

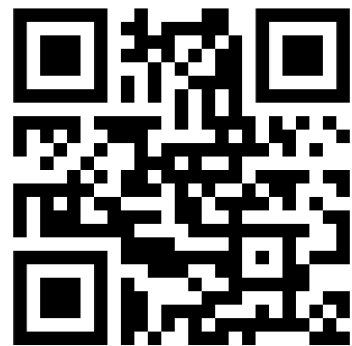
Masking in Autistic Adults: The Good, Bad & the Ugly

Christopher J. Quarto, Ph.D., PLLC

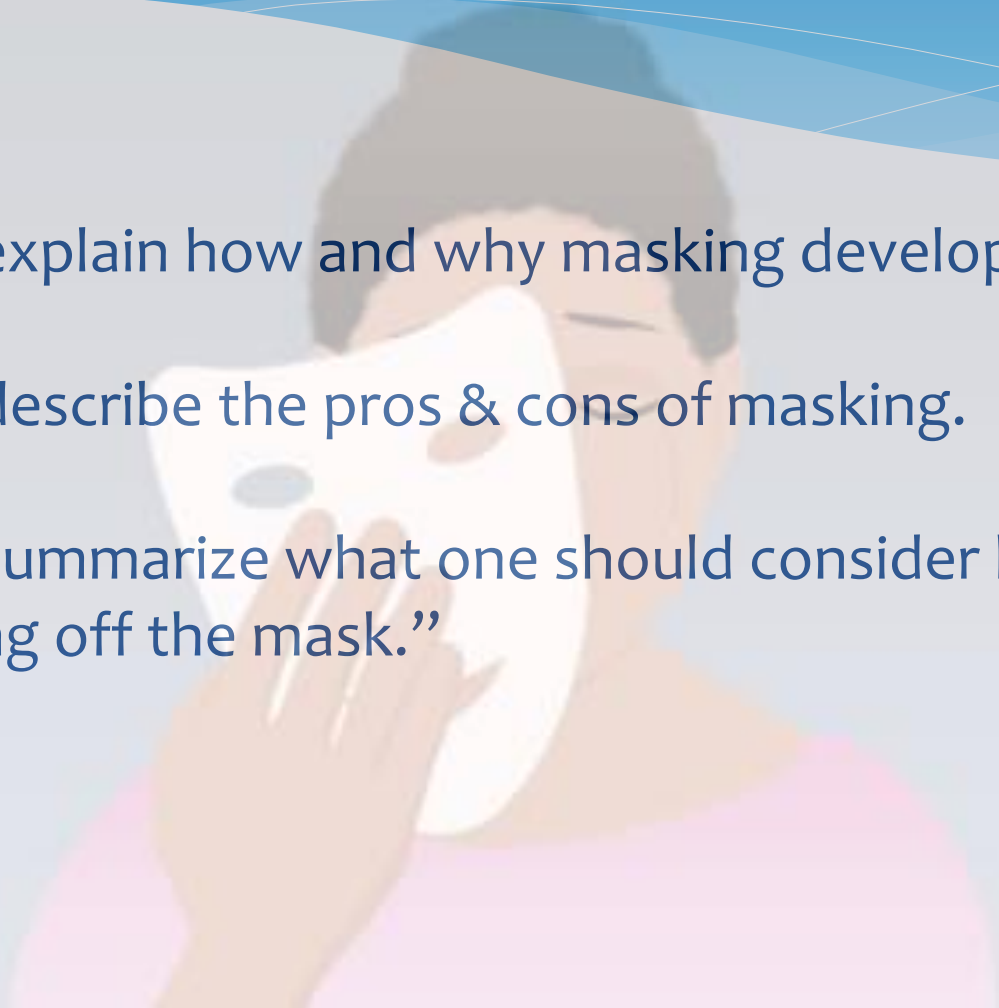
Licensed psychologist (HSP)

14th Annual Chattanooga Autism Conference

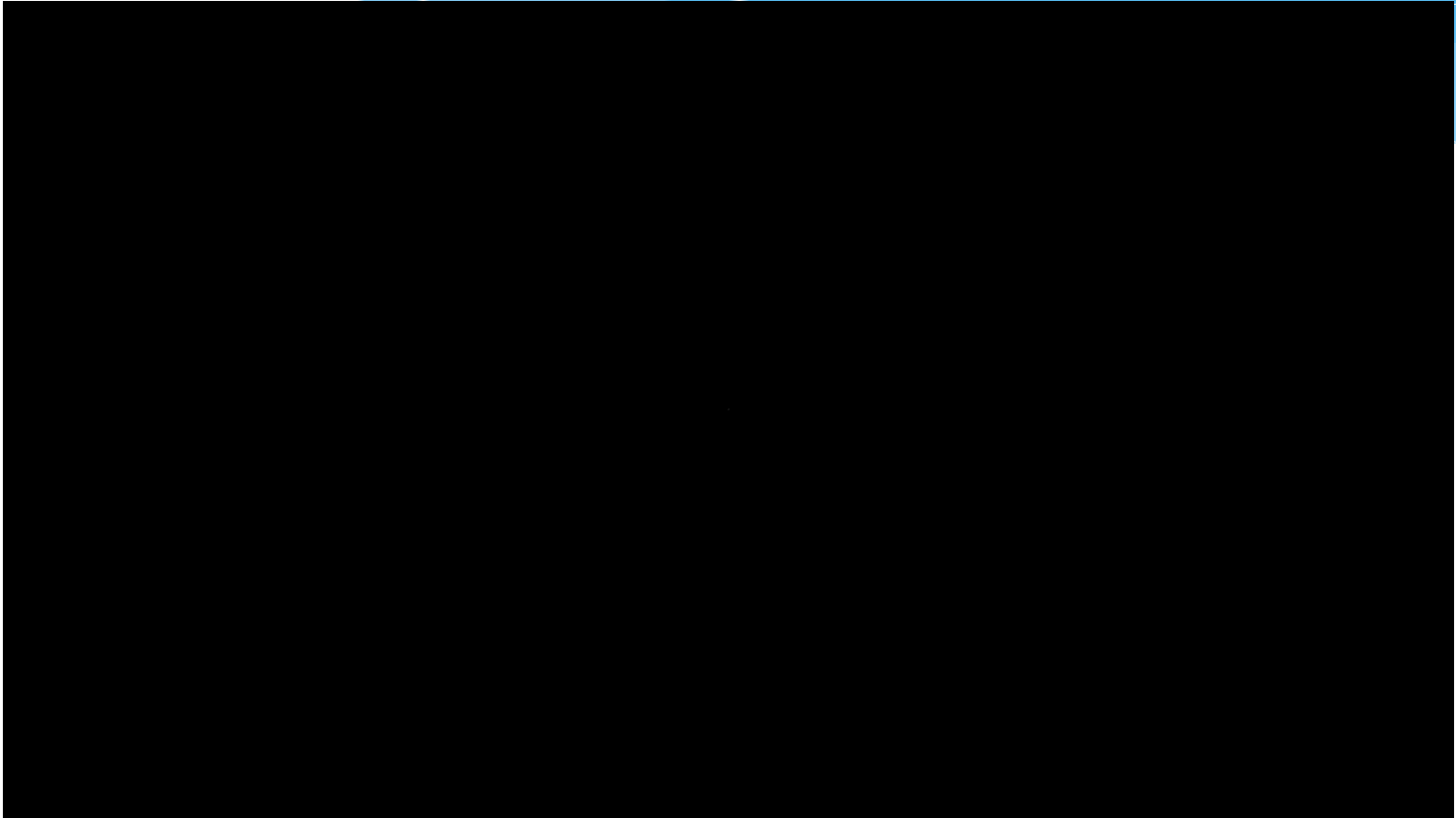
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Learning Objectives

