



Solihull Parent
Carer Voice

Masking in a SEND World

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What is masking and who masks?



Masking is a strategy used to fit in, or go along with societal expectations or behaviour that most people would think is typical, or to fit within a particular setting. This usually involves hiding your true feelings, behaviours, qualities or identity.

It is frequently used by people who feel that their true character may be disapproved of or misunderstood by those around them. Masking is a strategy used to cope in situations when a person feels uncomfortable or that they don't fit in, that they are different and may not belong. Masking can take many forms such as mimicking social behaviours and hiding emotions.

Everyone masks at times, however it is often associated with people who have neurodivergent conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and those with mental health conditions, it can also be relevant to anyone who feels the need to hide parts of themselves in certain situations.

For example, an adult may often hide their true feelings to avoid standing out at work or in social situations. A child or young person may hide their feelings at school, an autistic person might mask by stopping or hiding their natural behaviours or by mimicking the behaviours and actions of others to avoid standing out or to meet expectations, even if this causes significant stress or exhaustion.

At its heart, masking is an attempt to hide or suppress aspects of a person's personality or identity (their character).

Usually a learned behaviour, masking often begins as a way to manage or control social interactions, or to navigate through situations where the person might otherwise feel misunderstood or vulnerable.

Avoiding attention, particularly negative attention, bullying or exclusion, can be achieved through masking. Masking can be seen as a skill necessary to succeed in social, educational or professional settings where all too often conformity is valued and difference is seen as a disadvantage.



“ A person sits behind the mask that the world sees. ”

Why can masking be harmful?

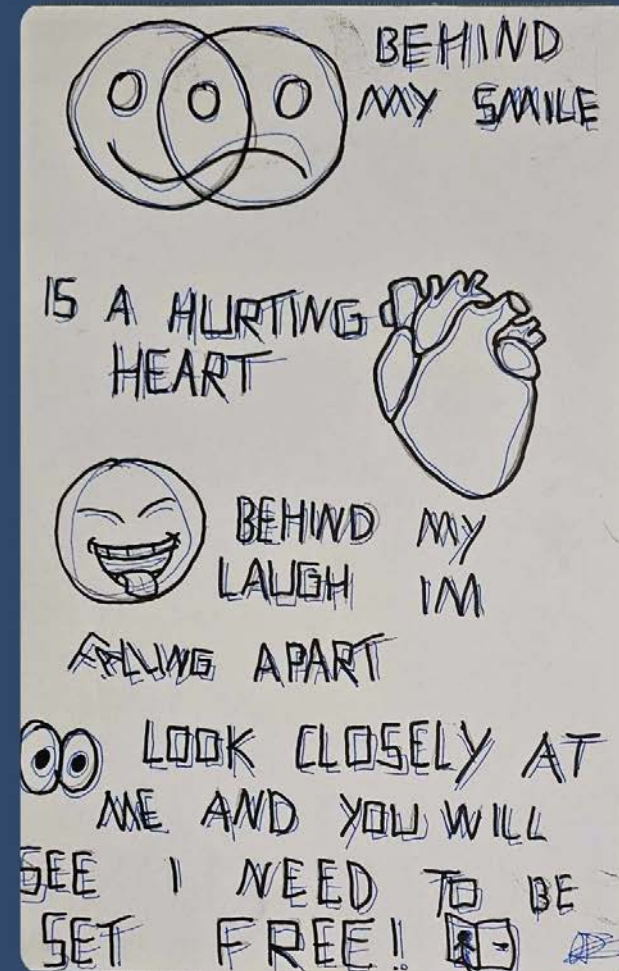
Whilst masking can be an adaptive response in situations where people feel that they must conform to fit in socially or in school or the workplace, it can be deeply harmful over time.

The long-term effects of masking are very complex and extend across emotional, psychological and social areas.

One of the main reasons why masking can be harmful, is the emotional strain that it can have on people. Masking takes a continuous effort to suppress true thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This constant monitoring of behaviour, actions and speech uses a huge amount of energy, often leading to exhaustion. For neurodivergent people, masking involves carefully monitoring and changing behaviour to match societal expectations, even if these behaviours feel unnatural or uncomfortable.

