



Unmasking Gently

How to reduce masking without feeling unsafe or exposed.

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

A steady orientation

This is not an invitation to drop your mask everywhere.
It's not a demand to be "fully authentic."
It's not a test of bravery or self-acceptance.

This guide exists because many neurodivergent people are:

- exhausted from masking
- unsure who they are without it
- afraid that unmasking will cost them safety, belonging, or stability

Unmasking is not a single act.
It's not all-or-nothing.
And it is **never owed**.

This guide is about **choice, pacing, and nervous system safety**... not exposure.

1. What masking actually is (and why it exists)

Masking is often described as pretending.

That description misses something important.

Masking is better understood as:

- **constant self-monitoring**
- **real-time translation**
- **behavioural editing to stay safe**

It often includes:

- managing facial expressions or tone
- suppressing stims or movement
- forcing eye contact
- filtering thoughts before speaking
- copying social norms
- staying "appropriate" even when overwhelmed

Masking is not deception.
It's **adaptation**.

Most people mask because:

At some point, being unmasked was not safe.

That history matters.

2. Why unmasking can feel threatening... even when you want it

Many people assume unmasking should feel relieving.

Often, it doesn't... at least not at first.

Unmasking can trigger:

- fear of judgement or rejection
- vulnerability hangovers
- identity confusion
- shame responses
- hypervigilance (“Was that too much?”)

This happens because your nervous system may associate:

being seen with risk.

So when you reduce masking, your system may react as if danger has increased... even if nothing bad is happening.

That doesn't mean unmasking is wrong.
It means your system is **checking for safety.**

3. Masking is not the enemy... forced masking is

Masking itself is not harmful.

Unchosen, constant masking is.

Problems tend to arise when:

- masking is required everywhere
- there's no place to rest from being observed
- masking is tied to survival (work, housing, care)
- unmasking would have consequences

This guide does not frame masking as something to eliminate.

It treats masking as a **tool**... one that can be:

- used intentionally
- reduced selectively

- set down when safe

The goal is **agency**, not purity.

4. Unmasking is about regulation, not self-expression

A common misconception is that unmasking is about:

- expressing everything
- saying exactly what you think
- behaving however you feel

That framing can be dysregulating.

A gentler, safer reframe:

Unmasking is about reducing unnecessary effort and self-surveillance.

It might look like:

- allowing natural movement
- speaking less or more slowly
- not forcing eye contact
- letting your face rest
- responding honestly instead of performing reassurance
- choosing silence over explanation

Unmasking is often **subtractive**, not expressive.

5. Why “just be yourself” advice is unsafe

“Just be yourself” assumes:

- the environment is safe
- there are no power dynamics
- your needs will be respected
- consequences are minimal

For many ND people, this is not true.

Unmasking without safety can:

- increase anxiety

- trigger backlash
- cause relational harm
- lead to shutdown or regret

You are not behind for needing conditions.

Safety is not something you overcome.
It's something you **build**.

6. The nervous system rule: safety before exposure

Unmasking works best when:

- safety is established first
- exposure is gradual
- recovery is available
- choice is preserved

A helpful internal question:

“If I unmask a little here, what’s the worst likely outcome... and could I recover from it?”

If the answer feels overwhelming, that’s information... not a failure.

You don’t have to start where it’s hardest.

7. What gentle unmasking actually looks like

Gentle unmasking often begins in **low-stakes ways**.

Examples:

- letting yourself stim when alone
- not correcting your tone
- resting your face
- taking longer to respond
- saying “I need time” instead of filling silence
- wearing clothes that feel regulating
- allowing quiet without explaining

These shifts may feel small... but they reduce **constant effort**, which is where the real cost lies.

8. Choosing *where* to unmask (context matters)

You do not need to unmask everywhere.

Many people find it helpful to map:

- **safe spaces** (home, certain people)
- **conditional spaces** (some work contexts)
- **unsafe spaces** (high evaluation or power imbalance)

Unmasking can look different in each.

You might:

- unmask fully in safe spaces
- partially in conditional ones
- mask intentionally where needed

This is not inauthentic.

It's **context-aware self-protection**.

9. The emotional hangover after unmasking

Even gentle unmasking can trigger a “hangover.”

You might notice:

- rumination
- self-doubt
- urge to apologise or explain
- fear you shared too much
- desire to retreat

This doesn't mean you did anything wrong.

It often means:

- your system isn't used to being seen without armour
- old threat memories are activating
- integration is still happening

Aftercare matters.

10. Aftercare: how to support yourself post-unmasking

After unmasking, it can help to:

- reduce social input
- ground in the body
- avoid replaying the interaction
- remind yourself you're safe now
- return to something familiar

You don't need to evaluate the moment immediately.

Let your system settle first.

Clarity often comes later.

11. When unmasking changes relationships

Unmasking can shift dynamics.

Some people may:

- respond with curiosity or care
- need time to adjust
- become uncomfortable
- resist the change

This is not always about you.

When relationships only function when you are masked, that's information... not an obligation to revert.

You're allowed to grieve this.

You're also allowed to choose yourself.

12. Unmasking is not linear

You may:

- unmask more, then less
 - feel braver one day and cautious the next
 - pull back after overexposure
 - need long breaks
-

This is not regression.

It's **self-regulation**.

Your nervous system sets the pace... not a timeline.

13. Signs unmasking is helping (often subtle)

You might notice:

- less exhaustion
- fewer shutdowns
- quicker recovery after socialising
- reduced self-criticism
- more internal quiet
- clearer yes/no signals

These changes are quiet but meaningful.

They indicate **load reduction**, not personality change.

14. What unmasking is *not* asking you to do

It is not asking you to:

- disclose diagnoses
- confront unsafe people
- drop coping strategies overnight
- risk your livelihood
- be emotionally exposed

You are allowed to:

- mask intentionally
- choose privacy
- protect yourself
- unmask slowly or never

Unmasking is optional.

15. A gentle unmasking check-in (optional)

You can copy this if helpful:

- **Where am I masking most heavily right now?**
- **What is that masking protecting me from?**
- **Is there one tiny place I could soften it?**
- **What support or recovery would I need after?**

Answering one question is enough.

A closing permission

You are not obligated to be visible to be valid.
You are not dishonest for protecting yourself.
You are not behind for needing safety first.

Unmasking is not about becoming more exposed.

It's about becoming **less exhausted**.

You are allowed to choose:

- where
- when
- how
- and with whom

You don't owe the world your unfiltered self.

You owe your nervous system **care, pacing, and protection**.

Use what fits.
Leave the rest.