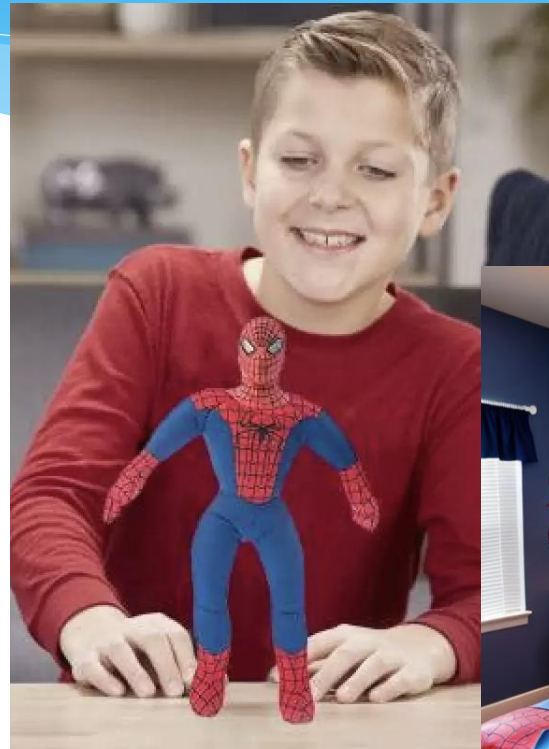
- * To explain how and why masking develops.
 - * To describe the pros & cons of masking.
 - * To summarize what one should consider before “taking off the mask.”
- 
- A faint, stylized illustration of a person with dark hair, wearing a pink top, holding a white, featureless mask in front of their face. The background is a light blue gradient.

Let's go Back... to the Future!



Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * Masking develops in a social context



Jaxon loves Spiderman!



Peer Acceptance & Rejection



- * Quality vs. quantity
- * Physical attractiveness
- * Socioeconomic, racial/ethnic & disability factors
- * Social competence

Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * *“Hey, Amelia. Your mom said you were sick. So, what happened?”*
- * VS.
- * *“Hey, Amanda. What’s wrong with you?”*



Peer Acceptance Meter

Peer Acceptance & Rejection

- * Peer accepted kids:
- * Good interpretation of body language, tone of voice, etc.
- * Eye contact
- * Explanations for listener understanding (perspective taking)

! Social
Thinking+

Four Steps of Perspective Taking

1

I think about you

2

**I think about your
motives and intentions**

3

**I think about what you
are thinking about me**

4

**I monitor my behavior & possibly
adapt it to try to keep you thinking
& feeling about me the way I want
you to think & feel about me!**

Peer Acceptance & Rejection



- * Peer accepted kids (continued):
- * Cooperative
- * Learn “social lay of the land”

