

Internal presentation - Masking



BBC



What are the Negatives of Social Camouflaging?

- ▶ There are many negatives to autistic masking and social camouflaging. For one, it can create a lot of tension between friends and family members who don't understand.
- ▶ This can be especially difficult when the person is in a vulnerable state because they may not know how to express themselves or respond appropriately to events.
- ▶ This can lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings that could have been avoided. As mentioned before, this can also make it more difficult for an neurodiverse person to connect with others.
- ▶ Additionally, as a result of these barriers, there might be an increased risk for depression and anxiety disorders because individuals are unable to express themselves or ask for help when needed.



Why are children missed or overlooked?



- ▶ Many 'maskers' appear to construct social connections based on analytical thinking (rather than intuitive socio-emotional understanding).
- ▶ They often generate 'learned' responses and behaviours
- ▶ They follow guidance observed from others
- ▶ These can be - rote-learning conversational phrases, imitating social behaviours (maybe from the TV), use of 'social scripts', 'masking' or 'camouflaging' their innate presentation



What masking Isn't!

It is **NOT** in any way another personality. In other words, the mask doesn't cover up a robot underneath or something like that (as the stock image would imply), and it's not meant to cover up malicious intent or hidden danger.

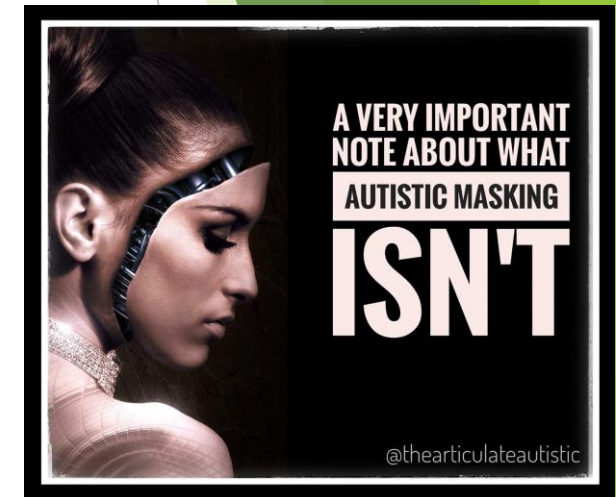
It is worn so that our social differences don't stand out as much and DETRACT from what's on the inside, who we truly are.

