Autistic Masking

"Masking is a psychological safety mechanism made up of layers of physical and social complex actions which Autistic person uses 'fit in' and self-protect in an endless variety of differing situations and environments. This happens by applying, in fluctuating degrees, often uncontextualized and sometimes rehearsed, learnt behaviours to appropriate situations; whilst simultaneously suppressing both natural behaviours and self-identity.

All this happens partly consciously with, over time, the person dissociating from the act; and partly subconsciously: pre-emptive, reactive and unplanned; And all at great mental and physical cost."

- **Kieran Rose, The Autistic Advocate**

Autistic Masking (Social Camouflaging, Social Blending) is the term used to describe a psychological safety mechanism. It starts from birth and is initially based on sensory suppression, developing in both conscious and subconscious ways as increasingly complicated tool for navigating the social world in order to not be identified as 'different', providing protection, enabling the ability to 'fit in'.

Undiagnosed Autistic children regularly have their sensory needs, or negative reactions to sensory stimulus dismissed and invalidated, often unwittingly. It's especially difficult when a child is unable to fully advocate what is happening to them. So, an Autistic child quickly learns to suppress those needs, particularly the responses to negative sensory information.

We often neglect to think about the years and needs that have been missed pre-diagnosis and the trauma that has developed from that time.

Masking becomes compounded when an Autistic child starts to properly socialise.

Quickly the child learns that they are not like the other children, that their way of communicating is different and that their playing style, learning and needs are different. Quickly the child develops skills that help them conform and fit in. It's often done by mimicry, using scripts and 'acting' like the other children, adults and even using techniques and lines learnt from books, television and films. These are just some examples of how an Autistic person Masks:

- Physical suppression
- Emotional suppression (Hiding emotions)
- Sensory suppression
- Pain suppression
- Stim redirection or suppression
- Scripting
- Mirroring behaviours
- Directed Echolalia (mirroring language)
- Directed Hyperlexia (Hiding behind intelligent fluff)
- Linguistic Masking (Playing for time)
- Physical Masking (clothes and makeup)
- Personality shifting
- Suppressing physical exhaustion

- Suppressing emotional exhaustion
- Exaggeration
- Suppression of identity
- Dissociation
- People pleasing and fawning
- Saying what they think you want them to say
- Taking on more than they can cope with
- Saying ‘yes’
- Easily manipulated and coerced
- More likely to be subject to abuse
- Putting themselves in vulnerable situations
- Conforming
- Falling into expected gender roles

The suppression of the sensory environment, an exhausting process, continues into adulthood, causing near constant tiredness and lethargy, which in turn becomes something else that needs to be Masked. But as that progression continues, as social environments become more complex, as trauma is applied through things like isolation, bullying and unmet needs the aspects above start to be utilised.

As the act of Masking also develops, the aspects of it that were at one time a fully conscious process, become semi-conscious and sometimes sub-conscious. Often later-diagnosed Autistic people are astonished that they didn’t know they were doing it, it had become second nature for them, until they reached the point where they could do it no longer

Masking is one of the reasons that Autistic children go unidentified at school. Often you hear the phrase ‘They’re fine in school’ spoken about undiagnosed and diagnosed Autistics, referring to the fact that teachers don’t see any issues. These children can sometimes be the ones that meltdown violently after school and it’s simply because they have spent the day suppressing in a hostile environment and then they get to a safe comfortable space where they can release what they are thinking.

There is a current narrative in research that Autistic Masking is a choice.

It is being suggested that a Mask is put on or taken off and this is being used to drive a secondary narrative around Autistic women and girls that is missing a lot of context around Gender expectations. As established above, much of what happens is a safety mechanism, a reaction to trauma.

And it is not necessarily that Autistic women and girls Mask better than any other gender, it is more that they are less *seen* and it can be easier for them to slip into the roles that society expects of them. That narrative also unfairly excludes those who are non-Binary, Trans and those who are atypically Autistic.

Rather than blaming the Autistic Women and Girls for essentially hiding, it should be the case that the way we look for Autistic women and Girls and the ways we look at Gender need to change, instead of trying to apply this fixed notion of Gender to Autism.

Rather than focusing on Gender differences for discussions around Masking, it would be fairer to look at Autistic people who have an atypical presentation and who are internalisers emotionally

and socially, who are more prone to Mask, over those who present typically and are generally externalisers emotionally and socially.

It is common amongst the life of the Masking Autistic person that on occasion there are periods when Masking is unsustainable, either in the short term or the long term. This is called Autistic Burnout (sometimes Autism Fatigue). Research into this area is just beginning, but it is important to note that Masking is now being implicated as a factor in the high rates of suicide amongst the Autistic population.