

Unmasking Toolkit

In the context of autism, masking is when an autistic person works to behave more like a neurotypical person or in ways that meet neurotypical standards. A person can mask intentionally or unintentionally. Masking is sometimes called camouflaging. This toolkit will help you reflect on why you mask, determine what purposes it's serving for you, and give you strategies to start unmasking.

Why do people mask?

There are many reasons people might mask. Underlying most of them is an attempt to blend in, be more accepted, or stay safe. Here are some common reasons people mask:

- To stay safe
- To avoid mistreatment, bullying, stigma, or discrimination
- To be more successful at work or school
- To meet friends or romantic partners
- To fit in
- Ableism or beliefs that acting autistic is bad or wrong

It's important to remember that masking is a survival strategy. Sometimes it isn't safe for a person (especially someone from a marginalized group) to act openly autistic. This toolkit is designed to help someone unmask if and when they feel safe and ready to do so.

Impacts of Masking

Although there are times and places where a person may feel it's necessary to mask, research has found that masking for long periods of time has negative consequences like:

- Mental health impacts, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation
- Burnout, fatigue, and limited energy for anything else
- Feeling disconnected from yourself
- Sensory suppression
- Difficulty developing a sense of identity
- Loneliness and isolation
- Delayed diagnoses
- Fewer services and supports

How Did You Get Here?

One useful place to start when it comes to unmasking is taking the time to understand why you mask, how you mask, and when you mask. That will help you determine what's getting in the way of stopping. Reflect on these questions:



When do you mask? Are there certain people you typically mask or unmask around?



What does masking look like for you? What do you do? What do you avoid doing?



What emotions do you feel when you think about unmasking? Can they help you identify why you are masking?



Do you have assumptions or fears about what might happen if you unmask? Or about yourself when you are unmasked?



Think about times when you have unmasked. What happened? Did it make you more or less likely to unmask again?

Discovering Your Authentic Self

As you start to understand why and when you are masking, you may begin to get a picture of who you would be without a mask. But sometimes it can be hard to even imagine yourself unmasked. To help you figure out how you'd behave if you weren't masking, try these exercises.

Build a sensory profile for yourself. Brainstorm what kinds of sensory inputs would feel good to you and which ones you'd want to avoid. You can try out [AuSM's Sensory Schedule](#) to go even further.

What is a Sensory Profile?

A sensory profile is a tool that helps you understand how your senses impact you in day to day life. Based on a checklist, you can see if you're over or under sensitive in different areas. Check out this free example from [Neurodivergent Insights](#).

Identify your special interests and brainstorm how you can spend time enjoying them.

Example

If your special interest is comedy, try taking an improv class.

Discovering Your Authentic Self

Notice what you do when you're by yourself and you don't feel pressure to be or act a certain way.

Why is this important?

Noticing what you do when you're relaxed shows you who you are without masking—and what you might want to bring into more parts of your life.

Example

Someone might clench their hands and grind their teeth when trying to appear calm, while their body actually wants to pace, bounce their knees, or stim to release stress.

Try to notice your emotions when you're masking. Is there something your body wants to do to express those emotions?

Be open with yourself about the places you need support. What do you authentically struggle with (especially those things you can force yourself to do but that take a lot out of you)?

Example

A person might be able to attend long meetings without any support but feel completely drained afterward. They could identify this as a place they need support.

Building Autistic Community

As you work on unmasking, it can be helpful to be around other autistic and neurodivergent people, especially those who are openly and proudly different. It will help normalize being “weird” and may challenge some of the assumptions you have that are rooted in ableism.

Places to find autistic community:

- Search for support groups in your area
- Look for online groups of autistics, including Facebook groups, Discord groups, or on Meetup.com
- Follow autistic writers and creators on platforms like Bluesky, Substack, or Youtube
- Look for local organizations focused on neurodiversity in your area and get involved
- Find groups related to your special interests or hobbies: chances are you’ll find another neurodivergent person or two there

As you spend time around other autistics, here are some things to notice that may give you ideas of how you’d like to unmask, or help you build motivation to unmask:

How do you feel around unmasked people?

Are there things that other autistic people do or believe that you wish you could do? What things do you admire/like about unmasked people?

Does anything make you uncomfortable? Why?

Are you being exposed to any new ideas or concepts? What are they?

Putting it Together: Practice

Unmasking is a skill you can build with practice. It may feel awkward or even scary at first—but like any skill, it gets easier over time. It’s also something that won’t happen by accident. You’ll need to be intentional and incorporate unmasking into your life regularly. These exercises will give you ways to intentionally practice unmasking in ways that feel safe, manageable, and meaningful for you. You don’t have to do all of them: pick which ones feel right to you. You can make notes about how it went, try it more than once, or decide that exercise doesn’t work for you.

Exercise 1: Ask for Accommodations

- Think of one thing that would help you feel more comfortable or function better (e.g., wearing noise-canceling headphones, skipping small talk at work, using a chat app instead of phone calls).
- Write out how you would ask for it. Try roleplaying with a trusted friend or writing an email draft—even if you don’t plan to send it yet.
- You can try this for a variety of settings: work, school, or even in personal relationships.



