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# The Neurodiversity Lecture Series



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# Masking in autism

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# Background information

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**1.1% of people living in the UK are autistic** (Baird et al., 2006; Brugha et al, 2009, 2012)

- Well documented that current diagnostic tools are less sensitive to diagnosing women with autism and individuals with higher cognitive abilities (IQ of 70 and above) and they are therefore likely to be diagnosed later in life
- Women are 4 times more likely to be mis-diagnosed than men
- Therefore, prevalence figures may not truly reflect the true proportion of those with autism
- Those with autism more likely to experience mental health conditions than neurotypical individuals (c 70% of those with autism)
- A number of hypotheses as to why this may be: social anxiety; sensory experiences; social and environmental factors



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# What is masking?

## Masking is a strategy that many people with autism adopt to 'fit in' with those around them

- Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there (Hendrickx)
- Researchers refer to masking as one element of camouflaging – the other two are compensation and assimilation
- However, research into this area is in its infancy and masking is the term that the majority of autistic individuals use to refer to their strategies for 'fitting in'
- Call for clinicians to be aware of masking behaviours when assessing autism as some autistic individuals mask so effectively that they appear neurotypical when in a 1:1 assessment situation. Some adults have been told by clinicians that they cannot be autistic because they are making eye contact or are in a relationship
- Socially mirroring and copying other people's behaviour without understanding why they are behaving in this way
- Involves observation of how neurotypical individuals interact with each other including language, facial expressions, body language, proximity to others
- Males and females with autism mask, although the current thinking is that it is more prevalent amongst females



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# Why do people with autism mask?

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- Greater pressure to hide their true selves so that they fit into non-autistic culture
- Society has an adverse reaction to individuals who do not respond in an 'appropriate' way
- As a result of bullying, social transitions and increasing social pressures
- Concerns about the impression they make when not masking
- Habit
- Often develops in early adolescence
- Low self-esteem and negative self-image
- Two main drivers – conventional reasons (to fit in at work or school) and relational reasons (to get by in relationships with others)
- To avoid potential harmful mental health interventions (Chapman, Rose, Hull & Mandy, 2022)



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# What does masking involve

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- Masking may involve suppressing certain behaviours that the individual finds soothing, but that others think are 'weird', such as stimming (flicking their fingers in front of their eyes, rocking, humming) or intense interests
- Developing complex social scripts to appear 'normal' in social situations. However, if something occurs during the interaction which does not follow the 'script' then the person with autism is unable to repair the interaction
- Constant reflection by the individual with autism on their behaviour, social interactions, functioning in a social situation to ensure they do not stand out from the norm
- A search for acceptance by others
- The suppression of sensory and emotional reactions



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# What does masking involve

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- Sometimes, the masking is so successful that the individual with autism no longer recognises that they are doing it
- Cognitive effort to keep the 'real' individual hidden
- Outward presentation may be so well constructed as to give the impression that the individual presents as capable of dealing with every day interactions
- Adopting a compensatory set of behaviours and strategies for avoiding certain situations
- Sometimes, individuals with autism mask from close family members
- Going along with social situations without understanding the rationale

# Societal expectations

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## The reactions of others

- Masking often develops in response to the behaviour of others towards the autistic individual
- Multiple criticisms from others over time
- Eye contact
- Misconceptions about autism



# Impacts of masking

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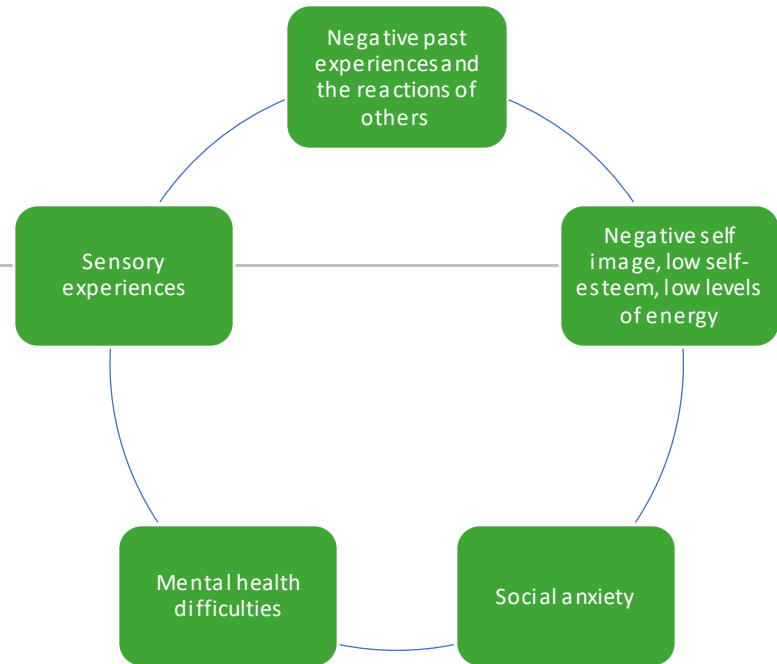
- Mental health difficulties
- Mentally, physically and emotionally draining
- Autistic burnout
- Identity confusion
- Different presentations at school and home, impacting on family life
- A feeling of disconnection from others which negatively impacts mental health
- Those that mask most effectively are unlikely to come to clinical attention

# Impacts of masking

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- Intensity of interest in autistic females
- At university autistic women 10 x more likely to drop out
- Masking is like trying to speak a foreign language 24hrs a day
- Can cover up a lot of the deficit by nodding & smiling but never fully know what's going on at a party/social gathering/
- Complete shutdown/meltdown after being in social situations due to strain of masking
- May lead to later diagnosis/misdiagnosis

# Relationship between mental health and masking



# CAT - Q

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## Camouflaging Autistic Traits – Questionnaire (Hull et al, 2018)

- Screening tool
- For individuals aged 16+ of average to higher intelligence (IQ of 70 or above)
- Questionnaire measures the 3 sub categories of camouflaging – compensation, masking and assimilation
- 25 questions with rating from strongly agree to strongly disagree
- Many of those completing the questionnaire found that their scores indicated that they camouflaged more than they thought



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# How can we help?

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## Strategies

- Support individuals to develop a positive self image and authentic autistic identity
- Support access to environments where the individual can exhibit authentic expressions and interaction
- Support access to environments which will nurture, value and support their skills and interests
- Explore how to provide an environment which meets the individual's sensory needs
- Challenge all instances of bullying of the individual with autism
- Challenge deficit based models of autism

# Learning without limits

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# Thank you



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