The cumulative effect of this is exhaustion, especially for those who mask for long periods of time in settings that are particularly taxing or demanding (such as school, college or the workplace.) Over time, this exhaustion can wear down a person's mental and emotional resilience and lead to increased anxiety and stress.

The longer the person masks, the more stressed they become, and this can contribute to the development of anxiety disorders and/or depression, which may then further reinforce their need for masking. While masking can help people to cope in particular situations, and in some circumstances, for short periods helpful, (such as in job interviews etc), the long-term effects of masking can be enormous.



Masking can be a factor in the development or worsening of some mental health difficulties, the emotional toll of constantly hiding your true thoughts and feelings can add to depression. As depression often comes from a lack of connection to yourself or from feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Masking can also significantly increase anxiety, especially in social situations. The constant need to monitor and change behaviour to fit in, mixed with the fear of being 'found out' and constant pressure to conform and fit-in, may often lead to increased levels of stress which can lead to panic attacks, other anxiety disorders or burnout.

Masking encourages people to view themselves through the lens of other people, or societies expectations, which often involve hiding parts of their character. Over time, people who mask focus so much on masking to fit in, rather than on understanding who they are and being themselves and therefore can lose their feelings of self-worth and their self-identity.

For example, an autistic person may mask by copying social behaviours, such as making eye contact or engaging in small talk, even though these behaviours may be uncomfortable or unnatural to them. Over time, this can lead to the belief that their true self is wrong or, because it doesn't match with what others may think are typical or normal behaviours. The result of this can often be a disconnect between the person's internal identity and their external behaviour. The longer a person masks, the more difficult it becomes for them to tell the difference between their true self and the mask they create to meet expectations.

“
No-one likes me unless
I am wearing my mask
”

“
I find wearing a mask is so
exhausting. Pretending to be a
person that I am not is more tiring
than anything else I do in life. I wish
I felt safe enough to just be me.
”

This disconnection can lead to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and guilt, with people often coming to believe that they and their natural traits or qualities are undesirable or unworthy. This can lead to poor self-esteem and emotional well-being difficulties.

Whilst masking may, at first, help people to fit into social or academic settings, it can ultimately lead to social isolation. The more someone masks, the more difficult it becomes to build true relationships and then the more the person masks, becoming a cycle where a person feels they have to hide parts of themselves. This can make it really hard to build strong and lasting relationships. People can often appear to have functioning friendships, but they frequently lack depth or true emotional connection.

Effective communication relies on non-verbal and verbal cues to express thoughts and feelings. When someone is masking, they can struggle to communicate their true needs, thoughts, and feelings. This can lead to misunderstandings and indeed frustration and conflict in relationships. People who mask may also not express their discomfort in situations- their desire to fit in and conform, overriding their ability to speak about the things that make them uncomfortable or that they find difficult.

Masking can also lead to the incorrect assumption that a person functions well and does not experience any problems, which can lead to a lack of support.

It is important to recognise that for many, masking is not always a conscious decision. It often becomes a habit ingrained over many years of trying to navigate the world- particularly for neurodivergent people trying to navigate a world designed for neurotypical people.

Masking is not inherently negative, but it highlights the need for more inclusive, accepting environments where people can express themselves freely without fear of judgment. By understanding and acknowledging the effects of masking and embracing authenticity through creating environments that encourage and welcome self-expression and acceptance we can create a society that fosters people's well-being and promotes inclusion.

What are some of the signs of masking?



Recognising the signs of masking is very important in understanding the hidden struggles that people face and offering them the support that they need. It can be very difficult to spot that a person is masking, by its nature, people who mask may go to significant lengths to mimic behaviour and hide their own character and identity, ensuring that they act 'appropriately' in any given situation.

Those who mask often pay close attention to social cues such as facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and eye contact and imitate the behaviours that they see, even when the behaviours don't come naturally to them. This can be seen in forced eye-contact during conversations, fake smiles, copying tone of voice, or attempting to engage in small talk, despite these making the person feel uncomfortable, and often increasing stress and anxiety.

People who mask, also often overanalyse social interactions, questioning whether they did or said the 'right' thing, made the 'right' impression, or acted in an acceptable way. This can be seen as hyper-vigilance.

