

Masking and Autistic Burnout Exploration

Welcome to this short introduction to our theme: masking and autistic burnout.

In this video, we're going to gently explore what masking is, how it impacts autistic people, and how it's connected to burnout.

Our hope is that this gives you some language and ideas to reflect on about your own experiences, and a deeper understanding of ways to feel safe, as well as ideas to help recognise and navigate burnout.

Many autistic people grow up learning that the way they naturally communicate, express emotion, and respond to the world is too much, not enough, or simply wrong.

As Dr Devon Price writes, autistic people are born with the mask of neurotypicality pressed against our faces. For many of us, this captures the experience of being shaped from a very young age to adapt in order to be accepted, to be safe, or to be included.

Even before we reach school age, we can be told that the way we should be playing is different, the way we should be sitting in class is different, and the way we should be communicating and managing our sensory systems is wrong.

Masking is sometimes also called camouflage. It describes the ways that an autistic person may hide, suppress, or alter their natural ways of being in order to fit into the systems and environments that are built around non-autistic norms.

This might include things like copying social behaviour, forcing eye contact, carefully monitoring tone of voice and facial expression, suppressing stimming and natural body movements, pushing through sensory pain, and constantly rehearsing what to say and how to say it.

Masking is not always a conscious choice. It is a survival response to living in an ableist world not designed for us.

As autistic advocate Kieron Rose describes, masking is a psychological safety mechanism made up of complex layers of physical, emotional, and social actions, which an autistic person is driven to use to self-protect and project an acceptable version of who they are.

These layers can include not only how and what we communicate, but how we hold our bodies, how we move, how we regulate our expressions, and how we manage our sensory and emotional responses in order to appear okay or normal to others.

All people adapt their behaviour in different contexts, especially people from marginalised groups. Many late-identified autistic adults realise, often in hindsight, that they've been masking

for most of their lives in order to survive, and this can be quite an overwhelming realisation and journey of learning and unlearning.

The intensity of masking can vary depending on where you are, who you are with, what you are doing, and how safe you feel.

Some people notice that they mask more in professional settings, education, healthcare, or unfamiliar social spaces. Others notice that even when alone, the habits of self-monitoring and suppression can continue automatically, as it has been so ingrained into us that we no longer really know who we are or how to help ourselves be ourselves.

While masking can help someone get through situations that might otherwise feel unsafe or overwhelming, it does come at a cost.

Holding yourself in a constant state of adaptation uses enormous amounts of physical, cognitive, sensory, and emotional energy. You're not only participating in an interaction—you are also monitoring your body, your expressions, your words, your sensory responses, and how you are being perceived.

Over time, this sustained effort can contribute to autistic burnout.

Autistic burnout is not the same as workplace stress or tiredness, and is different to anxiety and depression, though they can often co-occur.

Many autistic people describe burnout as a deep, long-term state of physical, sensory, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion caused by years of living in environments that do not meet our autistic needs.

You may feel that you can no longer cope with sensory input. You may be unable to communicate or socialise in ways that you used to, and experience more meltdowns and shutdowns, or feel that you are losing skills you once had.

Kieron Rose has described burnout as “a crash that keeps on crashing”. Others describe it as a loss of capacity, increased sensory overwhelm, difficulty with communication and decision-making, withdrawal, inertia, and a feeling of having absolutely no energy left to draw from.

For many late-identified autistic adults, burnout is the point at which coping strategies, including masking, finally become unsustainable.

When the demands of life outweigh our capacity to manage, it's often the moment when people begin to ask: Why is everything so hard? Why can't I keep doing what I used to do? And perhaps eventually, could I be autistic?

Or, if you've reached a burnout period post-identification, it might feel like you're suddenly even more autistic than ever, as you have no more energy left to mask.

Understanding the link between masking and burnout can be profoundly validating. It helps reframe burnout not as a personal failure, but as the understandable outcome of long-term adaptation, unmet needs, and having to survive in systems that were never designed with autistic people in mind.

In our session, we'll explore questions such as:

- When, where, and with whom do you notice yourself masking?
- When do you feel safer to be more yourself?
- What does masking cost you in terms of energy and well-being?
- What might gentle, safe, self-chosen moments of unmasking look like for you, if and when that feels possible?

There is no expectation that anyone should stop masking or become fully unmasked. For many of us, masking may remain a necessary safety strategy.

The aim is not to remove protection, but to build understanding, choice, and compassion for yourself so that you can find ways to manage your life a bit better.

As you join in and reflect through our session, we want you to know that you are not broken, you are not failing, and you are not alone.

Masking and burnout are not signs of weakness. They are signs of adaptation and survival—the impact of living too long without your needs or ways of being being recognised or supported.

We hope that through this session, you will discover a deeper understanding of yourself and gain clarification about your ways of autistic being, your strengths, your challenges, and how masking and burnout may have impacted your own sense of autistic identity.

Our aim is that by creating a safe space to share our experiences and stories, you will feel more empowered and be better able to advocate for your needs, and most importantly, gain a sense of belonging, knowing you're not alone.

Bye for now.