



Masking, Shame & Identity

How trying to fit in fractures self-trust... and how it can be repaired

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If you are experiencing severe distress, persistent mental health difficulties, or are concerned about your safety, please seek support from a qualified healthcare professional or local emergency services.

Use these tools in ways that feel safe and appropriate for you. You are not required to push through distress or manage alone.

Many neurodivergent adults discover the concept of masking late.

Not because they weren't doing it...

but because masking had become so constant that it no longer felt like an action.

It felt like *who they were*.

This guide explains what masking actually is, why it develops, how shame becomes internalised, and why identity often feels unstable or fragmented after years of coping.

It is not about blaming individuals for adapting.

It is about understanding the **cost of adaptation without safety**.

What masking actually is (and what it isn't)

Masking is often described as pretending.

Putting on an act.

Hiding your "true self."

Performing for others.

This framing is incomplete... and often harmful.

Masking is better understood as **continuous self-monitoring and self-interruption**.

It involves:

- suppressing natural responses
- editing tone, expression, and behaviour
- overriding sensory or emotional needs
- scanning constantly for social feedback
- adjusting in real time to avoid judgement

Masking is not deception.

It is **adaptation in the absence of safety**.

Masking is usually learned early

Most neurodivergent people do not choose masking consciously.

They learn it.

Often early.
Often quietly.
Often in response to repeated correction.

This learning may come from:

- being told you're too loud, too intense, too sensitive
- being punished for impulsivity or emotional expression
- being praised only when you suppress yourself
- noticing that acceptance depends on compliance

Over time, the nervous system learns a simple rule:

"I am safer when I edit myself."

Masking becomes protective... and automatic.

Why masking works (at first)

Masking is not irrational.

It often brings:

- reduced conflict
- better social or academic outcomes
- praise for being "mature" or "easy"
- external success

This is why many neurodivergent people appear to cope well... sometimes exceptionally well... for years.

But this success comes at a cost that is not immediately visible.

The hidden cost: continuous self-interruption

Masking requires constant internal effort.

It means:

- monitoring your own reactions
- suppressing impulses before they reach expression
- translating natural responses into acceptable ones
- staying alert to subtle social cues

This is cognitively and emotionally expensive.

Over time, it can lead to:

- chronic fatigue
- emotional numbness or volatility
- loss of spontaneity
- difficulty accessing joy or creativity

The system is never fully at rest.

When masking becomes identity confusion

One of the most painful consequences of long-term masking is **identity fragmentation**.

Many people begin to ask:

- “Who am I when I’m not performing?”
- “What do I actually want?”
- “Are my preferences real or learned?”
- “Do people like me... or the version I present?”

This confusion is not a lack of self.

It is the result of **continuous self-interruption over time**.

When expression is filtered constantly, continuity of experience breaks.

Shame is how masking sustains itself

Masking is often held in place by shame.

Shame develops when:

- differences are treated as defects
- needs are framed as inconveniences
- emotional responses are criticised or dismissed
- effort is only rewarded when it hides difficulty

Over time, external judgement becomes internal.

People begin to pre-emptively criticise themselves:

“Don’t be like that.”

“Calm down.”

“Act normal.”

Shame becomes a regulator... but a damaging one.

Shame does not motivate... it constrains

Many people believe shame keeps them functional.

In reality, shame:

- increases nervous system threat
- narrows cognitive access
- reduces flexibility
- increases burnout risk

What looks like self-discipline is often **self-surveillance**.

And self-surveillance is exhausting.

Why burnout often follows long-term masking

Burnout is not caused by neurodivergence.

It is often caused by **sustained adaptation without recovery**.

Masking accelerates burnout because:

- effort is constant, not cyclical
- needs are deferred indefinitely
- internal signals are ignored
- rest is conditional on performance

Many people only recognise how much energy masking consumed *after* they can no longer do it.

Burnout is often the first time the system says:
“I can’t keep disappearing.”

Unmasking is not becoming someone else

Unmasking is often misunderstood as:

- dropping all filters
- rejecting social norms
- becoming chaotic or inconsiderate

This is not what unmasking actually involves.

Unmasking is about:

- reducing unnecessary self-suppression
- responding honestly to internal signals
- allowing needs to exist without justification
- restoring continuity between inner and outer experience

It is not about being unfiltered.

It is about being **less fractured**.

Why unmasking can feel destabilising at first

Many people are surprised to find that unmasking feels uncomfortable.

This can include:

- increased emotional awareness
- fatigue as suppression lifts
- grief for lost time
- fear of rejection
- uncertainty about boundaries

This does not mean unmasking is wrong.

It means the nervous system is **relearning safety without constant self-editing**.

That takes time.

Identity is not discovered... it is stabilised

A common fear is:

“If I stop masking, who will I be?”

Identity is not something hidden that must be uncovered.

It is something that **stabilises when expression is no longer constantly interrupted**.

As masking reduces:

- preferences become clearer
- values feel more grounded
- emotional responses make more sense
- self-trust begins to return

Identity coherence grows through consistency, not performance.

Safety, not bravery, allows authenticity

People are often told to “be themselves.”

This advice ignores a critical truth:

Authenticity requires **safety**.

People unmask not because they are brave, but because:

- environments become predictable
- relationships feel non-punitive
- difference is accommodated
- shame decreases

Without safety, unmasking is risky.

The nervous system knows this.

What actually supports healing

Repairing the impact of masking is not about radical change.

It is about:

- noticing when you're self-interrupting
- allowing small, safe expressions of need
- reducing internal self-criticism
- choosing environments that tolerate difference
- building relationships where effort is not required to belong

Healing is gradual and relational.

A different story about yourself

Many people leave masking with a painful narrative:

“I don't know who I am.”

“I lost myself.”

“I was fake.”

A more accurate story is this:

You adapted to survive.
You protected connection.
You did the best you could with the safety available.

Now, you are learning how to exist **without disappearing**.

That is not failure.

That is growth.

A final reminder

Masking kept you safe... until it didn't.

You are not broken for needing to rest from it.
You are not selfish for wanting continuity.
You are not difficult for having needs.

Identity is not something you must perform correctly.

It is something that emerges when the nervous system no longer has to choose between **belonging and being real**.

And that is worth protecting.

