

AUTISM FOUNDATIONS · 2.5

Autistic Masking: What It Is and Why It Burns You Out

Masking is the conscious or learned suppression of autistic traits to fit in. It is widespread, particularly in women and late-diagnosed adults, and a meaningful contributor to burnout, anxiety and depression.

FOR

Adults investigating autism

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Autistic Masking: What It Is and Why It Burns You Out

What masking is

- **Suppressing autistic features to fit in.** Forcing eye contact, sitting still when the body wants to stim, suppressing facial expression, holding in distress at sensory overload. By adulthood this is often automatic rather than chosen.
- **Compensating with conscious strategies.** Scripting greetings, rehearsing small talk, copying others' behaviour, pre-planning interactions in detail. Significant cognitive effort that other people rarely see.
- **Assimilating: agreeing, performing, fitting in.** Avoiding topics of interest, agreeing with views you do not hold, performing enthusiasm you do not feel. The cumulative cost is high over years.

What it looks like and what it costs

- **Coping in public, collapsing at home.** A common pattern. Children often hold it together at school and let it out as soon as they get home. Adults often manage at work and collapse on the sofa. That after-the-day exhaustion is the cost of the masking rather than a personal failure.
- **Higher rates of depression, anxiety and burnout.** The research is consistent. Higher levels of masking are associated with worse mental health, including higher suicide risk in some studies.
- **Particularly common in women and late-diagnosed adults.** The version a clinician sees in the appointment often looks fluent. The difficulty at home is significant. This is one of the main reasons autism is missed in women.
- **Masking is not consent.** For most autistic people who mask, the alternative felt like exclusion or unsafety. The strategy was learned because the cost of not using it was higher.

How we can help

- **Bring the home picture, not just the work one.** A short appointment usually sees the polished version. Our assessments ask about how you function at home, how depleted you are by the end of the week, and specific examples of where masking has come at a cost.
- **Reduce the load that has been masked.** Sensory adjustments, predictable routines, low-demand spaces. Masking becomes less necessary when the underlying environmental load is lower.
- **Treat masking and mental health together.** Where anxiety or depression is also present, treating only the mood symptom without addressing masking tends to disappoint. Both need a place in the plan.
- **Connection with autistic peers helps.** Spaces where you do not have to mask reset the system in a way that individual non-autistic therapy alone often does not.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if masking-related exhaustion, anxiety, depression or burnout are meaningfully affecting your daily life. NeuroFX offers private autism assessment for adults from our Bedford clinic. Seek same-day help via 111 (or 999 in an emergency) for any mental health crisis, including thoughts of self-harm.

SOURCES

Hull et al. 2017 (JADD); Cage & Troxell-Whitman 2019 (JADD); Cassidy et al. 2018 (Mol Autism); Lai et al. 2017 (Autism); NICE CG142

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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