



# **Masking – the impact on mental health and identity**

**Dr Hannah Belcher**

Lecturer in User Led Research,

King's College London

**What do we mean by  
'masking'?**



# Types of masking

- **Hiding autistic traits to appear 'normal'**

e.g. suppressing stims in public, forcing self to make eye contact, monitoring voice intonation, hiding special interests

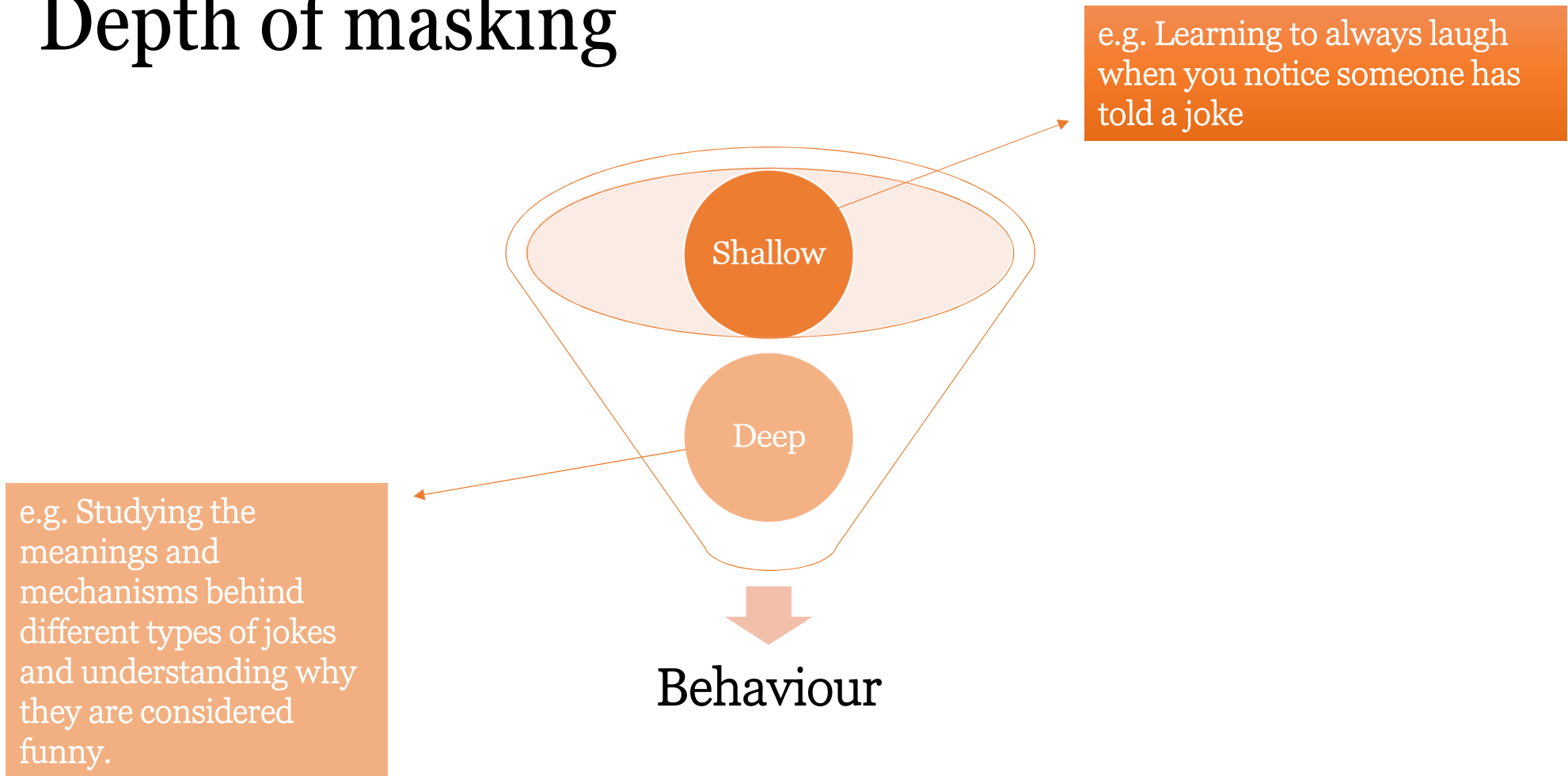
- **Compensating for autistic traits**

e.g. mimicking others in social situations, learning social rules and social scripts, rehearsing social situations