Those who mask often suppress or hide their true emotions and needs. They may therefore avoid showing emotions such as frustration, sadness, anger or even joy. In situations where they feel uncomfortable, they will suppress emotions and may hold back tears or laughter- an attempt to feel in control.

People who mask may try to hide behaviours that they feel aren't socially acceptable such as hand-flapping, rocking, fidgeting or vocalisations. They may instead clasp at their hands or the edge of their clothes to prevent them from flapping or fidgeting, they may clear their throat or tighten their jaw to prevent vocalisations.

The fatigue from masking can often be seen as withdrawal from situations- the need to retreat and have time alone, this can enable people to process what has been happening and their thoughts and feelings, as well as to recharge and recover from exhaustion.

People pleasing behaviours are also very common in those who mask- this can often be seen as people going out of their way to make others happy and to avoid disappointing them. People may agree to activities and commitments that they would prefer to decline. Difficulties in saying no, avoiding conversations and answering questions in ways to exit conversation as quickly as possible are also often signs of masking. For instance, children that say they are fine, or that they understand what they have to do, very rarely ask for help, or say they don't understand or are upset/angry etc.

People may also mask sensory difficulties, for instance for people who struggle with noise, instead of asking for sounds to be reduced or wearing ear defenders, they may wear headphones and be reluctant to remove them, they may turn away from noise or wince. Some people may create their own noises- noises they are in control of to hide the noises they are struggling with.

Masking and ADHD

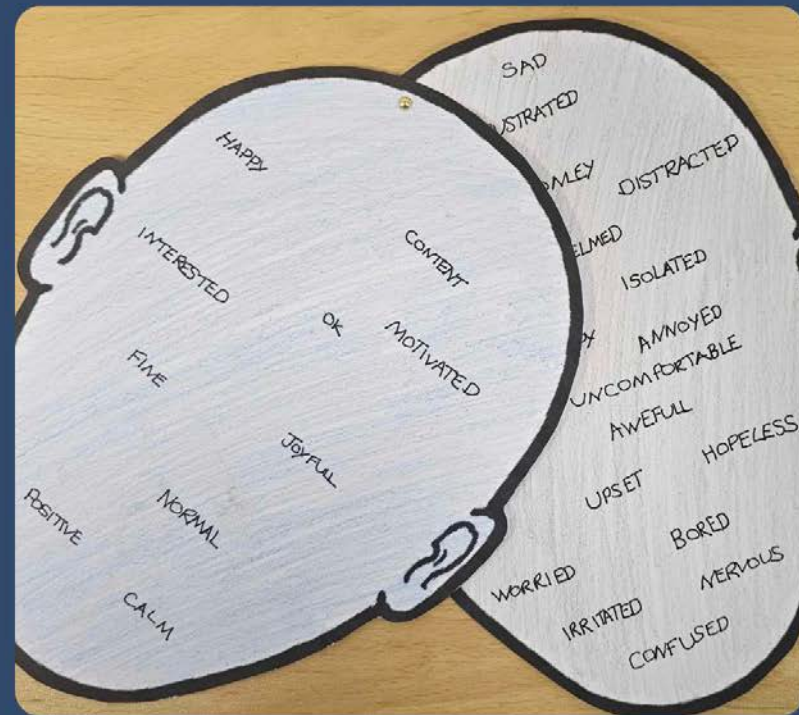
In the context of ADHD, masking often involves trying to compensate or make up for the characteristic symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. This includes consciously controlling actions such as fidgeting, suppressing, or trying to hide the urge to interrupt, focusing intensely to avoid distractions and conforming to social norms.

For people with ADHD, like for autistic people, masking is a way to attempt to fit in, and to avoid stigma and discrimination.

Research historically has focused mainly on autistic people, however in recent years research has been carried out regarding masking and ADHD.

89% of people with ADHD expect discrimination based on their diagnosis and therefore mask their symptoms. (Dorianne Green MD)

ADHD masking is often not accepted. Indeed in 2015, Russell Barkley said that the lack of research on ADHD masking is due to the fact that it is a difficult concept for those without ADHD to understand, so they may find it hard to believe.

