AUTISM TRAINING
and Technical Assistance Project

WHAT IS MASKING & HOW TO NAVIGATE IT?

People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can often be found masking in public spaces. This strategy assists those with ASD to blend into their social environment. Masking is the act of suppressing the natural neurodivergent traits to appear neurotypical to the outside world.

Other terms that represent this behavior include camouflaging, compensating, mirroring, and more. Masking occurs both consciously and unconsciously and can significant physical and mental side effects.

Masking can show up in a long list of ways; it is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list.

- ⇒ Suppressing common stims or replacing them with more common movements
- ⇒ Mirroring the tone of others in the conversation
- ⇒ Refraining from oversharing on topics of interest
- ⇒ Mirroring the dress and appearance of others
- ⇒ Reducing reactions to overstimulation (i.e. , touch, noise, lights, and colors)
- ⇒ Mirroring the facial expressions of others in the conversation

Because masking happens both consciously and unconsciously, some people experience more mental fatigue than others.

The Side Effects of Masking

While masking might not seem like a big deal to the outside world, it can cause long-lasting effects in the life of someone with ASD. It is important to know these side effects in order to identify when someone may need to seek help.

- ⇒ **Burn Out.** Physical and mental exhaustion are common in people who mask for extended periods of time.
- ⇒ **Delayed Diagnosis.** ASD has been found to go undiagnosed longer in response to masking. Leaving individuals without possible support throughout their lives.
- ⇒ **Mental Health.** Over time, masking can cause a loss of identity, anxiety, and depression.

Tips

Here are a few tools to help someone who is navigating masking:

1. **Identify A Safe Space and Set Boundaries –** A safe space might be as close to home as your room. Others find comfort at their favorite spot on campus or a public park. There is no right or wrong answer to what feels right for you. After determining a place you feel comfortable, transition into setting boundaries. Let your friends and family know when you need undisturbed time to yourself. Try starting with a set time each day and adjust to what feels right for you.

2. **Find a Support Community –** Many spaces offer support groups or events that can help you build a community. Try checking in with your advisor or searching the web for what's near you.

3. **Practice Unmasking in Safe Spaces –** After finding a safe space, practice unmasking, if you would like. This can be done by yourself in a public place or with close friends or family. Learning to unmask can take time; give yourself grace during these moments.

4. **Try Reading Our Resources on Disclosure –** Some have found that disclosing was helpful if they were learning to unmask. Try reading about our resource on When Should I Disclose My Autism if this is something you are interested in.

Tools for creating a safe environment for teachers, parents, and employers:

1. **Support your Student –** When having social events or gatherings, ensure they are accessible for all. A quiet hour or space is a great place to start. This provides a time to rest and recharge for those who need it.

2. **Respect Boundaries –** Masking can take a toll on one's body. Allow for space after events and listen to the boundaries someone makes for themselves. Try your best to support them in the ways they ask.

3. **Do your Research –** Keeping an open mind and learning about how those you care about experience the world is a great first step in creating a safe space. Try looking at our other resources for more insight at https://autismcollegeandcareer.com.

This publication is pursuant to a grant from the Illinois State Board of Education and funded 100% with Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project dollars.