

A quick guide to masking

What is masking?

- **hiding or suppressing parts of your autistic/ADHD self** so you fit in with others, for example by not stimming or talking about your special interests
- **saying you're okay when you're not**, to avoid attention and blend in
- **acting like other people** to fit in and to avoid being spotlighted. For example, a person who seems sociable might just be wearing their "sociable mask". This is sometimes called camouflaging
- **people pleasing** - doing things to make others happy even if you don't want to
- **disguising the reasons for your behaviour** by taking on a role like the class clown, the loner who doesn't care what anyone thinks, etc.



"Masking is when I wear a metaphorical mask that gives me the appearance of being neurotypical"



Confused by terms
like "neurotypical"?
Check out Amaze's
[jargon buster](#)

What masking can look like:



- often (though not always!) quiet
- perfectionist tendencies
- reluctant to ask for or access support because they don't want to appear different
- may feel a need to be very near friends (their "anchors")
- seems fine at school or other settings, then has meltdowns or shutdowns at home
- extremely – maybe obsessively – organised, writes everything down, may be distressed if their systems are disrupted
- mimics or mirrors those around them or people on TV
- rehearses conversations or phrases in their head (or out loud) or asks others for help with this 'scripting' and uses a repertoire of rehearsed answers to questions
- takes on a role to create what feels like more acceptable reasons for some of the things they do. For example, passes off impulsive actions as deliberate jokes, as the "class clown". Acting in socially inappropriate ways may be passed off as being deliberately rebellious or a loner
- autistic or ADHD traits seem more prominent when in an unfamiliar setting or situation
- seems like a different person or may become anxious/quiet/stressed when around people from multiple social groups at the same time (doesn't know who to "be")



Why do people mask?

"Masking is a survival instinct and it's absolutely exhausting"

- many neurodivergent people are not aware they mask
- if your natural way of being is widely viewed as "wrong", you may mask in order to appear like everyone else. For example, if you have been told to look at someone when you talk to them, you may do this even when it's very uncomfortable for you
- if people say you are being disruptive or annoying when you are hyperactive or stimming, you may focus very hard on being still on the outside, making you feel very bad on the inside
- neurodivergent children are much more likely to experience bullying and may learn to mask as a protective measure, to avoid standing out as "different" and becoming a target

"94% of autistic adults say that they mask (NAS, 2022), as well as an estimated one-third of all people diagnosed with ADHD (Barkley RA. "Taking Charge of Adult ADHD")"

How to help your child who is masking

- at home, build in downtime each day where they don't have to mask – maybe including sensory activities or space to focus on their special interests
- support your child to meet and spend time with other neurodivergent children (and adults where possible), and introduce them to a range of adult role models reflecting our neurodiverse society
- plan out your child's week based on how much energy they have, and how much energy each activity will use up, so they are less likely to burn out. This is called energy accounting
- remind yourself that regular meltdowns or shutdowns after school are a sign your child feels safe enough to drop the mask at home
- learn more about autism/ADHD and support your child to understand their autism/ADHD and how it affects them
- have phrases ready for people who say "they don't seem neurodivergent"
- support your child to figure out their own preferences and advocate for themselves, rather than just following others



How to speak to your child's school or college about masking



- if you are concerned about masking, ask for a meeting with the SENCO or your child's teacher. Amaze's [meetings and paperwork fact sheet \[pdf 730kb\]](#) may help you prepare for that meeting
- before the meeting, keep a diary for a couple of weeks to spot any patterns that are causing problems, e.g. change of timetable, difficulty returning to school after the weekend, certain lessons
- take your diary, your list of concerns and expert knowledge of your child to the meeting to help the school or college understand how your child masks
- all schools in Brighton & Hove have received a [school version of this leaflet \[pdf 900kb\]](#) co-produced by BHISS, Amaze and PaCC, with contributions from students. If your child goes to a Brighton & Hove school, you can mention this leaflet and refer to the key ideas in it
- ask for strategies to be put in place in the same way they would support a more "obviously" neurodivergent child, for example brain or movement breaks, focus toys, checking in with your child to make sure they have understood instructions. Your child may prefer these to be done subtly, so they don't feel singled out

- ask that these strategies are accessible at all times, to prevent distress, not just to support your child once things have gone wrong
- during your meeting, make a plan to meet again to review the impact of the changes on your child. If your child is already on an SEN Support Plan then this should be at least once a term. If they aren't, discuss if this should be a next step. See Amaze's [SEN Support fact sheet](#) for more information

Need more help?

[SENDIASS advice line](#) – special educational needs and disability information, advice and support service for East Sussex and Brighton & Hove

<https://amazesussex.org.uk/sendiaass/>

[ND Family Support Service](#) – for families with children and young people on the pathway to diagnosis (or post-assessment) for neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, ADHD or tics/tourettes

<https://amazesussex.org.uk/nd-family-support/>

[Amaze fact sheets](#) – read our fact sheets on a number of SEND-related topics

<https://amazesussex.org.uk/resources/fact-sheets/>



Co-produced by Amaze and PaCC and building on the schools leaflet co-produced by BHISS, the Hidden Children's team, ND partners and ourselves