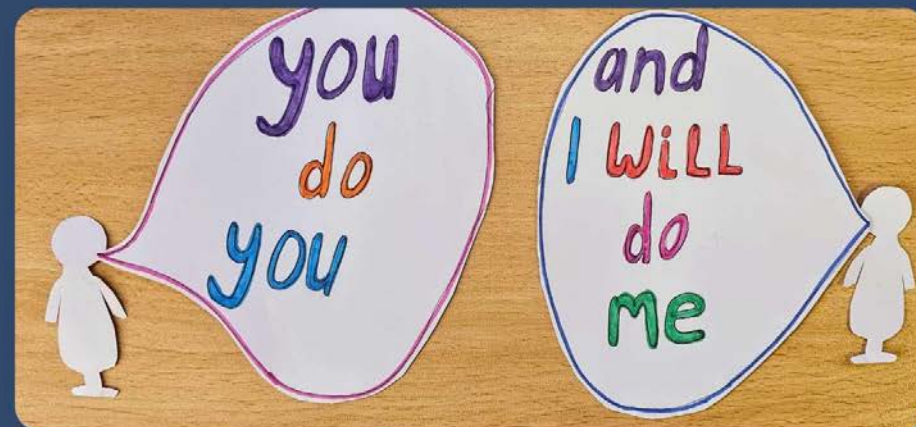
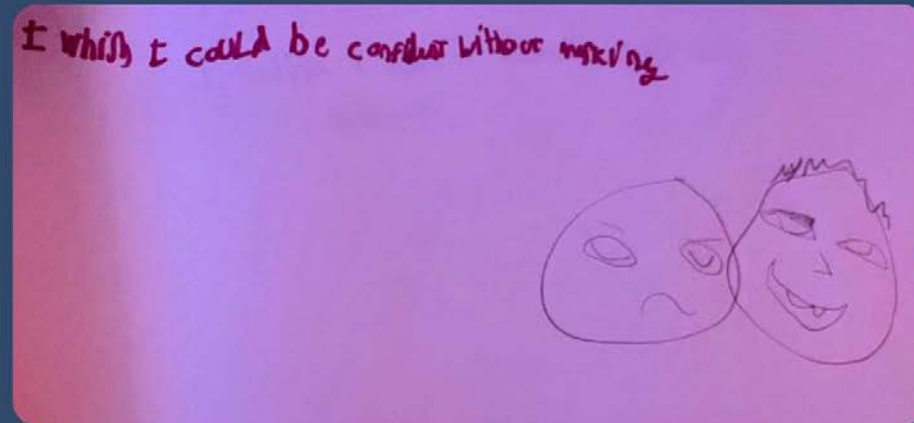


Masking and ADHD

For example, a person with ADHD may mask by making excessive efforts to appear focused or organised, compensating for their struggles with distraction or concentration. They may struggle with other tasks such as keeping track of time, remembering details, or staying on task.

A person with ADHD may feel that they have to hide their impulsivity and distractibility when they are in social settings. This can lead to them disengaging from conversations around them, trying to suppress their natural tendency to interrupt, or to avoid sharing personal stories and anecdotes which may reveal their difficulties focussing.

To the outside eye, the person may appear calm and in control, however internally they are expending a huge amount of energy. The fear of slipping up and revealing their 'true' character, can cause significant stress.



Masking and Autism

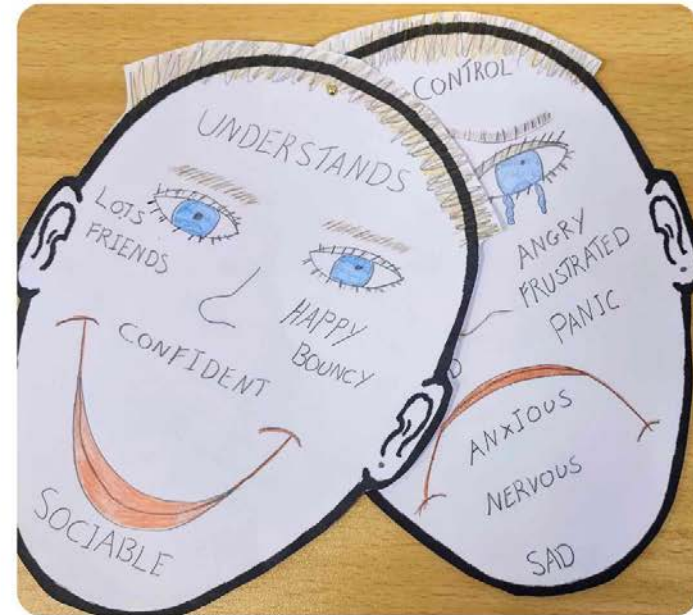
Masking is commonly associated with autistic people, many autistic people mask to blend in, avoid social rejection and conform.