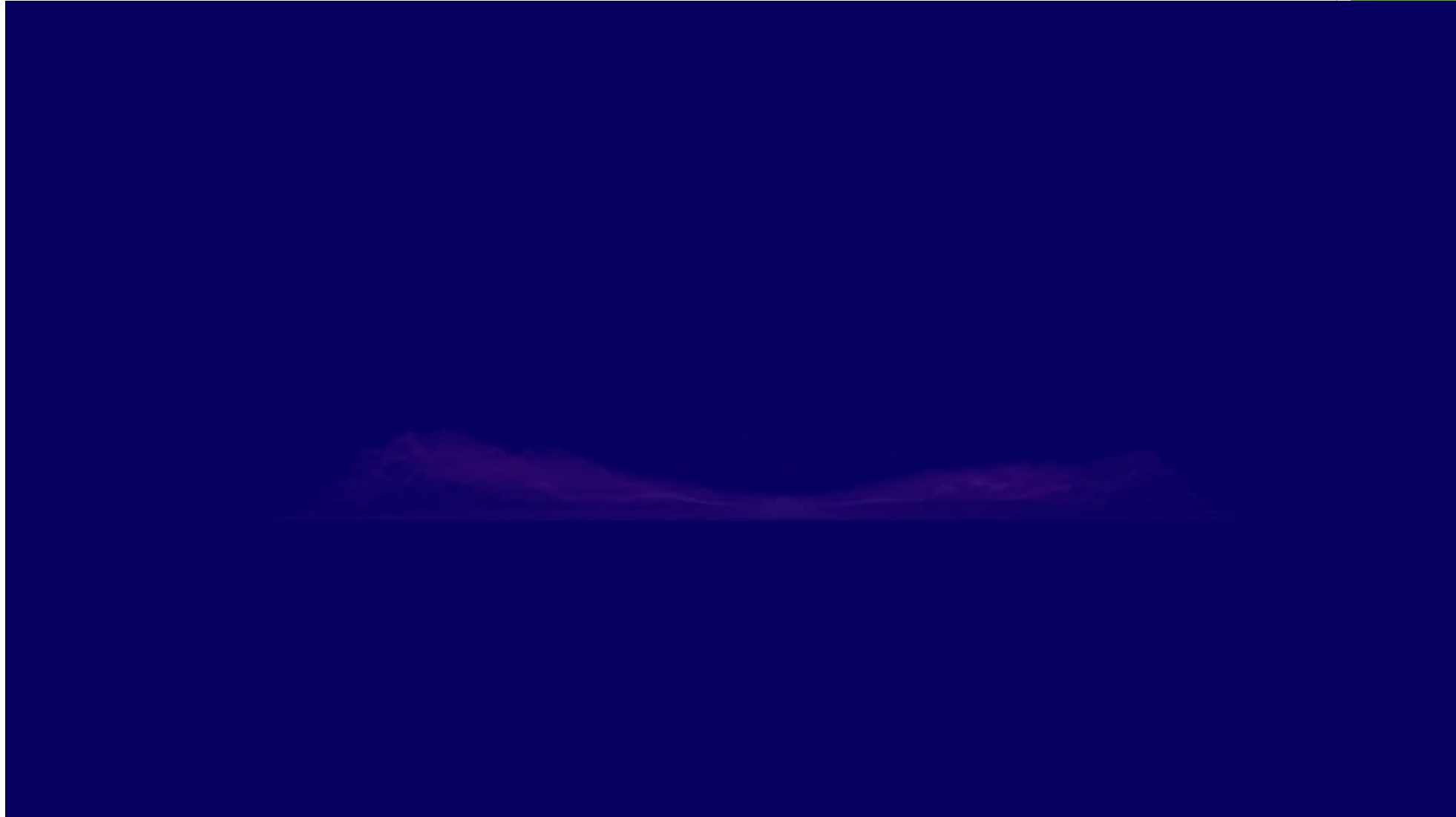
We are always us. The heart, mind, and soul is always the same, masking or not. Our values, our core beliefs, our likes and dislikes, etc., that doesn't change.

The mask just makes it safe for us to blend into an NT world, so we don't have to spend the entirety of our lives in fear.

When we drop the mask, we don't think, "Haha! Gotcha, you fool!" We think, "This person is safe. I don't have to force my face into a smile, I can let my eyes glaze over comfortably, I can stop stifling my stimming and stop policing my tone of voice, etc., so I can have some energy to spend with my loved one."

We are still the same person, always, mask or no mask. But society as a whole is not ready for our "facial deformity", so the mask is what we use for now, until, of course, we are safe with our most trusted friends and loved ones. ❤️





