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UNMASKING ME

Who am I when I am not performing for other people? Exploring masking, authenticity, safety and being more myself

NEW DISABILITY WORKBOOK SERIES - BOOK 17

This workbook belongs to:

Masking can be conscious or automatic. It may have developed for safety, acceptance, employment, education or simply getting through environments that were not designed for you. Unmasking is not an obligation, and safety matters.

Welcome

This workbook is not about forcing yourself to reveal everything or behave differently everywhere. It is about noticing where you perform, what that costs, and where you might have more room to be yourself.

A place or person around whom I feel most like myself:

1. What Does Masking Mean to Me?

Masking can involve hiding needs, changing communication or monitoring yourself closely.

- ☐ Forcing eye contact
- ☐ Copying other people
- ☐ Rehearsing conversations
- ☐ Hiding stimming / movement
- ☐ Pretending sensory input is fine
- ☐ Suppressing pain or fatigue
- ☐ Laughing when I do not understand
- ☐ Changing my natural communication
- ☐ Agreeing to avoid conflict
- ☐ Pretending I need less support
- ☐ Monitoring facial expression / tone
- ☐ Staying longer than I can manage

My notes / what applies to me:

2. Where Do I Mask Most?

Masking may change depending on the environment.

Place / people	How much I mask	What I change / hide
Home	Low / Med / High	
Family	Low / Med / High	
Friends	Low / Med / High	
Work / learning	Low / Med / High	
Healthcare	Low / Med / High	
Community	Low / Med / High	
Online	Low / Med / High	

3. What Am I Trying to Protect?

Masking often has a reason.

- ☐ Safety
- ☐ Employment / education
- ☐ Avoiding judgement
- ☐ Avoiding bullying
- ☐ Being taken seriously
- ☐ Keeping privacy
- ☐ Avoiding conflict
- ☐ Wanting to belong
- ☐ Not wanting to worry people
- ☐ Past experiences of being misunderstood

My notes / what applies to me:

4. The Cost of the Performance

Notice what happens during and after masking.

During masking	After masking

5. My Automatic Scripts

Some social responses become rehearsed because they make interactions more predictable.

Scripts or phrases I use automatically:

6. Things I Hide

Only include what feels safe to explore.

Things about my needs, communication or comfort that I often hide:

7. Things I Pretend Are Fine

Sometimes “I am fine” means “I can keep performing for a little longer.”

What I say / show	What may actually be happening
I am fine	
No problem	
I do not mind	
I can stay	
I understand	
I do not need help	

8. My Natural Communication

What happens when you are not trying to communicate in the expected way?

- ☐ More direct language
- ☐ Less speech
- ☐ Typing / AAC
- ☐ Long pauses
- ☐ Different eye contact
- ☐ More movement / stimming
- ☐ Talking deeply about interests
- ☐ Needing specific questions
- ☐ Using fewer facial expressions
- ☐ Being quiet without being upset

My notes / what applies to me:

9. My Natural Sensory Needs

What would you choose if nobody judged your sensory regulation?

Sense / need	What I suppress	What I would naturally choose
Sound		
Light		
Touch		
Smell		
Movement		
Space / crowds		

10. My Natural Movement

Movement can regulate, communicate or simply feel good.

Movements I naturally want to make when I am comfortable:

11. Clothes, Comfort & Presentation

Comfort and self-expression do not always match social expectations.

What I would wear / choose more often if comfort came first:

12. The Difference Between Privacy and Masking

Privacy is choosing what to keep private. Masking can feel like having to hide to remain acceptable.

I choose to keep private	I feel pressured to hide

13. Safe People

Unmasking often begins with people who respond well to difference.

Person / group	What I can be more natural about	What makes them feel safe

14. Green Flags for Being Myself

Look for evidence that a person or space can handle authenticity.

- ☐ They respect no
- ☐ They do not mock disability traits
- ☐ They accept AAC / different communication
- ☐ They do not demand eye contact
- ☐ They allow quiet
- ☐ They believe me about sensory needs
- ☐ They do not pressure me to appear cheerful
- ☐ They accept boundaries
- ☐ They are curious without interrogating

My notes / what applies to me:

15. Places Where I Can Drop the Performance

This might be home, online, outdoors, a group, or with one person.

Places where I can use less energy pretending:

16. Tiny Unmasking Experiments

Small changes can provide useful information without requiring a dramatic reveal.

- ☐ Use a sensory tool openly
- ☐ Say I need more processing time
- ☐ Choose text instead of phone
- ☐ Leave when I am tired
- ☐ Wear something more comfortable
- ☐ Allow myself to be quiet
- ☐ Stop forcing eye contact
- ☐ Use my natural communication
- ☐ Say I do not understand
- ☐ Ask for an adjustment

A tiny experiment that feels safe enough for me:

17. Saying What I Actually Need

Practise replacing performance with clear information when it is safe.

Try: “I need a quieter space.” • “I need more time to answer.” • “I am listening even if I am not looking at you.” • “I need to leave before I am exhausted.”

Things I would like to say more directly:

18. When Other People React Badly

Someone disliking an access need does not automatically make the need unreasonable.

If someone reacts badly, I want to remember:

19. Unmasking at Work or Learning

Authenticity and disclosure are separate decisions. You can request useful adjustments without sharing every personal detail.

Things I currently mask at work / learning:

What the masking costs me:

Adjustments that could reduce the need to mask:

What I am comfortable sharing:

What I prefer to keep private:

20. Unmasking in Relationships

Close relationships may feel safer when needs do not have to be hidden.

I feel closest to people when I can:

A need I want to hide less in close relationships:

How someone can respond when I am more natural:

A boundary that helps me feel safe enough to be myself:

21. Who Am I Beyond Coping?

Identity is bigger than symptoms, productivity and other people's expectations.

I am...	I care about...
I enjoy...	I want...

22. Rediscovering Preferences

Long-term masking can make “What do I actually like?” surprisingly difficult.

Area	What other people expect	What I actually prefer
Socialising		
Communication		
Clothes		
Food		
Free time		
Environment		
Routine		

23. My Unmasking Experiment

Choose one small, safe change and observe what happens.

What will I allow myself to do more naturally?

Where / with whom will I try it?

Why does this setting feel safe enough?

What support / exit plan do I need?

What happened?

How did my energy feel afterwards?

Do I want to repeat, change or stop this experiment?

24. My Masking Map

See where masking protects you, costs you, or may be safely reduced.

I mask for safety / privacy	I mask from habit
I want to mask less here	I already feel free to be myself here

25. My Authenticity Passport

A personal reminder of what helps you feel more like yourself.

My natural communication	
My sensory needs	
Movement / stimming that helps me	
How I show I am listening / engaged	
What I need when overloaded	
Things I do not want to force anymore	
People / places where I feel safest	
A part of myself I want to make more room for	

A Note to the Unmasked Me

I am allowed to choose authenticity and safety at the same time.

When I am not spending so much energy trying to look acceptable, I hope I have more room for:

Something about the real me I want to protect:

Notes

This workbook is a general disability-focused identity and self-understanding resource. Masking can be complex and may sometimes be connected to safety, trauma, employment, discrimination or social risk. Nobody is required to disclose a disability, stop masking, or behave more visibly disabled. Personal safety and choice come first.

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