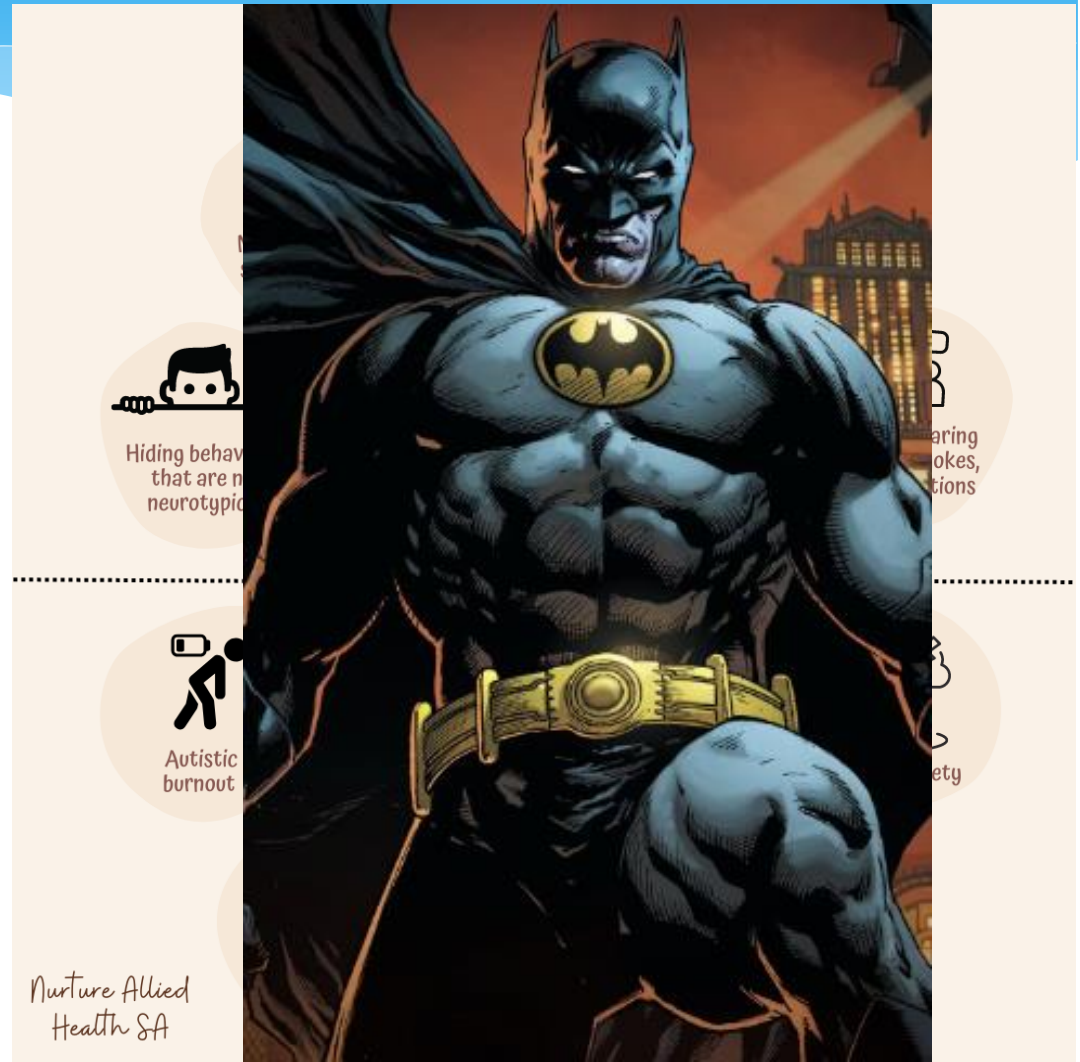
Peer Acceptance & Rejection



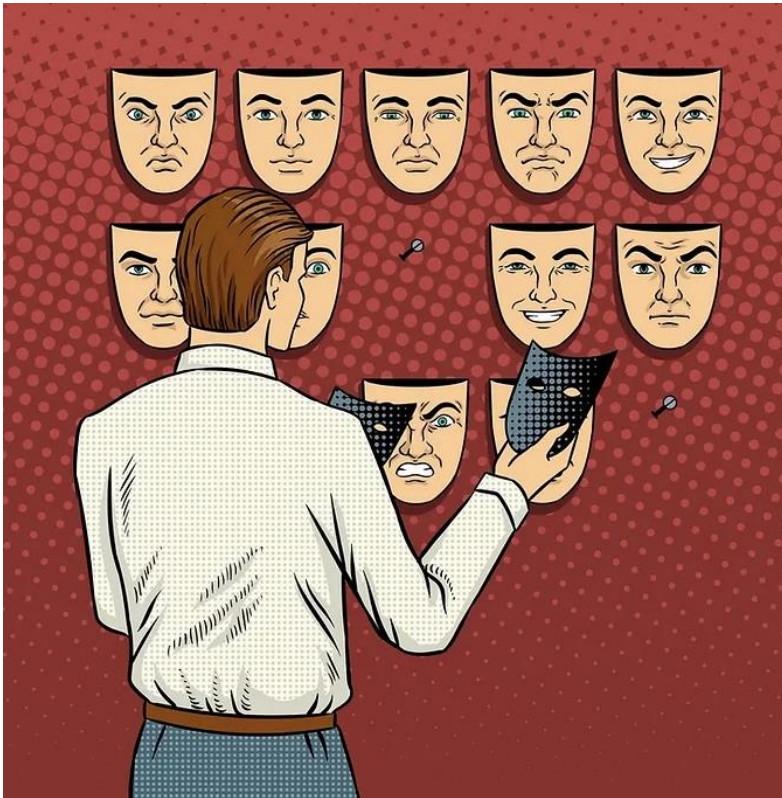
- * Peer rejected kids:
- * “Me” focused
- * Difficulty with perspective taking
- * Low cooperation/interest in social interaction
- * Shy/anxious or aggressive/poor emotional regulation

What is Masking?

- * A way to make people think more positively about you
- * Disguise self so people do not see the “real you”



What is Masking?

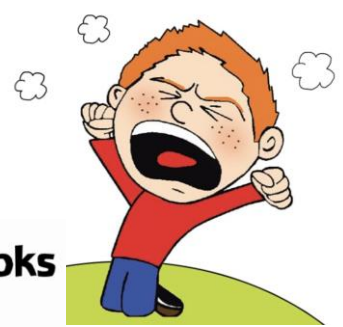


- * Impression management – using different personas to manage others’ impressions of you
- * Greater self-awareness makes impression management easier

