Masking and Self-Advocacy

What is masking and how does it impact the autistic community?

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What is masking and how does it impact the autistic community? This tip sheet is designed to describe masking, its pros and cons, and how to create an environment that supports self-advocacy.

❑ **What is masking?**

Masking is when certain characteristics unique to autism are hidden and replaced with behaviors that appear more neurotypical. One common example is mimicking others' facial expressions during conversation as to appear to be on the same page as the speaker.

> This is not to say that the autistic person is not on the same page, but they may not outwardly express their private thoughts. Because allistic (non-autistic) individuals rely a lot on nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language, this form of communication may require more work on the autistic person's part because they may not naturally communicate in this way (or this form of communication does not come as natural to them but instead has to be learned).

❑ **Why do autistic people mask?**

Some autistic individuals describe their masking as a survival tool for navigating their environment, both social and professional. Because there are societal expectations on how to behave in certain situations, autistic individuals may be placed at a disadvantage when these expectations are not explicit.

Whether it's a conscious decision or an outcome of their learning history, autistic individuals may mask their traits and work to appear more neurotypical in order to (1) succeed in the professional/social situation and/or (2) avoid punishment for acting in a way that differs from the neurotypical norm.

> "It may give them the sense that I'm 'one of them' but I know I don't get it and it feels isolating, I can be accepted by a group and feel utterly alone. I've only recently started to come to terms with this and am trying to be more intentional about asking for clarification, but humans have this depressing knee-jerk reaction to get upset when you don't get what they think is obvious."
>
> *~Dave Caudel, self-advocate*

❏ **What is the difference between masking and camouflaging?**
With masking, autistic traits are hidden and replaced with another set of behaviors to appear more neurotypical.

Camouflaging takes this a step further by not only giving the impression of neurotypical behavior but succeeds at totally blending in with the rest of the group.

> "To me camouflaging suggests that one has enough social skills to know how to change their behaviors to blend in with others. Masking on the other hand doesn't assume that level of social skills beyond just knowing they need to hide certain parts of themselves."
>
> ~Emelyne Bingham, self-advocate

❏ **To mask or not to mask?**
Sometimes masking is not a bad thing but can be a useful tool for feeling confident (or simply surviving) in social situations. Even though masking can have some short-term benefits, continuing to mask in the long term can have detrimental effects on mental health. Research has shown a strong correlation between masking and suicidal thoughts/behaviors (Cassidy et al., 2019).

When there is true comfort and alleviated pressure from social situations, autistic individuals may not feel the need to mask. While this is ideal, there are still instances in which all people are expected to "mask" to some degree in order to succeed professionally.

Everyone "masks" at work to some degree (even if you are comfortable with all your colleagues) because of set expectations. But that's okay and that doesn't mean work is inherently an unsafe place.

Although the goal is to create an environment where masking is not necessary, some autistic individuals may still prefer to mask if it makes them feel more comfortable and/or safer. If you are supporting autistic individuals, you should reflect on situations you may create that require/favor masking, and reconsider based upon their preferences.

❏ **How can we promote self-advocacy in these situations?**
While it's important for autistic individuals to advocate for their needs, it's also important that we create an environment for this self-advocacy to be successful. The best way to encourage students to self-advocate is to create an environment free of judgement, patronization, and inflexible expectations on how this expression should look.

Being open-minded and understanding is the best way to create a safe environment for autistic individuals to safely and comfortably express themselves.

> "I believe society is certainly doing their best to welcome diversity and individualism, but it still has a long way to go to ensure that those with autism feel like they will be treated with respect when not masking."

~Armando Bernal, self-advocate

❑ **Summary:**
Although masking can be detrimental to mental health in the long run, some autistic individuals may still feel pressured to mask. Others may prefer to mask for personal reasons. Whether the decision is made consciously or not, it is important to create an open and safe environment for autistic individuals to express themselves freely. All individuals are entitled to dignity and respect regardless of their presentation.

❑ **Additional Resources:**
  » A Systematic Review of Passing as Non-autistic in Autism Spectrum Disorder
  » Camouflage and Autism
  » Camouflaging in Autism: A Systemic Review
  » Commentary: 'Camouflaging' in Autistic People – Reflection on Fombonne (2020)
  » Commentary: The Construct Validity of 'Camouflaging' in Autism: Psychometric Considerations and Recommendations for Future Research – Reflection on Lai et al. (2020)
  » Is Camouflaging Autistic Traits Associated with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours? Expanding the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide in an Undergraduate Student Sample
  » Reconsidering Autistic 'Camouflaging' As Transactional Impression Management

This resource was created with direction, input, and feedback from TRIAD's Advisory Committee. For more information about this committee, please visit our website on Community Informed Practice.

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