An internal presentation

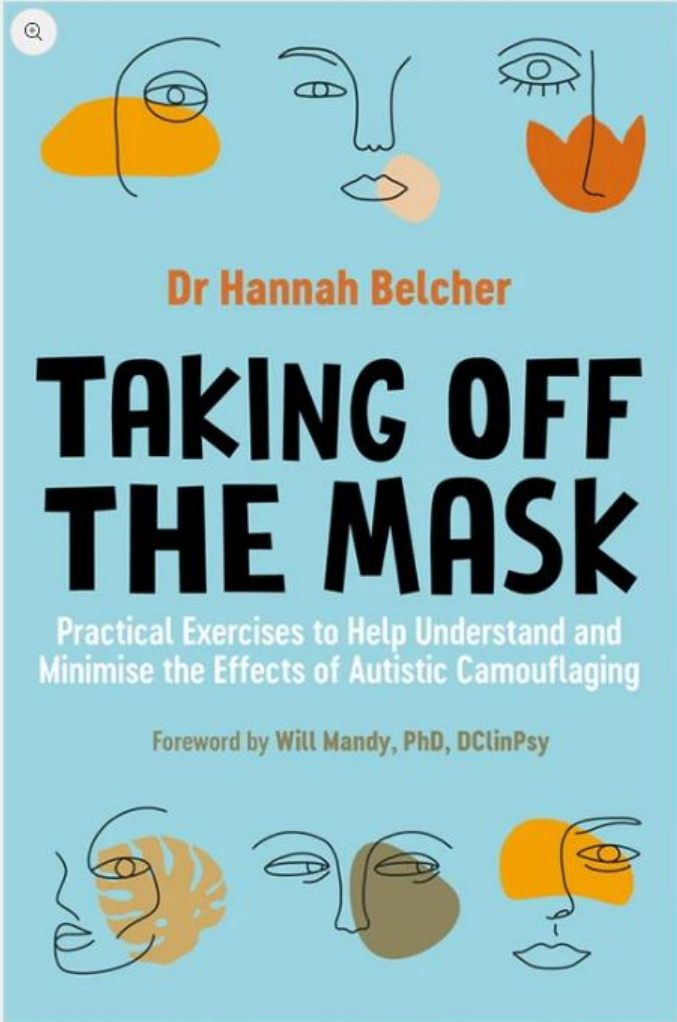
Girls aren't diagnosed later because there is a female phenotype of autism (there isn't), they are missed for complex reasons the largest of which are masking and presenting internally.

When we talk about an external presentation of autism, we mean one that is probably more recognisable to the majority of people where the person behaves in a way which is visibly different to their non-autistic peers (boys do this a lot).

They might stim (move, perform an action or make a noise in a repetitive way) by rocking or flapping their hands, they might be non- or minimally-speaking, they might exhibit distressed behaviour.

As a generalisation, children don't tend to present that way as much (but some do and if they do, they are probably diagnosed earlier), are less socially excluded but still face social exclusion or exclude themselves





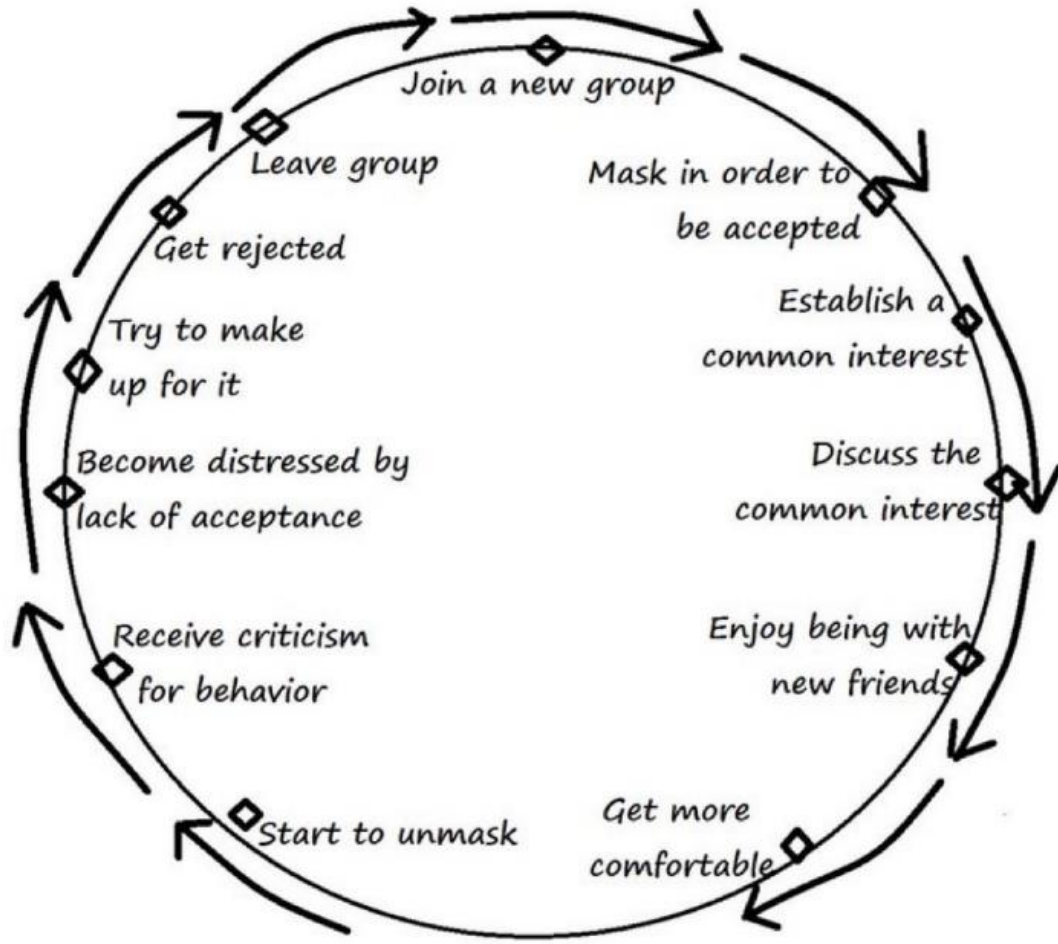
"Taking Off the Mask" includes personal stories and experiences from neurodiverse individuals, providing a deeply personal and authentic perspective.