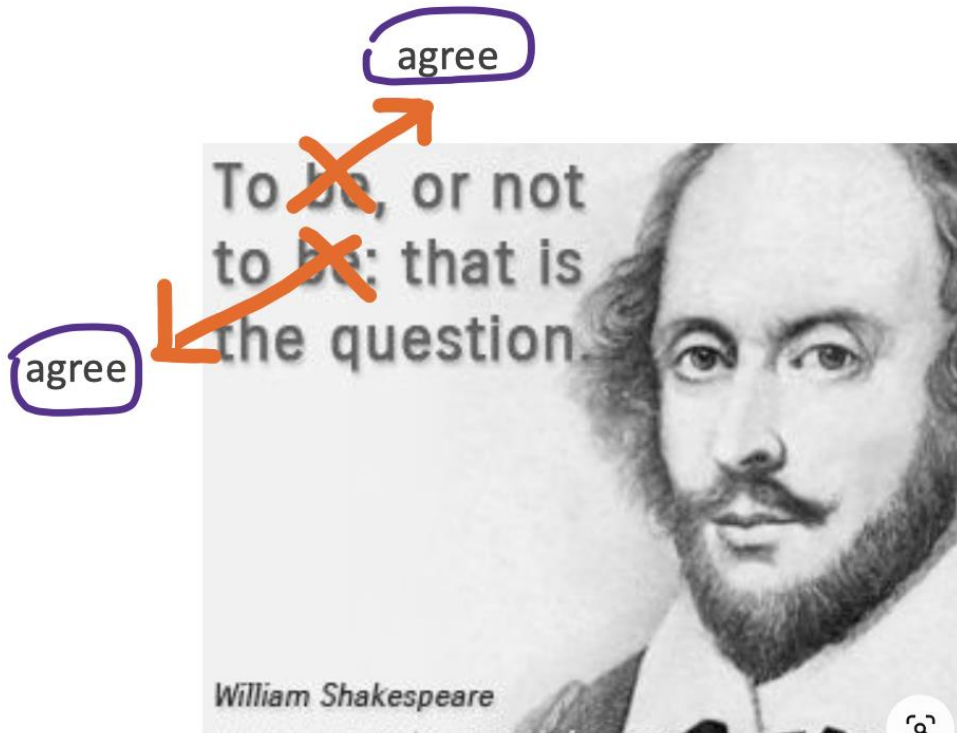
Reasons for Masking

- * *"If I can keep from flipping my lid then people won't think I'm strange."*
- * *"When I'm out in public I'm paranoid of how people will react to me if they see me rocking back and forth. It's like I'm always on high alert...it's so exhausting."*
- * *"[An autistic person who works at a coffee shop thinks to themselves,] 'I hate these constant changes in work schedules. I'm not sure how much longer I can take this. Why can't the owner just stick with the plan? I really need this job so I guess I'll put on a happy face and deal with it.'"*

Whenever Someone Looks At U Weird



Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



* I received help!

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

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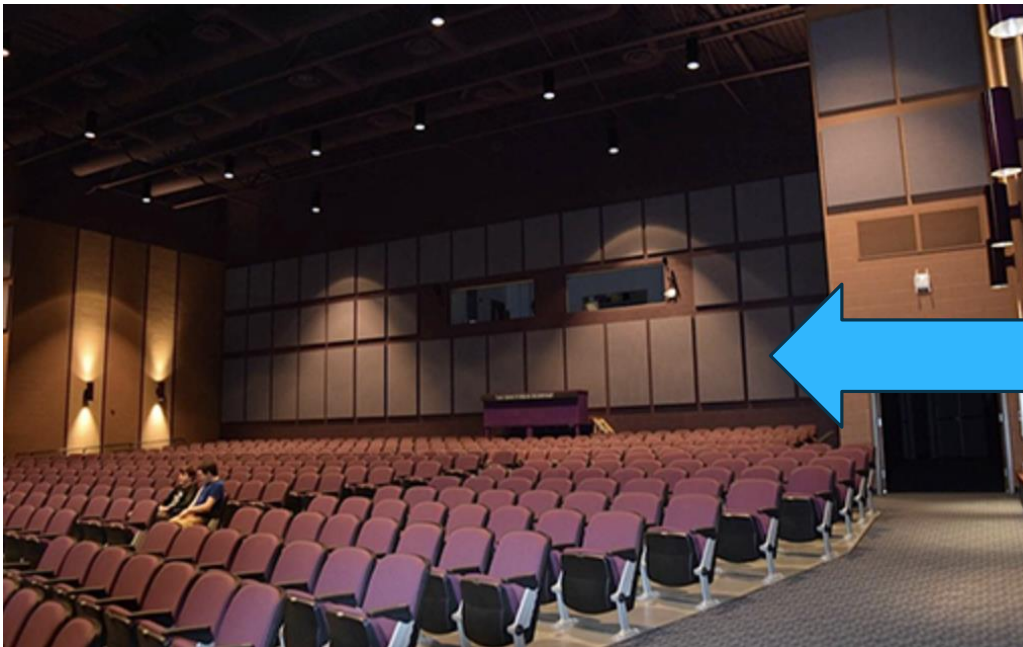
* Disclaimers!



“Here’s my report card
and here’s my personal disclaimer.”

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * 1. People take notice... usually in a good (or neutral) way



Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * 2. Provides alternatives to unsuccessful behaviors
- * *“It’s not worth it.”*
- * Masking depletes fuel from “emotional gas tank”
- * Reframing can help
- * Neurotypicals – comparing and contrasting



Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



- * 3. Masking is a source of survival in a neurotypical world
- * Fight – aggressive-like
- * Flight – fleeing
- * Fawning – people-pleasing
- * Freeze – doing nothing

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * 4. Masking enables person to “jump hurdles” to achieve goals



Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)

- * Learned helplessness (Sedgewick)
 - *“Those who feel like they have no control over their situation are more likely to experience helplessness and hopelessness and do nothing to avoid painful experiences. Those who feel they do have control, even if it is in a small way, tend to have better mental health, retain hope about improving things and will be more proactive in going for what they want.”*

Helpless Masking

“I have no choice but to mask.”

Capable Masking

“I have a choice of when, where and how to mask.”

Positives of Masking (i.e., “The Good”)



- * 5. Masking paves the road to acceptance, but...
- * ...you may encounter social “potholes” along the way...
- * **F-R-U-S-T-R-A-T-I-O-N!!**

Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

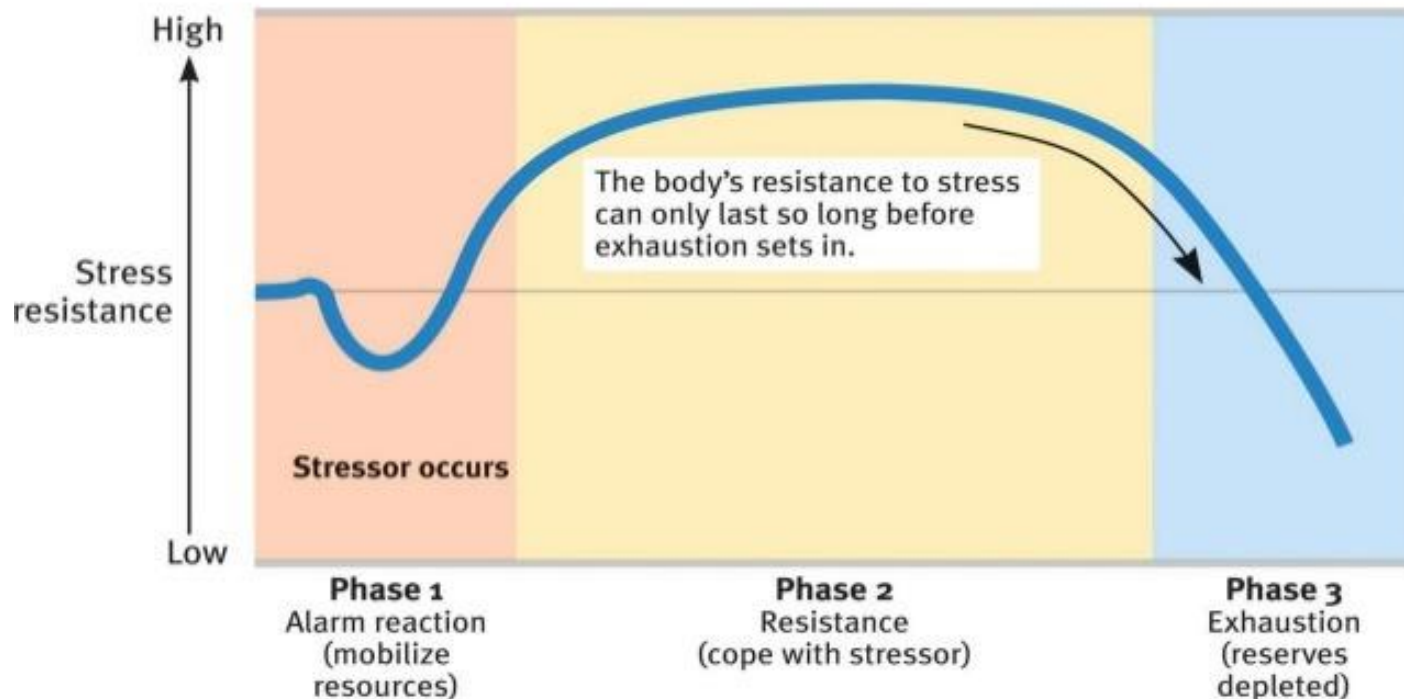
- * 1. Emotional & psychological discomfort



Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

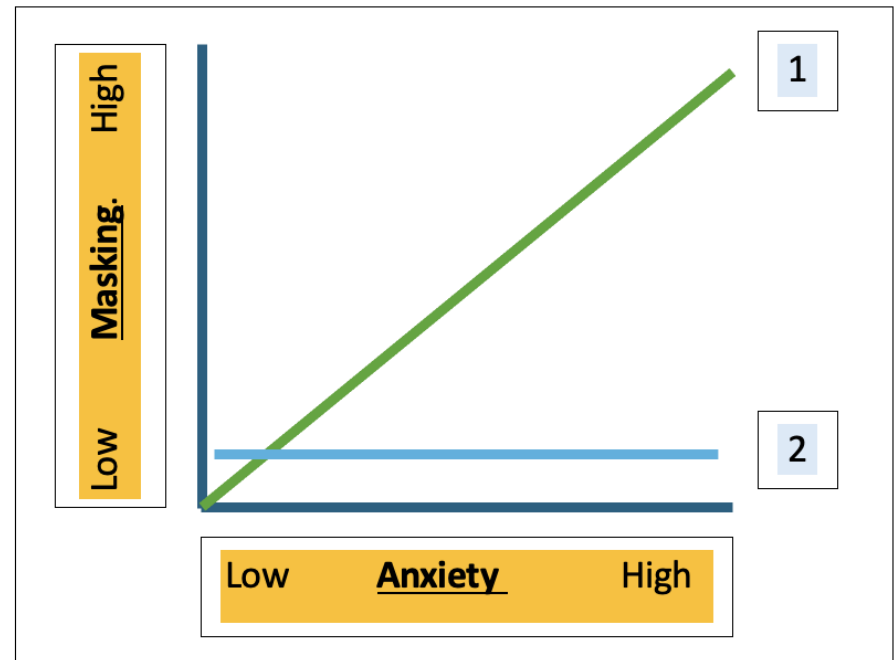
General Adaptation Syndrome [GAS] (Identified by Hans Selye):

Our stress response system defends, then fatigues.



Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

- * Masking lowers anxiety... but only temporarily
- * “What-ifs”



Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)



- * 2. Sacrifice authenticity
- * A price to pay
- * Neurotypicals – conforming to social norms
- * Autistics – avoiding negative consequences
- * Masking takes a lot of “spoons!”
- * Trauma responses deprive people from being their authentic selves



I just have
nothing left.

Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

- * 3. Unintentionally perpetuating society’s intolerance of differences / diversity by masking (no blaming the victim here!)

“You can’t be Autistic, you’re far too normal”.

Welcome to masking. It’s exhausting, burns me out and when it slips I turn into a bumbling mess, but thanks for making me feel both invalid and like I have to keep doing it to be accepted.