Exercise 2: Stim Freely in a Safe Space

- Identify a stim that brings you comfort. Try doing it intentionally in a private or semi-private space like your room, your car, or with a trusted person.
- Work up to doing it in a low-risk public space (e.g., a park, a corner of a café). Reflect on how it feels. Does it help you regulate or feel more like yourself?
- If you’re not sure which stims you like or what brings you comfort, try to notice what your body does when you’re having strong emotions. Do you bounce? Spin? Pick at your skin or nails? Make noises? Try out those stims intentionally. If they are uncomfortable or hurt you, try to identify the sensation you like and find another way to get it (for example instead of picking at your nails, try a fidget that provides pressure to your fingers).



More Practice Exercises

Exercise 3: Communicate Authentically

- Identify one person you trust. Try having a conversation with them without trying to use neurotypical facial expressions or nonverbal signals (like eye contact).
- If you naturally speak without a lot of inflection, try having a conversation where you let your tone stay monotone.
- If you take longer to process, pick a trusted person and let them know that you're trying to unmask. Have a conversation with them and take as long as you need to find your words. Try not to fill the silence as you process.
- If you're non-speaking or semi-speaking, experiment with using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) in more parts of your day.



Exercise 4: Honor Your Sensory Needs

- Identify one person you trust. Try having a conversation with them without trying to use neurotypical facial expressions or nonverbal signals (like eye contact).
- If you naturally speak without a lot of inflection, try having a conversation where you let your tone stay monotone.
- If you take longer to process, pick a trusted person and let them know that you're trying to unmask. Have a conversation with them and take as long as you need to find your words. Try not to fill the silence as you process.
- If you're non-speaking or semi-speaking, experiment with using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) in more parts of your day.



Exercise 5: Do a Routine That's Just for You

- Create a daily or weekly routine that supports your needs, even if it seems "different." Examples: eating the same lunch every day, wearing the same clothes, planning alone time before social events.



More Practice Exercises

Exercise 6: Incorporate More Rest

- Try to notice when you feel drained or low on energy. Write down what makes you feel tired.
- Create a list of things that feel restful to you. These should be things that help you relax or feel fulfilled.
- If you know you're going to do something that will leave you feeling drained, practice doing something off your rest list afterwards to recover. Try not to judge yourself if you need rest more often than other people.



Exercise 7: Set Boundaries or Ask for Help

- Practice setting a boundary beforehand. You can write out a script or practice with a friend.
- Try using a boundary to make an interaction more accessible to you. For example if someone invites you to a concert, you could say “I can’t be in loud places. Can we hang out somewhere else instead?”
- If you know you might have a challenge, try letting a friend or family member know in advance and tell them how they can help. For example, if you’re going to an overwhelming space you could ask a friend to squeeze your hand tightly if you get overwhelmed.



Exercise 8: Try It in Public, Then Reflect

- Choose a small way to unmask in a public space (e.g., wearing headphones, flapping your hands, using a stim toy, skipping eye contact).
- Afterward, write down what you noticed: How did you feel? Did anyone react? How do you want to approach it next time?



Exploration and Experimentation

Unmasking doesn't have to be all-or-nothing—and it doesn't have to be permanent. You get to choose what works for you, what feels good, and what helps you thrive. As you try new ways of unmasking, it can be helpful to think of yourself like a researcher: conducting an experiment, seeing what works, and then adjusting as needed.

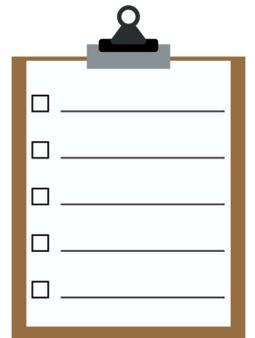
Principles to Keep in Mind:

- There's no “right” way to be autistic.
- What works one day might not work the next.
- You are allowed to change your mind.
- Safety and comfort are valid reasons to mask—and to unmask.

To help you out, here is a list of steps you can use as you experiment.

1. Create a “Try It” List

Make a list of things you'd like to try unmasking. You can pull ideas from earlier in this toolkit.



2. Run an Experiment

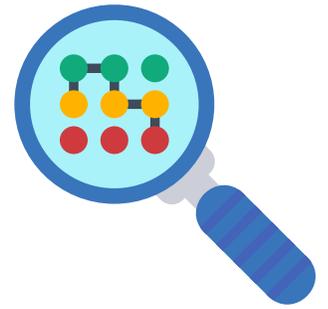
Pick one thing from your list and try it. Afterward, reflect using these prompts:

- What felt good about that experience?
- What felt uncomfortable?
- Did anyone react? How did you feel about their reaction?
- Do I want to do that again? Modify it? Try something else?



3. Track Patterns

Notice if there are places, people, or times where unmasking feels easier or harder. Are there any patterns? Can you make changes to spend more time in spaces that support your authenticity? It can help to write these down so you don't forget.



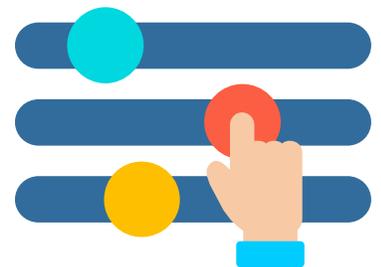
4. Build Your “Unmasking Menu”

Over time, make a list of unmasking strategies that you like or that feel safe. If you like, you can also include when, where, or how you like to use these strategies.



5. Adjust As You Go

It's okay if something doesn't work out. That's part of the process. Maybe some unmasking strategies don't feel authentic to you. Maybe over time your needs change and other strategies will stop being useful. Maybe part of a strategy is helpful, but you don't like all of it.



Each one of those is a piece of information that you can use to help find the authentic you.