Masking

What is masking?

Masking is when someone hides or suppresses symptoms, behaviours, or difficulties they are experiencing. Sometimes masking can be done consciously, for example as a coping mechanism for needing to get through a challenging situation at work or a social event with strangers, or it can be done unconsciously, over time, as an individual receives negative feedback for their authentic presentation.

What are some different types of masking?

Emotional Masking: This occurs when individuals consciously or unconsciously hide their true emotions, often presenting a different emotional state than what they actually feel. This can be a coping mechanism, a social adaptation, or a defence mechanism.

Masking in Personality: Some theories of personality suggest that individuals may develop a persona or mask to present to the world, which may differ from their true selves. This can be influenced by societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal experiences.

Behavioural masking: Behavioural masking refers to the act of concealing or modifying one's behaviour to fit social norms or expectations. This can involve suppressing natural reactions such as fidgeting or stimming, adopting artificial behaviours, or pretending to conform to societal standards. Behavioural masking is common in various social contexts, where individuals may feel pressure to conform or fear judgement for deviating from accepted behavioural norms.

Who can experience masking?

Everyone masks from time to time. Sometimes masking can be beneficial and useful and help us navigate challenging situations in life without drawing too much attention to ourselves. However, when masking becomes a daily struggle, hindering our ability to authentically connect with others or live a fulfilling life, it can exacerbate mental health issues and lead to burnout.

People with neurodivergence tend to engage in masking more frequently and to a greater extent than neurotypical people. Some common neurodivergent presentations that engage in masking include the following:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Those with ASD often engage in masking to camouflage their autistic traits, trying to fit in socially by imitating neurotypical behaviours.

- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Individuals with ADHD might mask their symptoms by developing coping strategies to appear focused and organised, especially in academic or professional settings.

- Anxiety Disorders: People with anxiety disorders might mask their anxiety symptoms to avoid drawing attention to themselves or to appear calm in social situations.

- Depression: Individuals with depression may mask their symptoms to avoid social stigma or to maintain a façade of normalcy, appearing cheerful despite internal struggles.

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Individuals with PTSD may mask their trauma-related symptoms to cope with daily life, suppressing emotions and memories associated with the traumatic event.

- Substance Use Disorders: People struggling with substance abuse may mask their addiction by hiding their drug use or minimising its impact on their lives, often to avoid judgement or intervention.

- Eating Disorders: Those with eating disorders may mask their disordered eating behaviours or body image concerns to avoid scrutiny or to maintain a sense of control over their lives.

What is masking burnout?

Masking burnout refers to the exhaustion and emotional strain that can result from continuously hiding or suppressing one's true thoughts, emotions, or identity.

This term is often used in the context of marginalised or stigmatised individuals who feel compelled to mask aspects of themselves to fit into societal norms or avoid discrimination. For example, individuals from minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, or those with invisible disabilities may experience masking burnout as they constantly navigate social environments where they feel pressure to conceal or downplay aspects of their identity.

The prolonged effort of maintaining this facade can lead to feelings of fatigue, disillusionment, and emotional depletion, ultimately contributing to burnout.

How can I unmask?

Unmasking can be challenging and, at times, frightening, especially if unmasking in the past has led to stigma and social isolation and judgement.

Some people may also feel like they have been masking their whole life and they are not sure how to act or even who they are deep down when they are not masking. However, research shows that working towards unmasking and embracing aspects of ourselves that we tend to see as "flaws" leads to increased mental wellbeing and satisfaction in life. Below are some ways in which you can begin to embrace your unmasked self.

- Self-awareness: Take time to reflect on your true thoughts, feelings, and values. Identify any aspects of yourself that you may have been hiding or suppressing.

- Acceptance: Accept yourself for who you are, including your strengths, weaknesses, and unique qualities. Recognize that it's okay to be authentic and true to yourself.

- Find supportive environments: Surround yourself with people who accept you for who you are and create spaces where you feel safe to express yourself without judgement.

- Start small: Begin by expressing your authentic self in small ways, such as sharing your opinions or interests with trusted friends or family members.

- Set boundaries: Establish boundaries to protect your values and well-being. Learn to say no to situations or relationships that require you to compromise your values and well-being.

- Practice self-care: Take care of your physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Engage in activities that bring you joy, relaxation, and fulfilment.

- Seek professional support: Consider seeking guidance from a therapist or counsellor who can provide support and guidance as you navigate the process of unmasking and embracing your authentic self.

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