Negatives of Masking (i.e., “The Bad & the Ugly”)

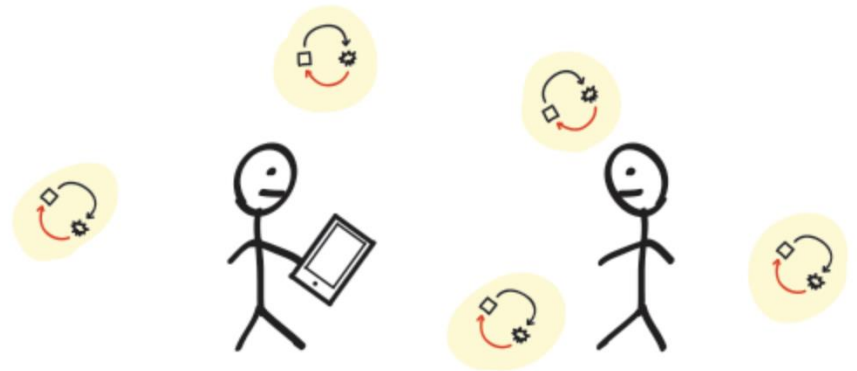


- * 4. Lack of recognition of needs and difficulties

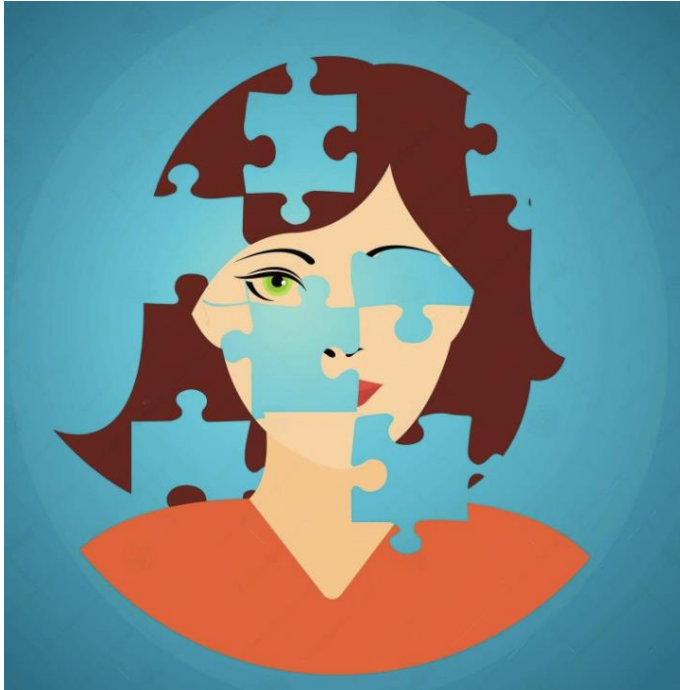


Considerations for Unmasking

- * Who are you without the mask?
- * Self-knowledge is acquired by interacting with people



Considerations for Unmasking



- * People don't react to the "real you" when you mask
- * Fewer "puzzle pieces" to piece together who you are

Considerations for Unmasking

- * Rejection vs. opportunity
- * Cost-benefit analysis
- * Think about self differently

Social Exchange Theory

Behavior or Action =
Rewards of interaction – Costs of interaction



Considerations for Unmasking

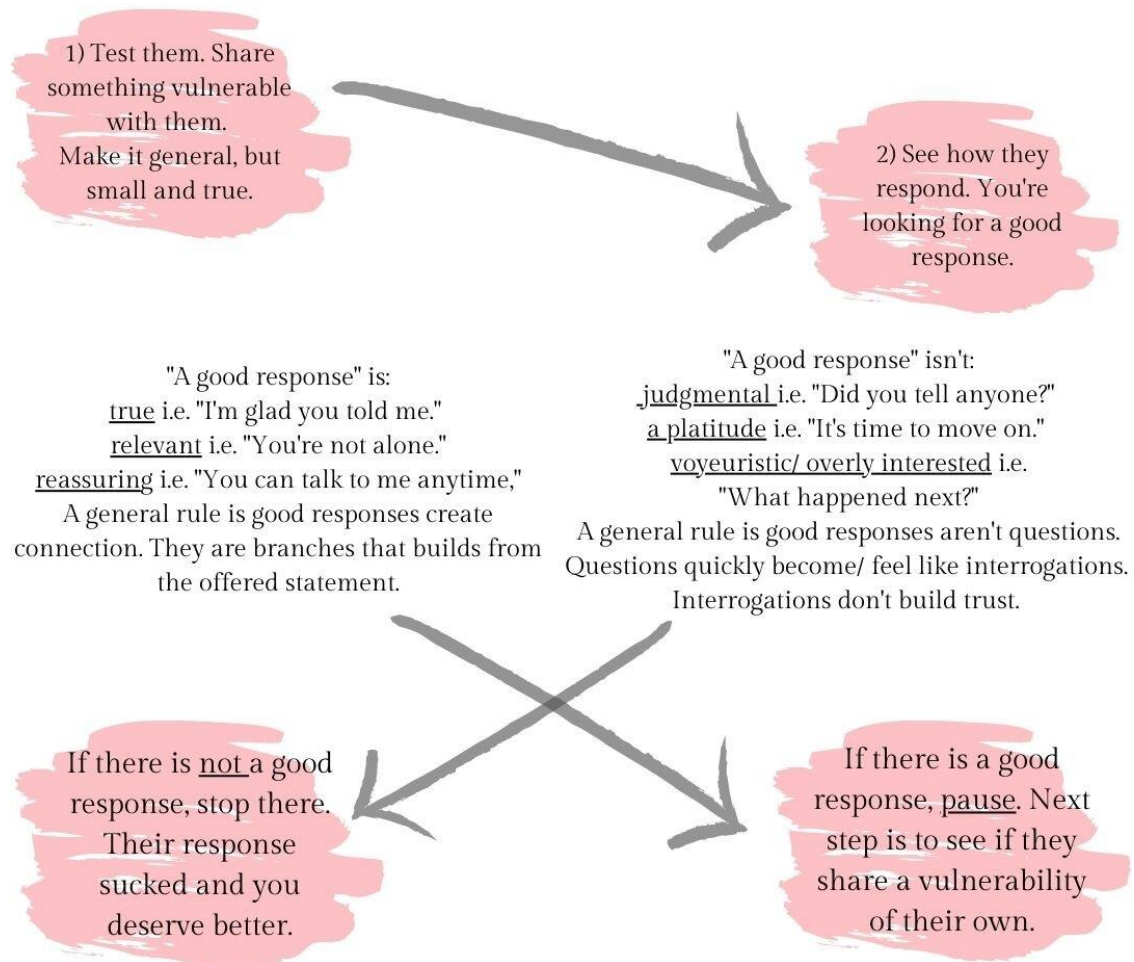
EMOTIONAL SAFETY	When, where, and with whom do I feel safe enough to ...
Difficult Emotions	Express feelings of sadness, anger, or fear?
Honesty	Give and receive honest feedback?
Help with Problems	Bring up complex problems and ask for help?
Differences & Belonging	Feel accepted for being different?

