

# What are 'masking' and 'camouflaging' in the context of autism and ADHD?

January 9 2023, by Beth Radulski

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We can begin identifying how neurotypical privilege – the cultural and social dominance of neurotypical norms – drives masking and camouflaging. Credit: [Leeloo Thefirst/Pexels](#), [CC BY](#)

Many [autistic](#) people and [ADHD-ers](#) report using "masking" and

"camouflaging" in their lives. This is where people [conceal certain traits](#) and replace them with neurotypical ones to avoid being recognized as neurominorities.

This can [involve](#) changing things such as

- tone of voice
- facial expressions
- eye contact
- speech patterns, and
- body language.

[Autistic](#) people make these changes in an effort to match dominant social norms.

Some [ADHD](#)-ers also embrace the concept, though [ADHD masking](#) remains under-explored in research.

Masking and camouflaging can cause immense [stress](#) for neurominorities. And they're different to the adjustments neurotypical people make in response to [social cues](#). While neurotypical people may moderate behavior to enhance social success, [masking and camouflaging differ](#) as they are used to avoid [negative consequences](#).

Here's what you need to know.

## How does masking or camouflaging affect

## neurominorities?

Masking and camouflaging are linked to:

- [physical, emotional, and intellectual exhaustion](#)
- [anxiety, depression, and poor self-image](#)
- negative [self-perception and identity loss](#)
- [burnout](#)
- [suicidality](#).

Yet, without masking and camouflaging many [autistic people](#) report experiencing difficulty [getting jobs and qualifications](#) or issues with [social exclusion](#). They may even risk [verbal and physical assaults](#).

The consequences of unmasking can be enormous. Disclosing autism can risk permanent residency [applications](#) being denied, and may lead to unwanted "[treatments](#)". For autistic people of color in particular, this can even result in violence from [police](#).

## Reducing the need for masking and camouflaging

In my late twenties, I found out I am autistic. Suddenly, things started to make sense. From failing ninth grade, to chronic unemployment, and [social isolation](#), I realized my disorder was causing these poor outcomes—or so I first thought.

This medical model understanding assumes disability is created

primarily by a [medical disorder](#) in the body or brain. That struggles autistic people or ADHD-ers face with [social life](#), employment, or schooling are because their brain doesn't work the way it "should".

The [neurodiversity movement](#) asks us to rethink this. It challenges us to ask how society can change to better include [neurominorities](#) (rather than seeing neurominorities as a problem needing to be "fixed").

The [#TakeTheMaskOff campaign](#) on Twitter, driven by neurodiversity activists, aims to address anti-autism discrimination and boost social acceptance and inclusion.

So, how can society prevent poor well-being, social, educational, and employment outcomes for neurominorities? And what's this got to do with masking?

My [research](#) suggests a first step is to begin identifying how neurotypical privilege—the cultural and social dominance of neurotypical norms—drives masking and camouflaging.

My work on autism is influenced by the work of activists who have [paved the way for disability anti-discrimination policy](#). My recent paper [argues](#) for an [intersectional approach](#) to examining why autistic people use masking and camouflaging and what changes we can make to reduce the need for them to do so.

Intersectionality identifies how forces such as colonialism, racism and patriarchy help reinforce systemic inequity.

For example, might neurominority women in male-dominated settings be under extra pressure to mask in order to "pass" as neurotypical? Might [autistic people of color](#) face [unique risks](#) when unmasking, in ways that most white people do not?

Perhaps one day we will see legal protections for visible neurominorities who cannot mask and camouflage, or choose not to.

In the meantime, you can support [neurodiversity inclusion](#) by:

- learning what [neurotypical privilege](#) is and how it is perceived by neurominorities
- acknowledging that unmasking and advocating for change can be [risky](#) for neurominorities
- learning about [neurodiversity cultural sensitivity](#)
- facilitating remote work and study options, and analyzing how working from home during COVID lockdowns [showed what's possible](#)
- using disability support resources designed by neurominorities. Try [Neurodiversity Hub](#), which has resources for universities, employers, and students.

Schools, workplaces, social circles, and [research institutions](#) should address neurotypical privilege. They should empower diverse neurominority leaders, and support them to drive systemic cultural change.

This is how we can remove barriers to unmasking, and improve life for neurominorities at work, school and in broader society.

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