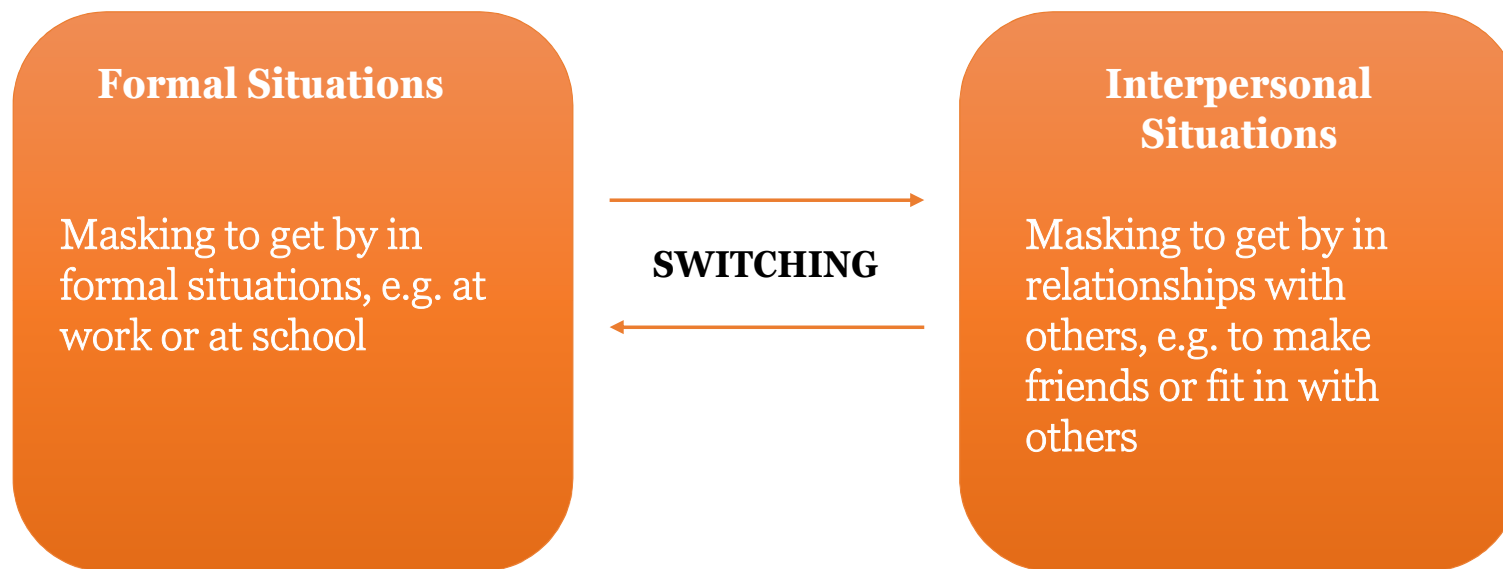
- **Wanting to 'fit in' with others**

e.g. feeling like you have to put an effort in to being around others or that you need to 'perform'

# Depth of masking



# Situations for masking



**Why do we mask?**



# Neurotypical Social Development

- We learn to imitate others to survive – both to learn new skills but also to fit in with our ‘tribe’ for vital support
- By imitating others we learn perspective taking and self-awareness – embarrassment and shame can result and drive us further to avoid these feelings by trying to ‘fit in’ even more (Leith & Baumeister, 2008).
- The ‘Chameleon Effect’ (unconscious social imitation) acts like glue in social bonds – we prefer people who mimic us and we over mimic others to enhance this bond (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999; McGuigan et al, 2011).
- Rather than just imitating the use of objects, we copy other peoples’ dress sense, gestures, mannerisms and much more (Carpenter, 2006).
- All humans navigate social situations as a stage to perform appropriately in front of others and to avoid shame (Goffman, 1990).