- * 1. Comfort & safety

Considerations for Unmasking

- * 2. Emotional well-being
- * Be strategic!
- * Do they seem kind, non-judgmental and trustworthy?

How to find safe, trusted people:



Considerations for Unmasking



- * 3. Relationship factors

- * Have more genuine interactions

- *  Authenticity  emotional exhaustion

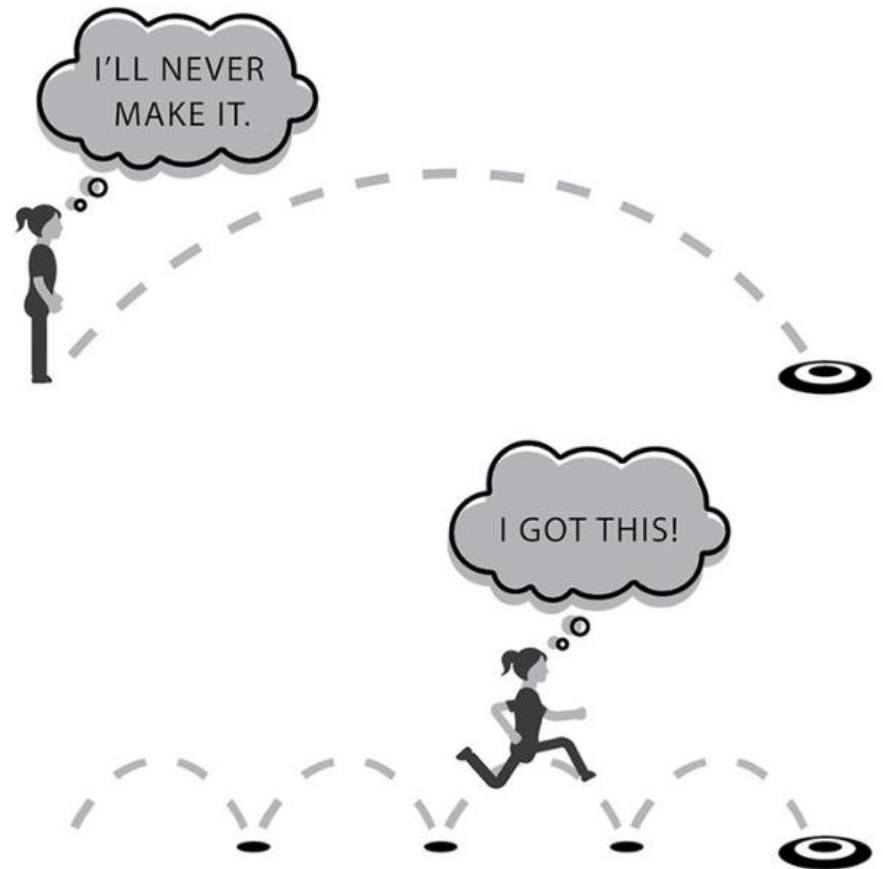
Considerations for Unmasking



- * 4. Context and setting
- * Masking... maybe yes... maybe no in professional or public settings
- * Enter the “autism advocate”

Considerations for Unmasking

- * 5. Personal goals
- * “Baby steps”



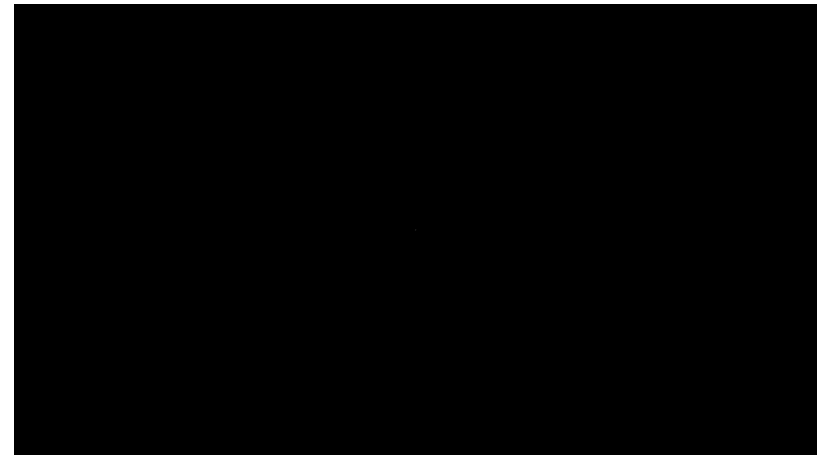
Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic



- * “What if they don’t believe me?”
- * 1. Be clear and direct
- * Reactions...reactions
- * “Invisible disability”

Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic

- * 2. Explain what it means
- * Stereotypes (e.g., Rain Man)
- * The different “faces” of autism