Autism is associated with challenges with social communication, including difficulties in understanding nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Autistic people may mask their discomfort by pretending to understand the cues they are missing, and by mimicking and following others' lead.

Autistic people may mask to 'fit in' and conform, however they often also mask to avoid stigma, discrimination, and negative social consequences.

In a 2019 study (Cage & Troxwell-Whitman) 70% of autistic adults reported that they consistently camouflage (mask). Masking has also been suggested as an explanation for the missed or late diagnosis of women with autism (Gould and Ashton-Smith 2011, Lai et al. 2015)

Masking for autistic people is also linked with poorer mental health outcomes and with the increased risk of suicide within autistic communities (Cassidy et al. 2019)

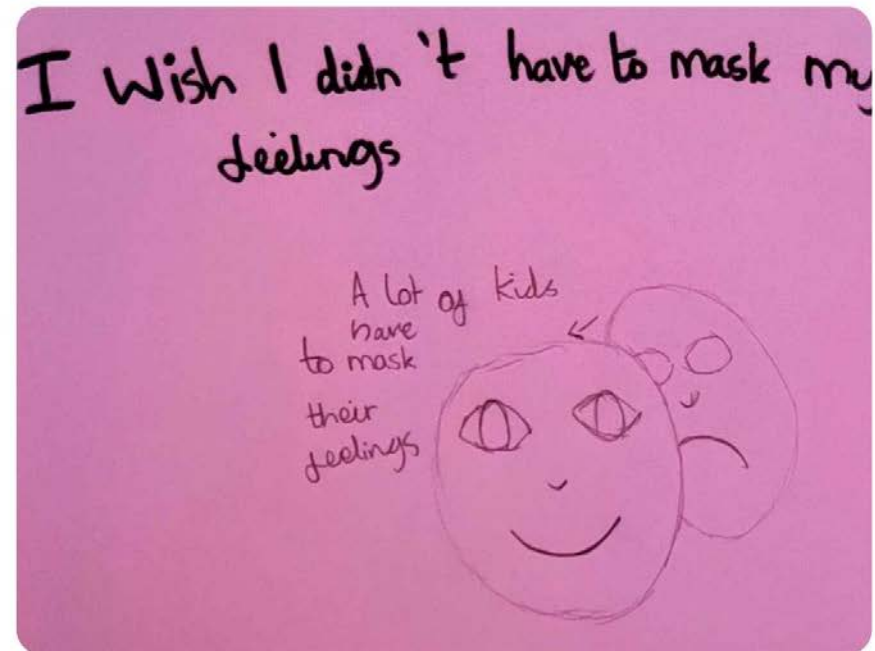


Masking and Autism

For instance, an autistic person may feel the need to mask and hide behaviours like stimming, flapping, spinning, rocking, fidgeting and vocalisations that help them cope, to do this uses a huge amount of energy and focus as these actions are natural and automatic responses and to the person are as natural as breathing. Stopping or hiding these behaviours and actions can lead to the person becoming stressed and dysregulated and eventually to burnout.

An autistic person might struggle to make deep connections and relationships, as they may feel unable to express themselves in a way that others can fully understand or appreciate. Over time, this lack of genuine connections and relationships can lead to social isolation.

The emotional toll of masking is exacerbated by the need to conform to both spoken and unspoken social rules, such as making eye contact, engaging in small talk, managing emotional expressions- that often make no sense to the person and they may feel overwhelming.



What can you do to support someone who masks?

Helping and supporting someone who masks begins with understanding. Understanding what masking is and isn't and understanding that whilst it may appear to people that the person masking doesn't need help and support, they actually do.