These narratives help readers understand the diverse ways in which masking manifests and its impact on daily life.

Gender Differences: The book explores how societal expectations influence masking behaviours differently in males and females.

While it focuses on women, it also sheds light on how boys and men experience and manage masking.

The Autistic Vicious Social Circle:



A Vicious Social Cycle

Negative thoughts impose themselves automatically, without someone being consciously aware of their core beliefs or schemas. The occurrence of negative thoughts increases more and more and is often accompanied by an increase in depressed mood and other negative feelings. As the sadness grows, negative thoughts become more common, more intense and increasingly credible.

Immie describes her Internal Presentation of Autism in 4 mins



Communication & Interaction - what should we do?

- Avoid assumptions
- Allow processing time (listen/respond/watch)
- Listen and seek to understand family perspective
- Teach/explain the social use of language e.g. articulation, intonation, semantics, when meaning shifts according to context.
- Teach/explain non-verbal communication.
- Teach/rehearse how to start, maintain and end a conversation and how to judge a listener's reaction (to make informed choices)



In general terms how do maskers manage?

Observation of others and contexts, categorising of behaviours/common social scripts (mimicking behaviours and speech patterns, memorise info about others)

Often **on the periphery** – looking in, planning reactions based on the behaviours of others (e.g. tutting, laughing, ‘who’ to talk to . . .)

Over-reliance on **rules and literal interpretation** of instructions (compliance)

‘Quietness’ – may **not want to gain any attention** that then requires a (social) response

‘**Friends**’ are often **younger** or of a **different ability** (fewer social demands)



But is all masking bad?



What effect can masking have?

- Stress and anxiety.
- Depression.
- Exhaustion.
- Delayed identification of autism.
- Loss of identity.
- Risk of autistic burnout.
- Increased risk of suicidal thoughts.



How to help,

Address & support the root of the anxiety – be aware of those things that may cause anxiety and stress.

The first step is becoming an advocate and then supporting a neurodiverse person to be accepting of all the emotions they are feeling, as well as their more visible characteristics.

They may not feel comfortable expressing their true feelings, so it's important that you don't push them to do so.



Key strategies

1. Develop Your Own School Understanding of Neurodiversity / Autism

- ▶ As education professionals, developing your own understanding of autism and what it means to be autistic (including awareness of the fact that children may mask their needs), will help you to work towards these aims.

2. Promote an Inclusive Whole-School Culture

- ▶ For children to be less likely to mask, they need to feel that their autistic identities are respected and supported. **Rather than expecting autistic people to change to ‘fit in’ to the environment, the environment needs to be changed to support neurodiversity.**



Key strategies

3. Provide Individualised Support

- ▶ Your support of children and young people with SEND should always be driven by their actual strengths and needs, and in line with the **Graduated Approach**. By making adjustments to effectively support individuals' differences, the impetus to mask should lessen.

