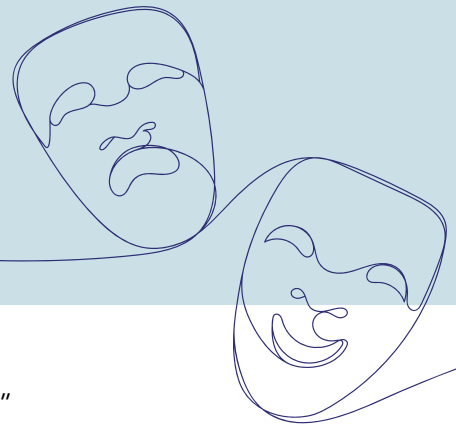


# Why some teens “mask” their neurodivergence



Masking means hiding or changing parts of yourself, so you seem more “typical” to other people. Many neurodivergent teens—such as those with autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—may mask in places like school, social situations, or online.

Sometimes people do this without even realizing it. It can become a habit when you’re trying to fit in or avoid being misunderstood. At the same time, it’s important to have spaces where you don’t have to mask—like with trusted friends, supportive adults, or neurodivergent communities.

Being neurodivergent means your brain works differently, not incorrectly.

## What masking can look like

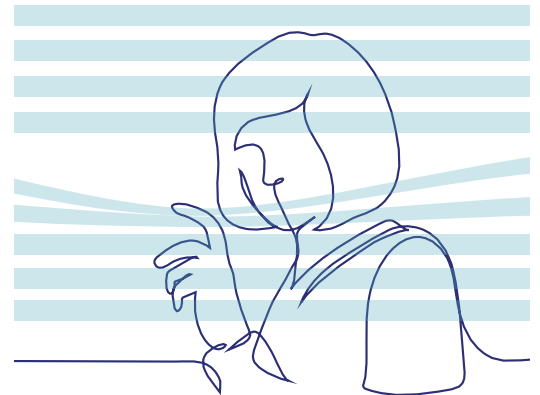
Masking can show up in different ways, such as:

- Forcing yourself to make eye contact even when it feels uncomfortable
- Copying how other people talk, joke or act
- Hiding stimming (like fidgeting, rocking or tapping)
- Practicing conversations ahead of time so you don’t say the “wrong” thing
- Pretending you understand something even when you feel confused or overwhelmed

## Why do people mask?

There are many reasons teens might mask. Some common ones include:

1. **Wanting to belong:** Everyone wants friends and to feel accepted. Some teens worry they might be left out if they act differently.
2. **Avoiding bullying or teasing:** If someone has been teased for being different, they might start hiding those parts of themselves to protect themselves socially.
3. **Conforming to social expectations:** School, social media and peer groups often send messages about how people are “supposed” to act or communicate.
4. **Not wanting extra attention:** Some teens don’t want people asking lots of questions about their differences.
5. **Trying to succeed at school or activities:** A student might feel pressure to act a certain way to avoid getting in trouble or being misunderstood.



## How masking can affect mental health

Masking can sometimes help someone get through certain situations, but doing it all the time can be really tiring.

Some possible effects include:

- **Mental exhaustion:** Constantly thinking about how you act or speak can feel like performing in a play all day. That takes a lot of energy.
- **Feeling like you can't be yourself:** If someone feels like they always have to hide parts of who they are, they may start to feel disconnected from their real identity.
- **Stress and anxiety:** Worrying about saying the "wrong" thing or being judged can create a lot of pressure.
- **Burnout:** Some neurodivergent people experience burnout, which can include extreme tiredness, feeling overwhelmed, or not having the energy to keep masking.

### Teen reflection checklist: Noticing when you might be masking

This checklist is meant to help you notice when you might be masking and how it could be affecting you. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is simply to help you learn more about your own experiences and what feels true for you.



#### Instructions:

Read each statement and check the box that fits you best.