It also requires the understanding and acceptance that talking with the person about masking may be difficult- it is very difficult for someone to admit that they are masking, and to take off the mask and talk about masking and why they do it- remember they are often masking to conform, fit in, people please and avoid stigma. Be gentle in how you approach communication about it. Offer multiple ways to communicate- talking, writing, drawing etc. And know the boundaries when communicating. Listen without judgement.

Understand the impact that masking can have- emotionally, socially, and physically.

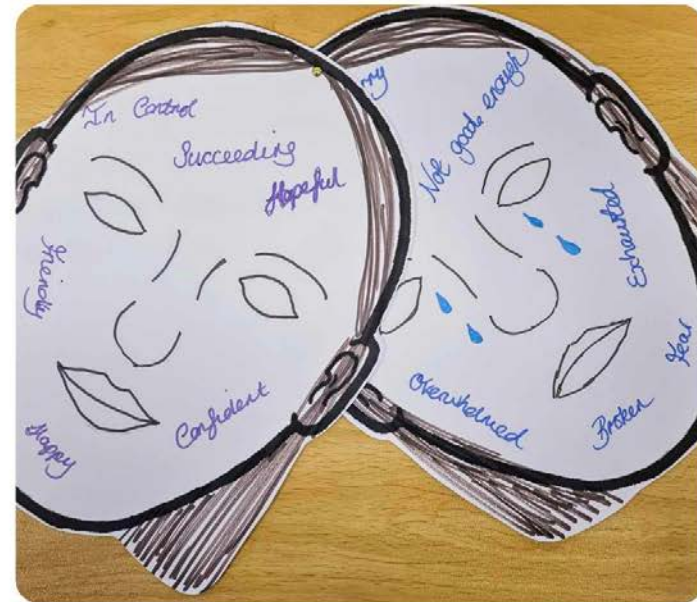
Make it clear that the person masking is not alone- that there are very many people who mask.

Explain that it is ok to take off their mask- that you will accept them for who they are. Let them know it's okay to say no, it's okay to ask for help, it's okay to talk and most importantly, it's okay to be themselves.



Quotes and Messages

"I feel it is important to note that everyone's experience is different, and everyone will mask for different reasons and have different signs etc. Acceptance has been the key for me to move forward with my journey on finding myself. For me I masked in order to fit in and get by. I subconsciously masked throughout my life to make friends and for people to view me as "normal." I've always knew that my brain wasn't quite the same as everyone else even from a young age however I just thought I was "weird". I struggle to cope with sensory input such as loud noises, crowds and get overstimulated quite quickly. Masking is a way for me to be perceived as neurotypical however it represses my true emotions, behaviours, personality, and feelings. This can then lead to me burning out once home in my safe space and having to isolate myself and stay in bed for at least a day. I think for me from a young age knowing I was different and a "weirdo" as people would call me it made me self-conscious and all throughout my life, I was told I was quiet, awkward, shy and other things I perceived as negative so I would mask in order to hide away and try to get people to like me. At my age now (19) I have realised people didn't like me for me and they liked me for this fake persona I had put on. I am now learning to accept myself for who I am and trying to unmask myself. I now understand that if people aren't going to accept me and love me for who I am then I don't want them in my life anyway.



Quotes and Messages

From young I mirrored behaviours and interests. I never really had my own interests and just “liked” things that were trendy at the time in order to fit in.

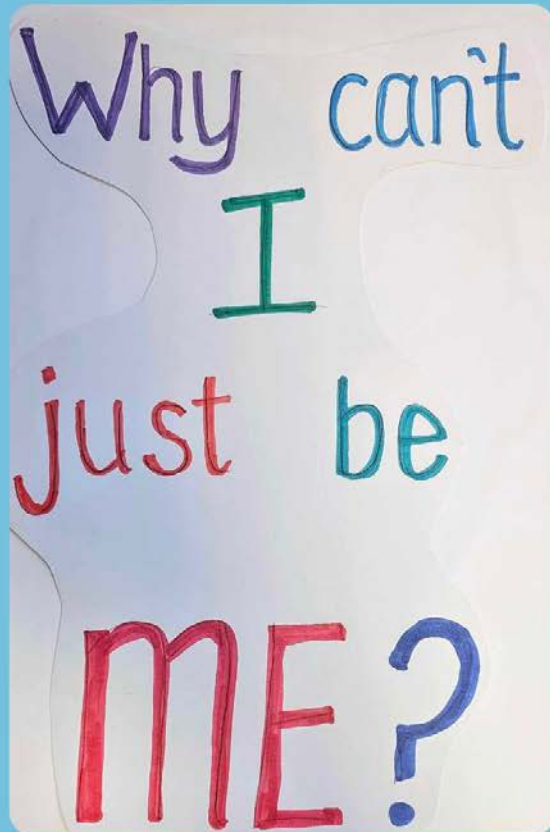
I also zone out a lot and people have described me as being “in my own world” in which I just have a blank stare and don’t have much facial expression. Not having the ability to put in boundaries and say no. I often say yes, or I don’t know when masking in order to get people to stop speaking to me.