4. Listen to Parents and Carers

- ▶ Parents are the experts on their own children. However, parents of autistic children who mask often **report** feeling unheard, shut down, or even judged as a bad parent when they report a picture of their child that is different to the one seen in school.
- ▶ Many neurodiverse children will present differently at home. This is often due to feeling safe, that they can fully be their true self at home, as well as experiencing less pressure to mask. (For example, they may stim more than at school because they don't fear judgement).



Autistic Masking at School



What you may see in class.



Key strategies

Structure the unstructured & try:

- Seating plans
- Visual timetables/ schedules (personalised if appropriate)
- Structure break and lunch times, after school time that is “free time”.
- Have clubs (different ones!) where autistic children can spend time/ share their interests
- Time to be with others who also have neurodiverse differences (if they choose)



Specific support

- ▶ Share an understanding of the **presentation of masking** on the Autistic Spectrum
- ▶ **Identify possible anxiety raising** and/or **mental health issues** in relation to the impact of social communication differences
- ▶ **Work closely with** families to generalise social understanding across different contexts
- ▶ Build the **individual's understanding** of their own profile of strengths & challenges, including how to manage sensory sensitivities and anxieties
- ▶ Provide **extra-curricular** support for special interests and introduce a **social language programmes** to navigate social rules & use peer mentoring schemes
- ▶ **PSHE focus** – specific SRE, privacy awareness, e-safety, grooming. Address self-image, self-esteem, assertiveness, confidence, gender identity
- ▶ Develop **vocational** interests and **leisure activities**
- ▶ **Careers information** – support to see the ‘bigger picture’ re career pathway options



Packham meets Flo



The very latest research - Jan 2024

It's not always masking

Parents often report the after-school meltdown. Children either come home extremely volatile and emotional or become quiet and withdrawn, why does this happen?

Firstly, the social behaviour and expectations of children are far greater at school than they are at home. Children have to use a lot of energy and resources to pay attention, follow directions, sit still, retain information, manage friendships and please their teacher - the list goes on and on. When it comes to time to head home it can be challenging for children to conjure up the same number of resources required to keep it together.



The very latest research - Jan 2024

It's not always masking

Secondly, they've had to manage all this without their comfort person their primary attachment figures their parents their caregiver and this means that once school is finished, they may feel exhausted from spending six to seven hours dealing with some pretty tough stuff on their own.

Thirdly they feel like they can meltdown at home with their caregivers because they're in their comfort zone where they know that they're safe supported and loved no matter how big the meltdown they know that their special big person will be there to help them pick up the pieces.



The screenshot shows the CPD Certified website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with categories like 'Improvement & Inspections', 'Governance', 'Teaching', 'Assessments', 'SEN Primary Curriculum', 'SEN Secondary Curriculum', 'Safeguarding', 'Online Safety', 'SEM', 'Climate Education', 'SEND by Type', 'Admin & Finance', 'Staff & Recruitment', and 'Health & Safety'. A search bar is located in the top right. The main content area is for a webinar titled 'Understanding and Supporting Autistic Girls' by Nicola Whitcombe, a Specialist Practitioner, SENCO and deputy head. The webinar is 45 minutes long and has 5 reviews. The description states: 'This webinar will provide you with expert insight into autism spectrum disorder (also called ASD and autism) in girls, with guidance on how to recognise the characteristics and 'masking' behaviours which are more common in girls, and the steps you can take to support them.' There are buttons for 'START LEARNING' and 'TO WATCHLIST'. The CPD Certified logo is in the bottom right corner.

And finally....

Social development:

- ▶ Offer partner work - to model behaviours
- ▶ Use video, role play, use of social scripts to show 'how to' behave appropriately
- ▶ Provide structure for social times
- ▶ Encourage and model reciprocity

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