Statement	Never	Sometimes	Often
I pretend to understand things in conversations even when I feel confused.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I copy how other people talk, act, or joke so I fit in better.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I force myself to make eye contact even if it feels uncomfortable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I hide movements or behaviors that help me feel calm (like fidgeting, rocking, or tapping).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I rehearse what I will say before conversations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like I'm "acting" a certain way at school or with peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I worry about being judged if I act like my natural self.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel very tired after social situations or a full school day.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel different from others and try to hide it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel more relaxed when I'm alone or with people who understand me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Reflection questions

After completing the checklist, think about these questions:

1. When do I notice myself masking the most?

*Examples: school, group work, sports, social media, with certain friends.*

2. How do I feel after situations where I mask a lot?

*Examples: tired, relieved, stressed, proud, confused.*

3. Are there places or people where I feel comfortable being myself?

What makes those spaces feel safer?

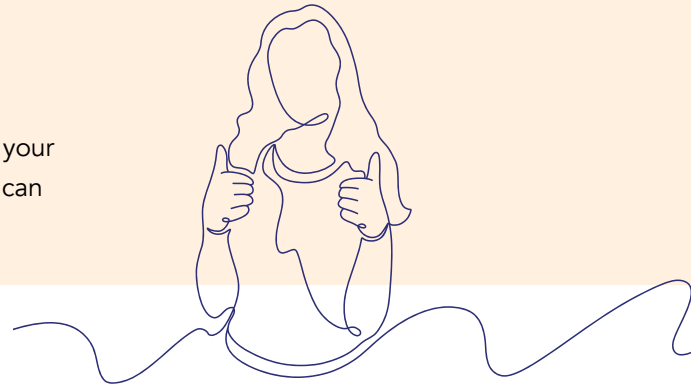
4. What helps me feel calm or recharged after social situations?

*Examples: quiet time, hobbies, music, talking with someone I trust.*

## Unmasking safely

*Exploring ways to be more yourself*

Learning when and how to unmask safely means finding ways to express your authentic self in environments where you feel supported. This worksheet can help you think about where, when, and how it feels safe to be yourself.



### Part 1: What does “being myself” look like?

Think about times when you feel comfortable being your natural self.

When I feel safe being myself, I might:

- Talk about my interests freely
- Move or stim in ways that help me focus
- Speak honestly about how I feel
- Take breaks when I feel overwhelmed
- Communicate in ways that work best for me

Other ways I feel like my real self:

### Part 2: My safe people *Some people make it easier to be yourself.*

People I feel comfortable around:

Person

What makes them feel safe or supportive?

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### Part 3: My safe spaces: *Some environments make it easier to unmask.*

Places where I feel relaxed or accepted:

- At home     With certain friends     In a club or activity I enjoy  
 Online communities     Quiet or low-stimulus spaces

Other safe spaces:

### Part 4: Small steps toward unmasking:

*Unmasking doesn't have to happen all at once. Small steps can help you feel more comfortable.*

Circle any steps you might want to try:

- Letting myself stim or fidget when I need to  
 Sharing one of my interests with someone  
 Asking for a break when I feel overwhelmed  
 Saying when I don't understand something  
 Using tools that help me focus (fidgets, headphones, etc.)

A small step I might try this week:

### Part 5: Checking in with my feelings

When I show more of my real self, I might feel:

- Relieved     Nervous     Proud     Excited     Unsure

What emotions do I notice?

### Part 6: My support plan

If I feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed while unmasking, I can:

- Take a break     Talk to a trusted person     Move to a quieter space     Do something calming

A person I could talk to if I need support:

## Reflection

Complete this sentence: "Being able to be myself matters to me because..."

## Important reminder

Unmasking is a personal choice. It's okay to choose when and where you feel comfortable sharing parts of yourself. The goal isn't to stop masking everywhere—it's to find places and people where you feel safe, respected and understood. Sharing differences with friends can be a helpful way to unmask and work towards showing up as your authentic self. Check out our "sharing differences" worksheet to learn more.