social anxiety than autistic traits (Lei et al., 2024). These feelings of anxiety could be another driving force.

04

SHORT-TERM ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

While less discussed, camouflaging can also be a defense strategy against different types of abuse, particularly those lower/non-masking individuals are at higher risk of being subjected to. In situations where intersectionality plays a role, this is even more prevalent.



CONSEQUENCES



1

HIGHER LEVELS OF STRESS AND ANXIETY

Lower camouflaging individuals were found to exhibit less stress and anxiety than their high camouflaging or switching counterparts (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

2

MORE FREQUENT EXHAUSTION AND FATIGUE

The most commonly reported consequence of masking is extreme exhaustion. Long periods of masking may cause the camouflaging to be less effective, and may require a longer recovery period depending on the individual (Hull et al., 2017).

3

LOSS OF IDENTITY

Many who camouflage feel that when they mask, they're lying about who they truly are. While this can have an impact on relationships (Hull et al., 2017), it can cause some individuals to feel disconnected from their sense of "self" as well.

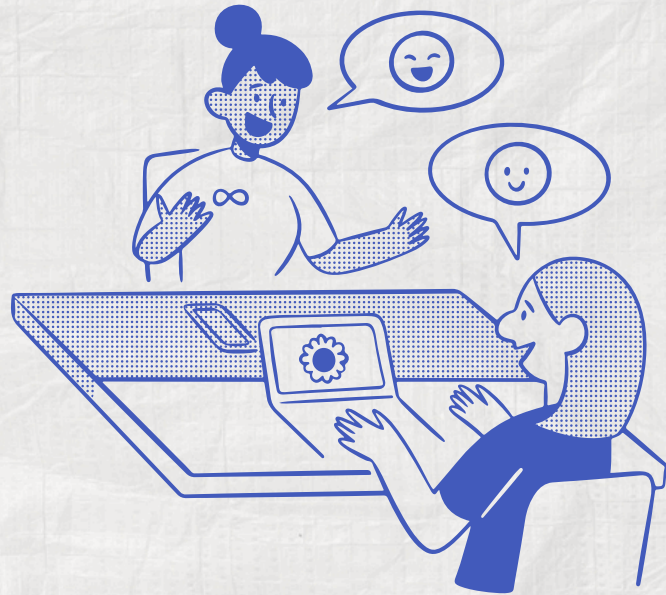
4

AUTISTIC BURNOUT

Autistic burnout is a state of chronic exhaustion, fatigue, cognitive difficulties, skill regression, and difficulties in sensory and emotional regulation. It is typically described as lasting at least 3 months, though it is not an official diagnosis. Exact symptoms can vary, but pervasive exhaustion that doesn't go away with rest is the defining feature.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

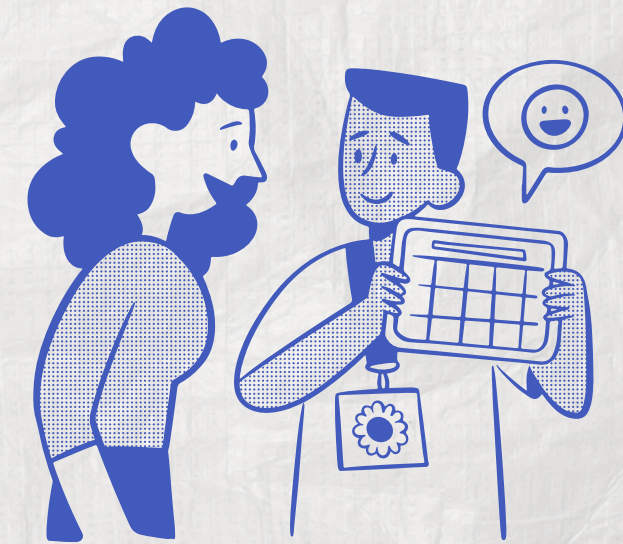
WHAT SOCIAL FACTORS CAUSE INDIVIDUALS TO MASK AT DIFFERENT RATES?



SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN MASKING BEHAVIORS IN "SEXUAL MINORITIES" COMPARED TO HETEROSEXUAL AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS (MCQUAID ET AL., 2025)



STUDIES HAVE SHOWN MIXED RESULTS WHEN IT COMES TO THE IMPACT OF SEX, GENDER, AND AGE OF DIAGNOSIS ON RATES OF AUTISTIC MASKING



DIFFERENT CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS BASED ON RACE AND NATIONALITY CAN HAVE LARGE IMPACTS ON THE PRESENTATION OF AUTISTIC MASKING (PAGÁN ET AL., 2025)

UNMASKING

Pros:

- Increased understanding of self
- Ability to recognize needs and ask for help more effectively
- Acceptance on a broad scale

Cons:

- More likely to be mistreated, outcast, or ostracized from social situations
- Difficulty "remasking" in situations where it may be beneficial

Approaches:

First Steps:

- Education
- Listen to your body's cues
- Saying "no"

Long-Term:

- Self-acceptance
- Mindfulness
- Limit testing





WHY DOES IT MATTER?



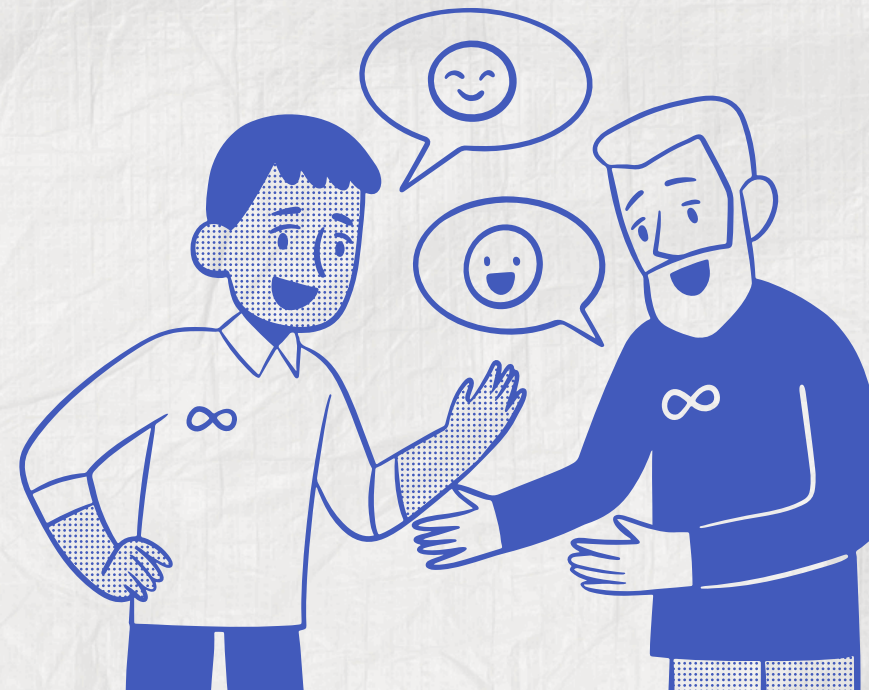
ACCEPTANCE!

- AVOIDS MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN PROFESSIONAL AND CASUAL SITUATIONS
- CREATES ROOM FOR PROPER ACCOMMODATIONS
- KEEPS DISCUSSION POSITIVE, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE
- ACKNOWLEDGMENT ALSO HELPS THOSE WHO CAN'T MASK GET MORE ATTENTION
 - THE LOUDEST VOICES AREN'T THE ONLY ONES



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**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!
ANY QUESTIONS?**

