

Masking in Autistic Adults: The Good, Bad & the Ugly

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Learning Objectives

- * To explain how and why masking develops.
- * To describe the pros & cons of masking.
- * To summarize what one should consider before “taking off the mask.”

Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * Masking develops in a social context



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Peer Acceptance & Rejection



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- * Quality vs. quantity
- * Physical attractiveness
- * Socioeconomic, racial/ethnic & disability factors
- * Social competence

Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * *“Hey, Amelia. Your mom said you were sick. So, what happened?”*

- * VS.

- * *“Hey, Amelia. What’s wrong with you?”*



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Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * Peer accepted kids:
- * Good interpretation of body language, tone of voice, etc.
- * Eye contact
- * Explanations for listener understanding (perspective taking)



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Peer Acceptance & Rejection



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- * Peer accepted kids
(continued):
- * Cooperative
- * Learn “social lay of the land”

Peer Acceptance & Rejection



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- * Peer rejected kids:
- * “Me” focused
- * Difficulty with perspective taking
- * Low cooperation/interest in social interaction
- * Shy/anxious or aggressive/poor emotional regulation

What is Masking?

- * A way to make people think more positively about you
- * Disguise self so people do not see the “real you”



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What is Masking?



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- * Impression management – using different personas to manage others' impressions of you
- * Greater self-awareness makes impression management easier

Reasons for Masking

- * *"If I can keep from flipping my lid then people won't think I'm strange."*
- * *"When I'm out in public I'm paranoid of how people will react to me if they see me rocking back and forth. It's like I'm always on high alert...it's SO----O exhausting."*
- * *"[An autistic person who works at a coffee shop thinks to themselves,] 'I hate these constant changes in work schedules. I'm not sure how much longer I can take this. Why can't the owner just stick with the plan? I really need this job so I guess I'll put on a happy face and deal with it.'"*



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Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



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* I received help!

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



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- * 1. People take notice... usually in a good (or neutral) way

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * 2. Provides alternatives to unsuccessful behaviors
- * *“It’s not worth it.”*
- * Masking depletes fuel from “emotional gas tank”
- * Reframing can help



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Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



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3. Masking is a source of survival
in a neurotypical world

Fight – aggressive-like

Flight – fleeing

Fawning – people-pleasing

Freeze – doing nothing

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * 4. Masking enables person to “jump hurdles” to achieve goals



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Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * Learned helplessness (Sedgewick)
 - “Those who feel like they have no control over their situation are more likely to experience helplessness and hopelessness and do nothing to avoid painful experiences.
- * Those who feel they do have control, even if it is in a small way, tend to have better mental health, retain hope about improving things and will be more proactive in going for what they want.”

Helpless Masking

“I have no choice but to mask.”

Capable Masking

“I have a choice of when, where and how to mask.”

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



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- * 5. Masking paves the road to acceptance, but...
- * ... you may encounter social “potholes” along the way...
- * F-R-U-S-T-R-A-T-I-O-N!!

Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

- * 1. Emotional & psychological discomfort



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Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

- * Masking lowers anxiety... but only temporarily
- * “What-ifs”



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Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)



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- * 2. Sacrifice authenticity
- * A price to pay
- * Neurotypicals – conforming to social norms
- * Autistics – avoiding negative consequences
- * Masking takes a lot of “spoons!”

Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

- * 3. Unintentionally perpetuating society’s intolerance of differences / diversity by masking (no blaming the victim here!)



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Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)



- * 4. Lack of recognition of needs and difficulties

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Considerations for Unmasking

- * Who are you without the mask?
- * Self-knowledge is acquired by interacting with people



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Considerations for Unmasking



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- * People don't react to the "real you" when you mask
- * Fewer "puzzle pieces" to piece together who you are

Considerations for Unmasking

- * Rejection vs. opportunity
- * Cost-benefit analysis
- * Think about self differently



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Considerations for Unmasking



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* 1. Comfort & safety

Considerations for Unmasking

- * 2. Emotional well-being
- * Be strategic!
- * Do they seem kind, non-judgmental and trustworthy?



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Considerations for Unmasking



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- * 3. Relationship factors
- * Have more genuine interactions

*  Authenticity  emotional exhaustion

Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic



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- * “What if they don’t believe me?”
- * 1. Be clear and direct
- * Reactions... reactions
- * “Invisible disability”

Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic

- * 2. Explain what it means
- * Stereotypes (e.g., Rain Man)
- * The different “faces” of autism
- * “... *process information differently... unique way of experiencing...*”



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Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic

- * 3. Share how it affects you
- * Typical day-to-day experiences
- * Analogies can be helpful



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Katie's Recommendations – “The Things I'd Go Back & Tell My Younger Self (About Unmasking)”

- “Start when you're ready and go at your own pace.
- Try unmasking with the most kind and understanding people first.
- Be gentle and patient with yourself.
- Remember that everyone won't accept the unmasked you, and that's okay.
- Remember that authenticity is the “endzone” and every time you “cross the goal line” you score mental health points.
- Don't forget that unmasking is a process, not a one-time event.
- When you're ready, show off your authentic, autistic self to the world.”

Two Key Take Aways from Katie

- * 1. It's OK to be the unmasked version of you! :)
- * 2. Be gentle & patient with yourself
- * It's not “all or nothing”



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Thank you! :)



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