Draining. Honestly, masking is the most overwhelming, draining thing. It’s like a constant battle within your brain. When I am masking I don’t even realise that I’m doing it most of the time I just get on with my day and then when I get home to my safe space that’s when all of the emotions hit me. When I get home and into my room it’s almost like it all hits me at once and punches me in the chest.

Masking helped me in the short term as it prevented bullying and helped me make friends in primary and secondary school however, I have now realised that these friends aren’t real friends and I can’t be myself around them so now I am making friends who accept me for the true me. The issue is I don’t know who the true me is anymore. I have masked since such a young age that it feels like my whole life, I haven’t been myself. How can I unmask when I don’t know who I am without my mask. It’s like me and the mask are one. My mask has always been a shield and unmasking is like ripping away my safety shield. I am getting there though, and masking can help in order to do things such as shopping or things that are necessary but it’s nice to be able to be myself more now.”

Solihull Young Person.

Quotes and Messages



"I am an autistic adult, I was diagnosed several years ago in my late 30's. I remember spending my whole life until that point, wondering why I was different, why I didn't fit in. I tried so hard to fit in, depleting all my energy. I put so much effort into trying to fit in, trying to conform and please others that I had no energy left for my schoolwork, or when I entered employment, for my work.

I remember in infant school, on Friday's the Headteacher at my school, had groups of children in her office and she used to randomly ask us questions about what we had learned that week, or things she thought we should know about the world around us. Those Friday's terrified me so much, I wanted to please and get the answers correct, but the pressure exceeded my ability to mask. So much so that I began to self-harm. Obviously at the time I didn't know that was what I was doing, but I would crawl around the playground at lunchtime, desperately hoping to cut my legs open badly enough to be sent home.

Over the years at school and in employment I could list many examples of masking, of trying desperately to fit in, to make (and keep) friends, to understand what was going on around me. It never worked for long though and was so utterly exhausting. I have struggled with anxiety, depression, claustrophobia, and agoraphobia for many years. It was only when my children were diagnosed with autism and ADHD that I recognised that both of those diagnoses also fit me.

Quotes and Messages

I now have a formal diagnosis of autism, and whilst I haven't sat on the waiting list for years for an ADHD assessment, I clearly have ADHD as well. I now can look back on my life so far and understand why things happened, why I felt different - because I am! It's not just me being weird!

I now try not to mask as much, there are times when I do. There are very many times when I still do not feel comfortable to be myself, I worry I won't be accepted. I worry about the impact on my career. Sometimes I have to mask my difficulties in order to support my children. I still self-harm, but not as much as I used to.

I wish society better understood, and better accepted people with autism and ADHD. I would really like schools to have a better grasp of differences, and for those differences to be normalised. For schools to be set up to meet the needs of children and young people, without them having to mask who they are. The difference this would make to people's lives is enormous. To grow up feeling accepted for who you are, should be a basic right for all people."

Solihull Autistic Adult and parent.



Quotes and Messages

"I feel free when I am not wearing the mask. I can just be me."

"It takes me ages to recover from wearing a mask."

"I am so tired of always pretending to be someone else."

"Wearing a mask means that people think I am 'normal'."

"Wearing a mask is like having a shield around me. It means that I can go to school and out with my friends without them looking at me like I am weird. I already know I am different to the other kids in my class. I want to not have to have this shield. It's heavy and it is so tiring carrying it around me."

"I want to be accepted for just being ME!"





**Solihull Parent
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