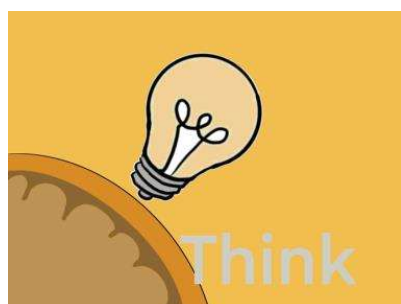


Masking

Masking (or camouflaging) is when Autistic people feel the need to hide the fact that they are Autistic. It is commonly assumed that Autistic people mask because they want to fit in with their non-autistic peers. Autistic people report, however, that often they mask their autism in order to avoid being discriminated against, teased or bullied. Equally, Autistic people report that masking is often the price they have to pay in order to be allowed to take part in friendships, relationships or social activities. Everybody has times when they need to adapt their behaviour in order to be accepted by their peers, but Autistic masking is different because the person may feel they have no choice but to mask if they want to take part in social life or if they want to have a job. Research shows that masking can be harmful to the Autistic person's mental health, their sense of self and their wellbeing.



Autistic people may not feel able to request the clarity they require in order to fully understand or fully take part in social activities. Instead, rather than giving responses that reflect their own thoughts or interests, they may copy their peers or give responses or talk about interests that they feel are socially acceptable. Out of a fear of being seen as different or unusual, Autistic people may suppress their need to adapt the sensory environment. As a result, they may become more easily and more frequently overwhelmed.



From the above, it follows that an Autistic person may appear "less autistic" in situations when they feel the need to mask their autism. The need to mask may not be a choice. Rather, the need to mask may be a survival response rooted in past experiences of being bullied, rejected or scorned for being autistic or acting differently to their peers. Masking in these circumstances means that the Autistic person may be distressed and dysregulated but is concealing this in order to continue taking part in social interaction. Masking can be both exhausting and harmful to physical and mental health.



Accepting your Autistic peers, friends and family members just as they are may reduce their need to mask and so reduce their experience of distress and ill health. Accepted for who they are, the Autistic person is able to take part in more social activities and to be fully themselves more of the time. Each of us benefits when allowed to be our authentic selves. A powerful way to show solidarity with Autistic people is to demonstrate your awareness of how the sensory environment may affect them and to be comfortable and accepting if an Autistic person needs to stim in order to manage their sensory or emotional experience.