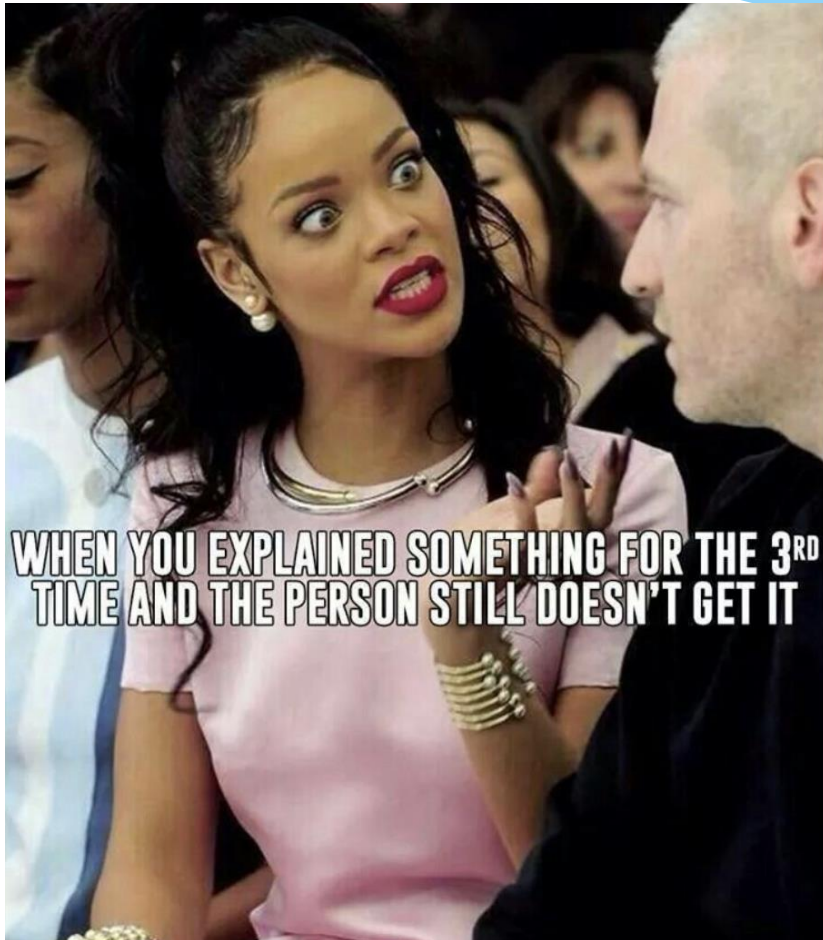


Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic

- * 3. Share how it affects you
- * Typical day-to-day experiences
- * Analogies can be helpful



Disclosing to Someone that You're Autistic

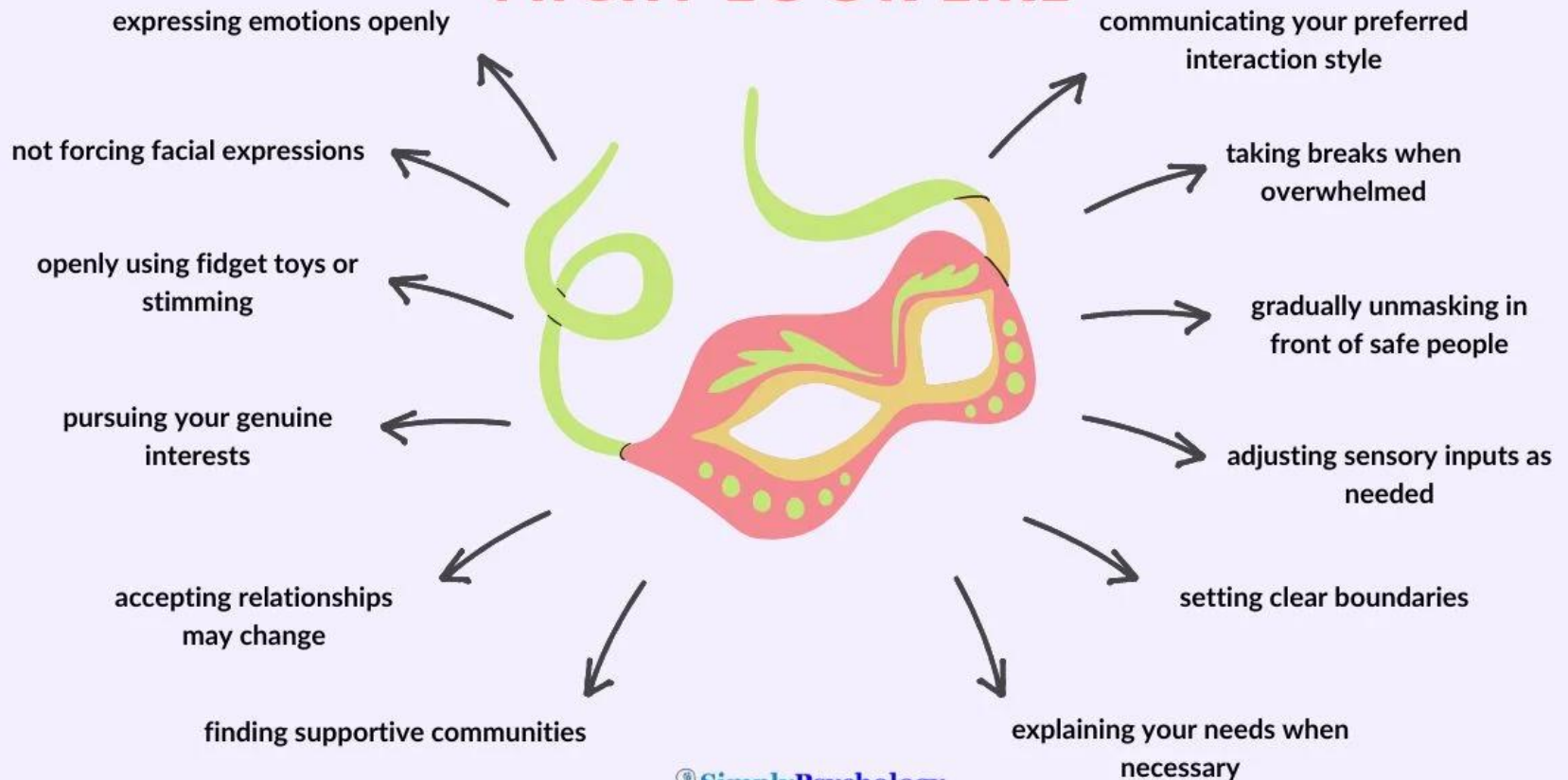


- * 4. Answer questions
- * Necessity of masking may be part of explanation
- * Do what feels right

Katie's Recommendations – “The Things I'd Go Back & Tell My Younger Self (About Unmasking)”

- “Start when you're ready and go at your own pace.
- Try unmasking with the most kind and understanding people first.
- Be gentle and patient with yourself.
- Remember that everyone won't accept the unmasked you, and that's okay.
- Remember that authenticity is the “endzone” and every time you “cross the goal line” you score mental health points.
- Don't forget that unmasking is a process, not a one-time event.
- When you're ready, show off your authentic, autistic self to the world.”

UNMASKING AUTISM MIGHT LOOK LIKE



QUESTIONS?

ANSWERS!