# Differences in the autism 'mask'

**AUTISTIC MASKING IS EASY.  
IT'S LIKE RIDING A BIKE.  
EXCEPT THE BIKE IS ON FIRE.  
AND THE GROUND IS ON FIRE.  
AND EVERYTHING IS ON FIRE.  
BECAUSE YOU'RE IN HELL.**



# Differences in the autism 'mask'

Autistic people report using masking strategies significantly more than non-autistic people (Hull et al., 2019) possibly because:

- Autistic people are more likely to face stigma and bullying throughout their lives because of their behaviour differences and others' intolerance/unwillingness to accept and adapt to these – masking keeps us safe and is an 'obligation' rather than a choice.
- Autistic people and neurotypical social culture can be so different that autistic people need to put even more effort in, over a longer period of time, and in more situations to mask their autistic traits to 'fit in' – there is a mismatch between one's natural state of being and what is expected socially.
- Autistic people are often given 'treatments' or socialised in a way that encourages masking and adopting more neurotypical social behaviours.

**What are the  
consequences of  
masking?**



# Associations between masking and mental health

- The more someone reports using masking strategies, the more likely they are to have symptoms of depression and anxiety (Hull et al., 2019).
- Masking significantly predicts suicidal behaviours in autistic people (Cassidy et al., 2018).
- Autistic people who mask highly in both formal and interpersonal contexts, or highly in one but not the other, have similarly high levels of anxiety and stress (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).



# Associations between masking and mental health

- **Constantly self-monitoring and adapting to different social situations with different people all day is exhausting!**
  - It uses up mental resources that then can't be used elsewhere e.g. having to memorise social scripts and inhibit natural behaviours and responses (Livingston et al., 2018).
- **Masking our natural behaviours and traits denies expression of our true selves and identity**
  - Autistic people often feel they don't belong and that they're isolated because they have to mask (Hull et al., 2017).
  - Thwarted belonging has been shown to increase suicidality in autistic people (Pelton and Cassidy, 2017).
  - Masking can mean hiding or stopping special interests, which are positive aspects of our identity.
  - Being encouraged to mask by others reinforces that our true selves aren't acceptable or good enough.

**How can mental  
health be improved  
and masking  
reduced?**



# Moving towards more acceptance of autistic traits and less masking

## Why?

1. Masking increases mental health problems long term.
2. If they aren't 'problem behaviours' then they don't need to be changed.
3. Masking autistic traits doesn't improve the judgements non-autistic observers make of the social behaviour exhibited by autistic people (Belcher et al., 2021).
4. When non-autistic people are informed that a person is autistic, they judge their behaviours more positively (Sasson & Morrison, 2019).

