

Masking and Camouflaging in Autism: Impression Management

Adjusting how we present ourselves to others is a common part of being human. However, the effort this takes, and how tiring it can become over time, varies from person to person. Some autistic young people may put extra effort into adapting or compensating for certain traits in social situations.

Common strategies used to navigate social situations

Copying others' gestures and expressions

Rehearsing or scripting conversations

Holding back natural responses

Maintaining eye contact despite discomfort

The cost of sustaining it

- Constant self-monitoring takes considerable mental effort
- Associated with stress, exhaustion, anxiety and low mood
- Can leave a young person feeling disconnected from who they are

Barriers to identification

- **Autistic traits may not be apparent** in a clinic room or classroom
- **Reports from parents, teachers and clinicians may differ**, since masking varies across settings
- **More commonly described in girls and young women**, although much of the evidence comes from adults

Implications for practice

Looking beyond observable behaviour to the young person's own experience

Comparing how they present across home, school and other settings

Easing the pressure to mask, rather than treating masking as a skill to build

Seeing masking as impression management shifts the clinical question from the young person's behaviour to the pressure behind it, and to the environments that make masking feel necessary.



Join Dr. Meng-Chuan Lai for an advanced webinar on masking and camouflaging in autistic young people: evidence, debates and clinical implications.

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