

Masking Across The Lifespan: From Childhood to Adulthood

Presented by:

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What is
Masking?

Why do we
Mask?

Impacts of
Masking

Supports for
Masking

Case
Examples



Owner and Therapist
Specialising in person-centered
and strengths-based support
for neurodivergent individuals

BP sychSci (Hons)
Research projects studying
neuroaffirming supports, neurodiverse
behaviours, and attention



A Quick Warm Up

~~X~~ Individuals who mask should be considered 'two-faced'

✓ Long-term masking can contribute to burnout, anxiety and loss of identity

~~X~~ Only neurodivergent individuals exhibit strong 'behaviour management'

Masking refers to adapting behaviour to fit societal norms

Neurotypical Individuals

Commonly referred to as 'Impression
Management'
Done consciously with low to moderate
effort
Used to manage appearance in
different contexts

Neurodivergent Individuals

Used as a survival mechanism
Done either consciously or
unconsciously
Intends to hide evidence of
neurodivergent traits to meet
neurodivergent standards

Behavioural

Masking
Strategies

Social

Internal

Behavioural Masking

Monitoring and controlling the behaviours we display

- Forcing eye contact
- Suppressing stimming
- Copying facial expressions
- Hiding overwhelm
- Monitoring tone



Social Masking

Monitoring and controlling the way we communicate with others

- Rehearsing conversations
- Developing scripts
- Mirroring communication styles
- People-pleasing




Internal Masking

Monitoring and controlling your neurodivergent thought process

- Suppressing natural thoughts or reactions
- Not feeling 'normal'
- Minimal sense of identity





What can Masking
look like across the
lifespan?

Childhood

Adoloesence

Adulthood

Hiding Confusion

Large emphasis on
academic performance
May stay quiet when
confused to blend in
Can perform well when
observing others

Differences in behaviour

More complex
expectations & pressure
to 'fit in'
Quiet and reserved when
out but loud and chatty
at home

Highly controlled

personas
Can happen without
realising
Behaviours become
deeply practiced
Appears natural but isn't



Early Guidance

Why do we
Mask?

Social Conformity

Protection

Early Guidance

Direct or indirect
messages of what is
'normal'