# Strategies for autistic people

## Become your own advocate

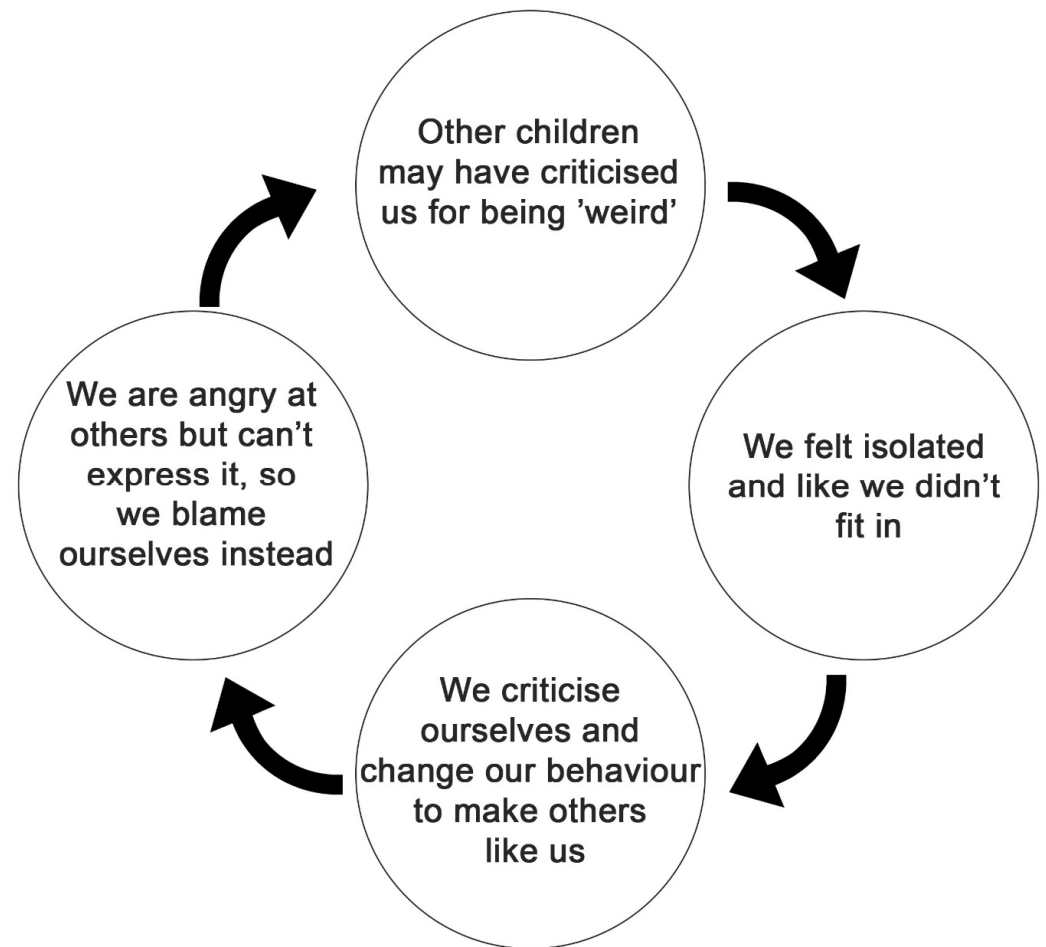
- Masking often begins unconsciously as a way of avoiding social trauma, but by becoming more aware and conscious of our behaviours we can gain more control of when and how we use them.

- Take the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q) (Hull et al, 2019).
- Keep a journal each day of when you noticed you masked, why, and how it made you feel. Identify the following:
  1. What was the situation?
  2. What thoughts did you have?
  3. What physical and emotional feels did you have?
  4. How did you respond?

# Strategies for autistic people

## Have some compassion

- A lifetime of masking leads to constant self-criticism, which leads to further anxiety and depression. The more anxious and depressed we feel in social situations the more we will mask.
- Having compassion for ourselves means acknowledging our suffering and being non-judgemental of ourselves.
- Practicing self-compassion can make permanent changes to way our brains think and perceive situations (Gilbert, 2009).





# Strategies for autistic people

## Changing negative thoughts

Situation	Old automatic thought	New compassionate thought
I got nervous in the supermarket and started stimming with my hands.	Everyone's going to think I'm weird  People will laugh at me  I failed at hiding my autism	I didn't actually notice anyone laughing or looking at me  Even if they were I can't tell what they're thinking and I'm assuming their thoughts were negative but they may have been empathic to the fact I was nervous

# Strategies for autistic people

## Tolerating distress and self soothing

- Make a list of things you find soothing and build in time to do these things after particularly stressful situations
  - e.g. allowing yourself time to stim before and after attending a social gathering.
- Keep a journal record of how intense your feelings are and how much a soothing activity helps to relieve them (or doesn't!)
- Practice mindfulness
  - e.g. try a guided meditation app for 10 minutes each day.
- Gently practice not avoiding situations that you fear will induce intolerable feelings
- Keep a journal of positives and things you have achieved in your day
- Seek professional support to help develop these strategies

