

Autism and Masking/Fawning Fact Sheet

Autism and Masking

Masking can be defined as hiding or controlling behaviours (social camouflage) that are associated with autism that may be viewed as inappropriate in situations, for example presenting with frustration or self-stimulating behaviours such as twiddling/rocking. Autistic people can feel the need to present or perform social behaviours that are considered neuro-typical or may hide neuro-diverse behaviours in order to be accepted and fit in.

An autistic person may mask to avoid feeling embarrassed or viewed as 'different' at school or the workplace. It can help a person feel safe from misunderstandings or aggression, but this act of self-preservation takes a toll on self-esteem and self-identity. Masking can contribute to autistic burnout which occurs when the challenges of life exceeds a person's ability to manage this and often autistic burnout or autistic meltdown can occur when the person returns to an environment they feel more comfortable in. This can be returning home from school/work or when they are with parents/close friends.

Masking can lead to serious health physical and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

How can we recognise when someone is masking?

- Learning social cues from observing people and media
- Mimicking gestures
- Adjusting tone of voice to match other people's
- Observing other people's interactions
- Hiding stimming behaviours
- Developing a repertoire of rehearsed responses or questions
- Hiding personal interests
- Forcing eye contact, conversation, social interaction
- Intensified behaviour when returning home or when with certain people

Masking can also contribute to suicidality as it can decrease an individual's feelings of social belonging.

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How can we support individuals who mask?

- Use energy accounting to support individuals to monitor and limit situations where they will feel required to mask.
- Create inclusive and open environments where autistic people are fully accepted and do not need to mask to be accepted. Think also about making spaces inclusive by providing quiet break out spaces and encouraging self-regulatory behaviour such as stimming.
- Forge peer-relationships where autistic individuals can share relatable experiences with each other.

Autism & Fawning

As with masking, fawning is an attempt to conceal how the autistic person may be feeling and is another form of social camouflage. To avoid a conflicting situation, they will aim to appease the situation by following or allowing the situation to happen regardless of whether they would like it too for fear of upsetting or disrupting the person/environment. This can be particularly distressing for the person as the fear of being rejected can be more profound than the feelings of doing right or wrong. This causes an internal conflict and can lead to reduced self-esteem and a lack of personal identity.

How can we recognise someone may be fawning?

- Constantly attempting to please and appease others
- Asking about the thoughts and emotions of others in order to dictate their response
- A lack of personal identity
- Mirroring the ideology and preferences of others
- Having an inability to say “no”
- Ignoring your own beliefs, ideas and values and following other people’s
- Intensified behaviour in less pressurised environments i.e. when at home

How can you help support a person who may be masking/fawning?

It is likely, if the person is feeling low or is unable to communicate how they are feeling, that it may be difficult to engage in conversation. The following, although not

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exhaustive, are some helpful strategies that may support more effective ways of communication.

- Try and identify 'capable spaces' in unfamiliar environments, for example access to a garden area or quieter/more comfortable spaces the person can retract too when feeling overwhelmed - this will allow the person to manage their anxieties and reduce potential triggers where the person may feel they have to socially camouflage.
- Provide the person with a comforting item so they can refer to this or hold this when feeling stressed in social situations.
- Encourage the person (if they are able) to go for a walk with you or do an activity they enjoy with you. This may support a more relaxed mood and encourage communication about how they are feeling.
- Support the person to identify hobbies and interests of their own.
- Validate authentic feelings with the person i.e. telling them "you are very brave" if they try something new or "you are very happy doing that activity" – this will support the person to associate their own feelings to experiences.
- Provide accessible information to the person that can be read in their own time around understanding how they may be feeling and to substantiate their own feelings.
- Avoid trying to force communication (unless in an emergency situation).

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