Told from an early age what
is inappropriate and socially
acceptable

Childhood &
Adolescence



Social Conformity

A way to feel safe in
social environments

Avoids negative
attention, standing out or
being judged

Childhood, Adolescence
& Adulthood

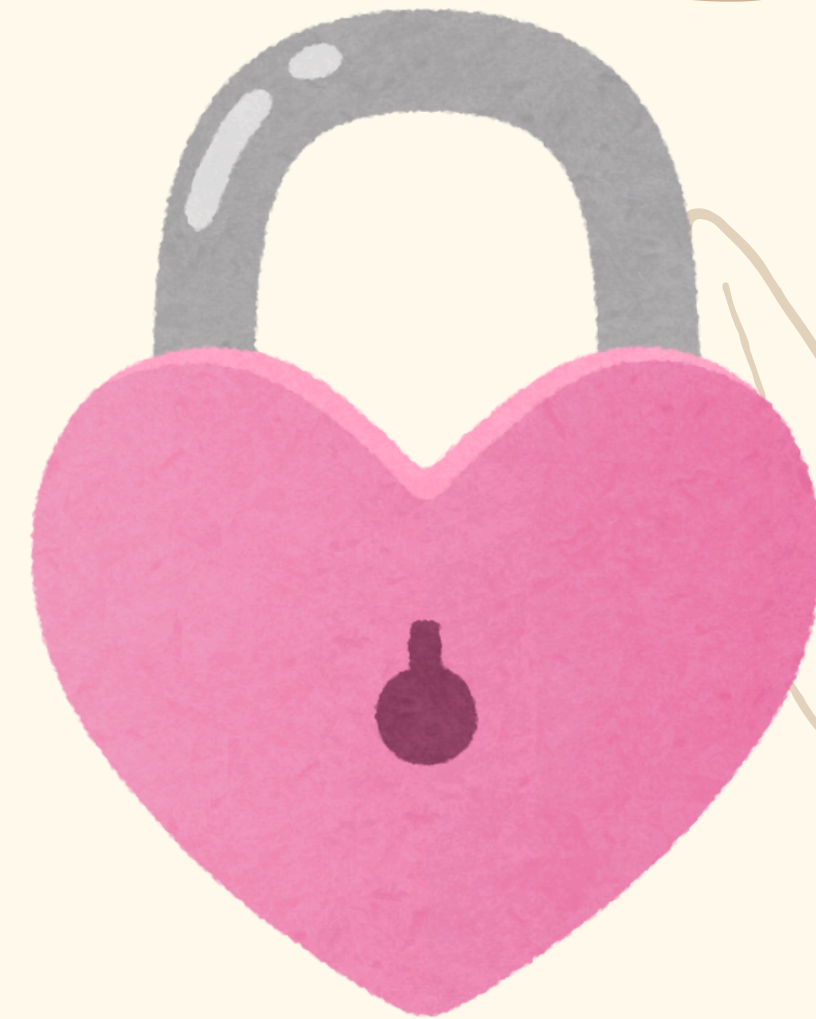


Protection

Protection against
social rejection

Fitting in socially with
peers to maintaining
employment

Childhood, Adolescence
& Adulthood



Emotional Wellbeing

The diagram features a central green oval containing the title 'Impacts of Masking'. Three brown ovals are positioned around it: one above, one to the left, and one to the right, each containing a specific impact. The background is a light beige color with faint, stylized line drawings of plant branches and leaves.

Impacts of Masking

Access to Supports

Identity Loss

Reduced Access to Support

Struggles and support needs get overlooked because societal expectations are being met

Reduced Wellbeing

Ongoing stress and anxiety from constant self-monitoring
Experience emotional exhaustion, frustration and isolation

Identity Loss

Reduced recognition and understanding of personal emotions and needs
Can experience grief over lost sense of identity



Childhood

- Copies interests of other children
- Observing how classmates complete a task
- Display anxiety around social interactions



Adolescence

- Create different 'versions' of themselves for different contexts
- Increased sense of loneliness and lack of genuine connections



Adulthood

- Struggle identifying personal needs
- Experience burnout leading to troubles maintaining responsibilities

Encouragement &
Acceptance

Supports For Masking

Rest & Recovery

Education &
Advocacy

Encouragement &
Acceptance

Creating spaces where differences in
opinions and expression are accepted
and encouraged

Asking
Questions

Mistakes
Are Okay

Non-
Judgement

Rest &
Recovery

Providing flexibility, sensory
accommodations and regulation spaces
to ease pressure

Adequate
Breaks

Respecting
Boundaries

Quiet Times
& Soft Light

Education & Advocacy

Recognising and discussing the signs and impacts of masking, promoting community and self-awareness

Accessing Support

Supporting Others

Policy Changes



Case Examples



Mr. Green & Millie

Supports

- Schedules independent activities during class time, such as reading
- Directly asks Millie if she needs help, rather than waiting for her to reach out

Observations

- Used to spend time playing independently, but now plays with other children quietly
- Becomes less engaged as school day progresses
- Quiet and polite in class, but loud and angry at home



Sarah

Supports

- Learned about neurodiversity and obtained a late-diagnosis
- Set clear boundaries with her boss
- Gives herself time for sensory breaks

Observations

- Carefully and constantly monitors her facial expressions and body language
- Prolonged eye contact makes her uncomfortable, but does it to please boss
- Suppresses behaviours that calm her
- When home she feels overwhelmed and avoids social interaction

Used for short-term acceptance

Creates long-term exhaustion & confusion

Accepting, Safe & Educated Spaces



Thank You!

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