# Strategies for autistic people

## Taking off the mask



# Strategies for autistic people

## Taking off the mask

Situation	What do you think will happen?	How will you test this prediction?	What actually happened?	What are your reflections about this prediction?
I always have to try really hard to stop myself flicking my fingers (stimming) in public	If people see me doing this they will think there is something wrong with me and that I'm 'crazy'	I'm going to let myself flick my fingers for a few seconds whilst I'm on the train	I was a bit nervous at first but the train was empty, and I started by hiding my flicking under my jumper. Eventually I did it more in the open. Someone looked at me but then just looked away. I didn't notice anyone laughing or talking about me.	It's difficult to know what people on the train were thinking, but it felt quite liberating and calming to stim freely. I would like to test this more in busier places.

# Strategies for autistic people

- These strategies won't work for anyone, the main thing is to learn more about yourself and to be kinder to yourself to relieve some of that pressure.
- Some people don't want to stop masking, or can't, and that's OK too. It's about you choosing and being your own advocate to ensure you're protecting your mental health and wellbeing as much as you can.
- It may be difficult to do these exercises and others by yourself, where possible seek professional help or the support of family and friends.
- Don't beat yourself up and criticise yourself more for not being able to reduce your masking or follow these activities. The most important part of these techniques is learning to have compassion for yourself.

# Tips for parents/guardians/carers

- **Don't try to change a behaviour if it isn't hurting your child or anyone else**

e.g. it might be embarrassing to see your child behaving differently in public, and you might fear they will get picked on, however, by trying to discourage or stop this behaviour you are reinforcing to your child that being themselves is wrong and you may be stopping behaviours that actually calm and soothe your child. Instead provide safe spaces where they are encouraged to be themselves.

- **Help them plan difficult situations in advance**

e.g. make social scripts with them of what will be happening and when, and how they can manage anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. This may make them feel calmer and they may then have less need to develop masking strategies to avoid social threats.

- **Provide them with positive autistic role models**

e.g. find other autistic children they can spend time with, attend 'autism friendly' events, and read more literature written by autistic adults. Feeling part of a community may lessen feelings of alienation.

# Ideas for teachers/educators

- **Create safe spaces at school**

e.g. rooms where an autistic child can get away and be alone to be themselves, so they have time to unwind if they are masking in the classroom and at play times. This could reduce their overall stress levels and exhaustion from being at school all day.

- **Listen to the parents/guardians**

e.g. often autistic children who mask will be perfectly well behaved and quiet at school, but may have meltdowns as soon as they get home. Their parents/guardians will know their child best, as their child will normally feel most comfortable being themselves around them.

- **Play to their strengths and provide lots of praise**

e.g. many autistic children will already be full of self-criticism. Make sure you let them know what they're doing well and give them the confidence to excel in those areas.

# Recommendations for therapists

- **Adapt and adjust**

e.g. autistic people may be more sensitive to sensory issues in a therapy room and they may need adjustments to the way you communicate. Regularly check in with their preferences and be willing to change the way your work where possible (e.g. allowing emails or written communication in verbalising is difficult, introducing more creative methods, and avoiding open ended questions).

- **Listen and don't assume**

e.g. autistic people may struggle to express their true feelings and thoughts if they are masking, they may even mask in the sessions. Therefore, don't assume based on their behaviours and expressions how they are feeling, instead try and explore non-judgementally with them what's going on.

- **Help them better understand their masking and the effects it is having**

e.g. help them use the therapeutic space to examine and work on those self-critical thoughts and social threats, and how they use masking strategies. By creating a safe space in the session you may be providing the only space they have to feel comfortable enough to eventually unmask.



# Find out more

## Book release:

“Taking off the Mask: Practical exercises to help understand and minimise the effects of autistic camouflaging”

Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Released: September 2022

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## Contact details:

Email: [Hannah.belcher@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Hannah.belcher@kcl.ac.uk)

Website: [www.hannahbelcher.com](http://www.hannahbelcher.com)

Twitter: @DrHannahBelcher