

Masking

>> **SEAN:** It's almost like I've been like an undercover policeman, but I've been undercover for too long.

At Autistic Knowledge development, we have an unusual take on unmasking...

[REWIND SOUND EFFECT]

>> **SEAN:** Welcome back to our Embrace Autism Series.

This short video is about masking.

Masking is both a learned and a subconscious behaviour of trying to fit in.

Basically, trying to hide and disguise the fact that you're autistic.

Masking can be positive, and it can also be negative.

It can be a defence or a self-preservation mechanism, a learned habit.

It might be about fitting in, which is another way of trying to make sure that you have an easy life, that you're not picked on, that you're not singled out.

It might be that it's doing what's expected of you by society, by family, by partners, by school, by your job.

It is a learned and conditioned response.

For any person that realises they are autistic, especially later in life, a big part of what you will go through is working out what parts of you is learned

behaviour, is you masking, and also what parts of you is actually the real authentic autistic you when you've lowered your guard.

One of the biggest challenges for me as a later in life diagnosed autistic person, is working out what is the authentic me and what is actually me masking.

One of the examples that I've given when I've tried to explain it before it's almost like I've been like an undercover policeman, but I've been undercover for too long.

Then, it's working out what's been my undercover police identity... and what is the real me afterwards.

The longer I've known I've been autistic and the more I've consciously unmasked when it's been safe to do so, there's still a bit that the more I've unmasked, the more I've realised how much masking I still do.

Some of it's not done consciously, some of it is involuntary and that's where for me personally, there is no fixed point where it's like "okay... well... I've finished my journey of discovering what it is to be an autistic person".

Certainly, the more I've learned about being autistic and about other autistic people, the more I've realised that I've still to learn and I've still to go on my own journey.

Some autistic people will try and hide the fact that they 'stim' or emotionally regulate this way.

'Stim' is short for self-stimulatory behaviour.

For example, in these films, I'm desperately trying not to shake my legs in case it jiggles the camera.

That's an example of conscious masking.

But equally when I allow my legs to shake, I concentrate better, and my anxiety levels are reduced.

People pleasing can be part of masking as well.

One of the things in my life now, as I'm openly autistic, is there's a lot of people from my old life who used to see me as the life and soul of the party and actually, I am very, very, introverted.

Again, it's this whole jumping off point of being honest with yourself and not thinking "oh... am I going to offend these people" and instead thinking "no, this is a social situation I'm not going to enjoy, and I don't want to put myself in".

That, as difficult it is to me, that is part of my own unmasking process.

It's being honest about what I do or don't enjoy socially.

It's ok to have boundaries.

I've also realised that I can enjoy socialising when it's done in a certain context and in a certain way that works for me as an autistic person.

For many autistic people, masking can lead to burnout, poor mental health, negative self-image, depression and anxiety.

It's sadly at a lot of the root of the high levels of suicide within the autistic community.

Sometimes, for example in work or education, it might not be safe to unmask or could have negative impacts on our chances for success.

At Autistic Knowledge Development, we have an unusual take on unmasking, in that we believe in the real world, it's not always the safest or the best thing to do.

Part of unmasking is finding safe spaces to unmask.

We're not advocating or saying you should just live your full life unmasked because sadly, in the world we live in, it's not safe and not necessarily going to be the best for your own safety, for your own career, in many workplaces, but it's being able to find places where you can actually start to explore who the authentic you is... when you don't have a mask on.

For me, I've been lucky enough to make some really great autistic friends.

It's even realising at the point in my autistic friendships that I find myself almost starting to mask, and I'm like "of all the places that you don't have to mask this is here!".

What I learn about myself in these spaces is really helpful to then take into my wider life.

I've personally found that through being able to unmask more I've been able to work more.

This is because you're doing it in a safe and healthy way for your own well-being.

It's one of the things that again, post-diagnosis, I have dramatically changed all aspects of my life.

The difference between private me, and public me, who you get here now, who you get when I'm at work here, has got smaller and smaller and smaller.

I can't even begin to describe how much better my mental health is because of it and also how much more energy I have.

Some questions to ask yourself are:

Which parts of my life am I masking a lot in?

What is the impact of doing this?

Is it helping me?

Is it harming me?

Do I want to change this?

Is it safe to do change this?

Through doing this, you can start to make informed and conscious decisions about masking and unmasking.

Exploring this with other autistic people can be helpful for some people.

Shared interest groups can be a way of doing this too and can potentially be safe spaces to do this.

This is because it doesn't necessarily have to say 'this is an Autism space'...

There are some spaces that you'll go into where the likelihood of most of the people there being neurodivergent, autistic, ADHD, dyslexic with or without a formal diagnosis is much, much, higher.

Again, it's places where you can feel like this is my tribe, this is where I belong and there's something really validating, really positive about

interacting with other human beings whilst being your authentic self and them getting you and liking you.

For me personally it's really helped me to feel better about myself, better about being autistic and to feel positive generally about life.

There's more information linked to this video on how to access different resources. Our next video in this series is on relationships which has lots of relevance to what we've been discussing with masking.

We've hoped you've enjoyed and got something from this short video.

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