

Masking at Work

Understanding the mask, what it costs you, and how to lower it safely

Most of us learn to mask long before we have a word for it. It starts young, usually as a way of staying safe, keeping the peace or avoiding being told off again. By the time you reach the workplace it can be so automatic that you barely notice you are doing it. You only notice the tiredness.

This handout is here to help you see your own masking clearly, understand what it takes out of you, and work out where you might be able to let a little of it go. There is nothing in here you have to do. Read it at your own pace and take the parts that fit.

What masking actually is

Masking is the effort you put in to seem more like what other people expect. It is not lying and it is not being fake. It is a skill you built, often without ever choosing to, because somewhere along the way you learned that being yourself came at a cost.

Some of it is conscious. A lot of it is not. Most people are surprised by how much of their day turns out to be management rather than work.

What it can look like in a working day

- Rehearsing what you are going to say in a meeting, then rehearsing it again
- Borrowing someone else's tone, phrasing or sense of humour because it lands better than yours
- Holding eye contact because you know it is expected, while losing half of what is being said
- Hiding stimming, or swapping it for something small enough that nobody comments
- Saying yes when you have no capacity left, because no feels dangerous
- Nodding along to an instruction you did not follow, then quietly working it out afterwards
- Laughing at the joke you missed
- Staying quiet about what you need in case you are seen as difficult or high maintenance
- Working late so nobody finds out how long that task really took you
- Turning your camera on and arranging your face into interested for an hour

Worth knowing

Masking is not the same as being professional. Everyone adjusts themselves a bit at work. The difference is the effort. Adjusting costs you a little. Masking costs you the evening.

When it is a mask, and when it is really you

One of the harder parts of understanding masking is working out what is left. People often go through a stage of questioning everything about themselves. If I stopped masking, would I still be kind? Would I still be funny? Would I still care about doing the work well?

Not everything you do to fit in is a mask. Some of it is simply you. You are allowed to be a neurodivergent person who genuinely likes tidy spreadsheets, polite emails and being on time.

Three questions that help

- Would I still do this if nobody was watching and there were no consequences either way?
- Am I doing this because I want to, or because I am scared of what happens if I stop?
- How do I feel afterwards? Being yourself can be tiring in an ordinary way. Masking tends to leave you flat, wired or oddly empty, as though you have been performing.

If the answer is that you enjoy it, it is yours. If the answer is that it protects you, it is a mask. Some things are both, and that is normal too.

Who you are underneath

Your personality is not the mask. It is also not the exhaustion that sits underneath it. It is what is there when you are not busy managing other people's comfort. For a lot of people that turns out to be someone warmer, funnier and far more direct than the version they take to work.

Try this

Take five minutes and write three short lists. There are no wrong answers and nobody else needs to see it.

- Three things I do at work that are genuinely me
- Three things I do mainly for other people's comfort
- One thing I honestly cannot tell either way

Come back to the third list in a month. It usually sorts itself out once you start paying attention.

The energy it takes

Masking runs in the background all day, like an app you never closed. It uses the same energy you need for the actual job, which is why you can finish a day where nothing difficult happened and still feel wrung out.

It is worth being honest about the size of it. For many people, masking is the most demanding thing they do at work, and it is the part nobody sees or thanks them for.

Signs the mask is costing you more than you can afford

- You need the first hour at home in silence before you can speak to anyone
- Weekends go on recovering rather than living
- Small things tip you over in a way that surprises you
- You feel resentful about work you actually like
- You get home and cannot decide what to eat, what to watch or what to wear tomorrow
- You are picking up every bug going round
- You have stopped replying to friends, not because you do not care but because there is nothing left
- Sunday evening feels heavier than it used to
- You are counting down to annual leave, then spending the first three days of it asleep

Map where it goes

For one week, jot down the parts of your day that leave you most depleted. Not the parts you dislike, the parts that drain you. They are often different things.

- What costs me the most
- What I usually do straight afterwards
- What I end up cancelling to pay for it

Most people find two or three predictable moments doing the bulk of the damage. Those are the ones worth changing first.

When and how to lower the mask

Lowering the mask is not all or nothing, and it is not something you owe anybody. Some workplaces are genuinely not safe for it, and you are the only person who can judge yours. What follows is about small chosen steps, not a big announcement.

Signs there may be room to unmask a little

- Other people ask for what they need and it goes fine
- Mistakes are treated as information rather than evidence against you

- There is at least one person you already relax slightly around
- Difference is talked about openly rather than in whispers

Signs to take it slowly

- Feedback tends to arrive as character comments rather than about the work
- People who ask for adjustments quietly end up sidelined
- You are new, on probation, or in the middle of a restructure
- Your gut says no. Trust it. You have spent years reading these rooms.

Small ways to start

- Pick one low stakes meeting a week and stop performing attention. Look at your notes, doodle, listen properly.
- Let yourself stim somewhere private first. A walk, your car, the last ten minutes of your lunch break.
- Stop filling silences. Let somebody else do it once and notice that nothing bad happens.
- Answer one small question honestly instead of automatically. Start with what you want for lunch, not your workload.
- Swap sorry for thank you. Thanks for waiting lands better than sorry I am late, and it costs you less.
- Tell one person one true thing. That is usually the step that changes the most.

Words you can borrow

Having a few phrases ready means you do not have to invent them while you are already depleted.

- I take things in better in writing. Would you mind sending that over.
- Give me until the end of the day and I will come back to you properly.
- I have missed something there. Can you say that part again.
- I am going to take my break outside. I think better once I have moved.
- I would rather skip the social part, but I will be there for the session itself.
- I can do that, but something else will need to move. Which would you rather I dropped.

Strategies that make masking cost less

Protect the energy before it goes

- Put a gap either side of anything high effort. Twenty quiet minutes before a big meeting is worth more than twenty minutes of extra preparation.
- Do not stack your hardest social demands on the same day. Spread them across the week if you have any say in it.

- Use writing wherever writing is allowed. Email, chat and shared documents cost most of us far less than talking.
- Book the recovery in your calendar like a meeting. Nobody questions a calendar block.

Recover properly

- Notice the difference between rest and recovery. Scrolling on the sofa is not always recovery, it is just being still.
- Work out what actually refills you. Movement, water, quiet, your special interest, being near someone without having to talk.
- Recovery is not a reward you earn once everything is done. Everything is never done.

Reduce how much masking is needed at all

- Ask for the adjustments that let you work in your own way. Agendas in advance, cameras off, written instructions, a quieter space, flexible hours, more processing time.
- A workplace needs assessment can put all of this in one place, in writing, so you are not asking again with every new manager.
- In the UK, Access to Work can fund support, equipment and coaching. You do not need a diagnosis to start a conversation about adjustments.
- Find your one honest person at work. Not a whole team, just one.

A last thought

The energy you spend masking is not a personal failing and it is not a flaw in you. It is the cost of working somewhere that was designed with somebody else in mind.

Some of this work is yours to do. A good deal of it belongs to your employer. You are allowed to expect them to do their part.