



Masking:

Putting on a Mask to Fit In

In order to fit in socially and be considered "normal" in our daily environment, we need to comply with certain unwritten "rules". Therefore, we might choose the option of masking which can sometimes prove to be both a help and a hindrance.

Masking: Putting on a Mask to Fit In

Living in society has great advantages for us as a species. In fact, interaction with others is essential for the maintenance of our physical and psychological health. However, to fit in and be accepted by the group, we're forced to fit the narrow mold of apparent "normality." Therefore, those who differ from this in some sense are forced to use masking. This is a strategy that can prove to be extremely harmful.

Have you ever felt the need to put on a mask? To pretend to be who you weren't in order to adapt to a particular social situation? Perhaps you were grieving and had to smile and be nicer than you really felt like you wanted to be at work. Or, maybe you were meeting some new people and had to think of a list of things you wouldn't normally say to them.



Masking

Masking, also known as camouflage, is a coping strategy that means the individual adapts their behavior to the kind that's socially expected. It's a kind of social camouflage that people adopt to appear socially competent and adjust to what's understood as normality. In this way, they hide any signs of divergence and force themselves to act neurotypically. It can be an extremely adaptive habit. However, it can also be very limiting if the person ends up diluting their identity in the process.

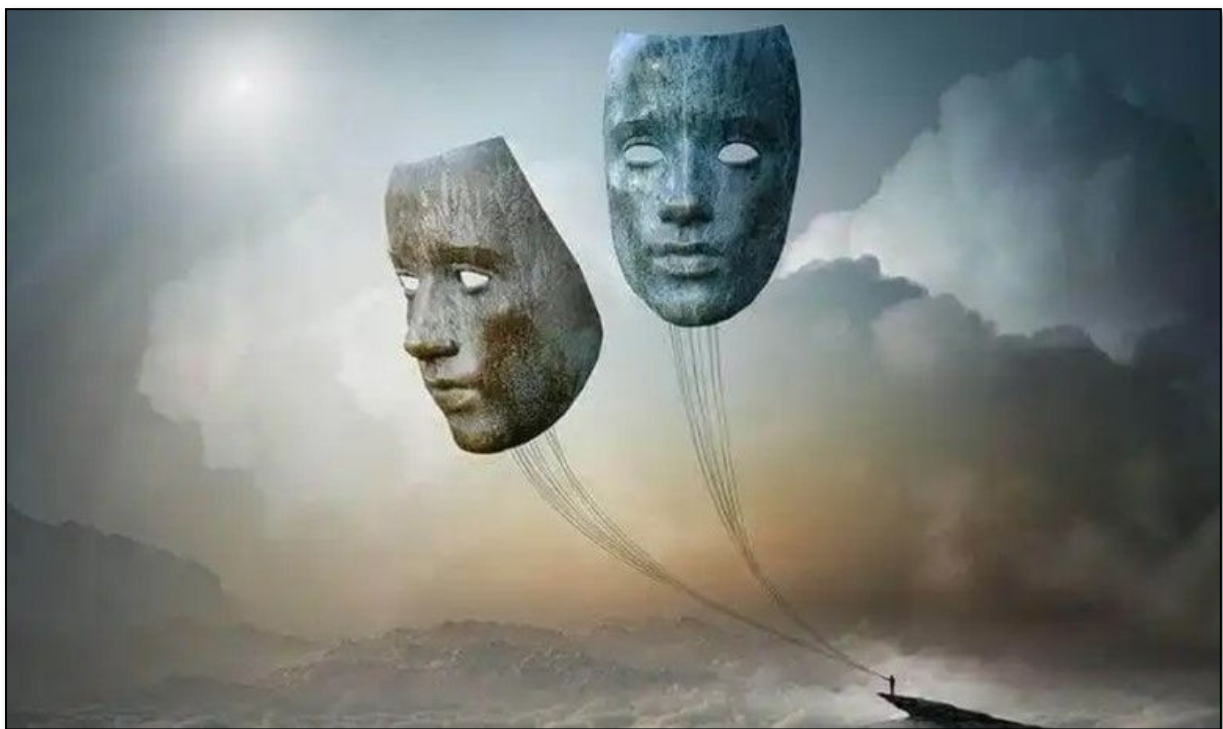
Neurotypical people are those who present a typical kind of neurological development. In other words, they think, feel, and act as the majority of the population does. On the other hand, neurodivergent people possess a

different understanding and interpretation of reality. Indeed, although their vision is as valid as the rest of us, they tend to suffer misunderstandings and are forced to “pretend” to avoid rejection.

Who uses masking to fit in?

As we mentioned earlier, it's neurodivergent people who are most often forced to perform this type of social camouflage.

As a matter of fact, people with no apparent disorder may use this strategy in certain situations. This is more apparent in those with a lack of or difficulties in social skills.



Consequences and associated problems

At first glance, masking can seem rather functional. In fact, it certainly fulfills its adaptive function. It allows for greater social success and can even prevent people from suffering from bullying at school or at work. However, in the long term, it can have serious mental health consequences. For instance:

- Having to constantly act or pretend is psychologically draining. Therefore, after periods of social interaction, the person may feel exhausted, overwhelmed, and need some time alone to recharge.

- To camouflage themselves, they need to focus all their energy on complying with certain pre-established guidelines. For example, making eye contact, taking turns, choosing their words carefully, etc. All of this can make it difficult for them to really pay attention to the content of the conversation that's taking place. Therefore, the experience may not be as deep or meaningful as it could be.

- When masking is maintained daily and for a long time, it can lead to anxious and depressive episodes and even dissociation. With this condition, the person becomes detached from their true thoughts, feelings, and impulses, due to having to constantly direct and modify them.

- Finally, the biggest problem is that this strategy doesn't alleviate the individual's discomfort or add anything to their particular experience. In fact, it only invalidates their vision of the world in order to adapt it to that of others.



Empathy and tolerance for diversity

There's an easy way to reverse this situation. It's by cultivating empathy. Indeed, as a society, we have to open ourselves to diversity and understand that there are different ways of interpreting the world. Furthermore, that they're all valid in their own way.

Therefore, it's important that we all learn to put ourselves in others' shoes and understand their perspectives so we're not forcing them to relate to us on our terms.



**When differences are no longer viewed as negative
or as a cause for rejection, people can stop using masks
and start relating to others as they really are.**