

MASKING BURNOUT MELTDOWNS SHUTDOWN AND OVERWHELM



What is Masking?

The art of hiding Autistic characteristics in social interactions or situations. It is also known as 'camouflaging', which means 'the difference between how someone seems in social contexts and what is happening to them on the inside.' Through observation of Neurotypical interactions, Autistics can learn how best to act to be accepted by their peers. **NOTE:** This can take a long time to be able to master). But to achieve this, they need to wear a mask (not a literal mask); a demeanour, language structure, appearance, etc., that is different from their natural self or inclination. Please note that this is not done to deceive or manipulate; it is due to fear of being rejected, ridiculed, ostracised, embarrassed, humiliated, vulnerable, or overwhelmed.

What does Masking look like?

It can take many forms, and it is mainly individual to each Autistic. Social scripts are a common tool used; the Autistic will have pre-set responses to specific questions or statements, or they will have run through several potential conversations in their head, prior to the social interaction, to prepare a social script for that specific event. Mimicry is common with female Autistics; this is where they subtly copy the other person's behaviour, body language, or tone and inflexion of their voice.

This can also include clothing style, hairstyle, makeup, etc. Practising body movements, posture, facial expressions, etc., before the social interaction to ensure that they can confidently and successfully emote the pose, facial expression, etc., that is likely to be expected in the social interaction. Hiding their stims; this is where they will actively avoid stimming in front of people, or they will channel the stimming need into something more socially acceptable, like doodling or twiddling their hair.

Is Masking healthy or not?

This is quite a difficult question to answer. Masking helps Autistics survive in an NT driven and designed world. It enables them to fit in more efficiently, to make friends, to get jobs, etc. So, in that respect, it is a handy tool. However, due to the ongoing belief (in general society) that being Autistic means that you are flawed and only have detrimental characteristics, they are acutely aware that they are different from others, Autistics feel like they have to mask to be accepted. The friends they make, and the places in which they fit in, like and accept the mask – not the Autistic themselves, and this fact alone can cause many mental health issues. Knowing that your friends only like you because of who you pretend to be can be a very lonely and depressing realisation and experience, especially for children. It is also incredibly exhausting to maintain a mask for any length of time, draining them mentally, physically, and emotionally. If an Autistic has been masking in different situations for many years, they can lose sight and recognition of who they actually are. Suppressing stims can also cause mental health issues as it is a tool for calming and regulating emotions, anxiety, and overwhelm.

BURNOUT

What is Burnout?

Intense mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, potential loss of skills, heightened anxiety, and lack of executive function.

What causes Burnout?

Having to mask for an extended time, monumental exertion of mental or physical energy, or sensory overload.

What does Burnout look like?

The Autistic will likely hide away from the world, if possible. They may be exhausted, lethargic, depressed, highly anxious, unable to mask or exhibit skills that they usually have, they may suffer selective mutism, may experience emotional outbursts or become more reactive.

How can I help my child/young person in Burnout?

The best thing to do is to keep them away from the situation or environment that has caused the Burnout until they have fully recovered. Support them by letting them rest as much as they need to and be more patient with them if they have emotional outbursts or are more reactive. Give them time, listen, understand, and support.

How does Burnout feel?

Like you have run a marathon and then been run over by a steamroller, coupled with feeling, emotionally and mentally, thoroughly washed out and drained. Everything feels like it is too much. Sensory sensitivities are heightened, as well as anxiety

MELTDOWNS

What is a Meltdown?

It is an intense response to an overwhelming situation where they temporarily lose control of their behaviour, and their brains struggle to process the volume of information that it is receiving.

What does a Meltdown look like?

They may scream, shout, hit, kick, cry, break things, or exhibit other explosive behaviour, or they may go into Shutdown (see further on in this section). In general, they will be inconsolable, and the promise of reward or punishment to stop the behaviour will not affect them as they are not in control at that moment.

How is a Meltdown different from a tantrum?

A tantrum is caused by a child not getting their way or not getting something that they wanted. It is an intentional act that displays anger or frustration, in which they are in control. Giving the child what they want will stop the tantrum quickly, as well as using the promise of a reward or punishment.

A Meltdown is caused by intense overwhelm and the inability to cope in the situation. They are not in control, and the mental, emotional, and physical experience is an incredibly unpleasant one.

In short, they may appear the same to an outsider, but they have very different causes and effects on the child and the aspect of control.

How can I prevent a Meltdown from happening?

Learning what triggers overwhelm in your child or young person and looking for the signs of heading for a Meltdown.

These may include; increased anxiety, a need for reassurance or security, pacing, heightened reactivity, signs of sensory overload.

When you see any of the above starting, remove your child/young person from the situation and take them to a quiet and calm area or somewhere they feel safe. Give them space but reassurance that you are there.

How can I help my child/young person during a Meltdown?

Remove your child or young person from the situation and take them to a quiet and calm area or somewhere they feel safe. Ensure that you are the only adult there with them (or the person they feel safest with or most connected to), sit quietly, speak softly and reassuringly, but don't bombard them or ask them to speak. They need to ride the Meltdown out but need the reassurance and security that you are there, that you are not angry or upset with them, and that you love them.

How does a Meltdown feel?

I define it as akin to a panic attack, as you feel completely out of control, terrified, and unable to stop it. If the Meltdown is explosive or violent, immense guilt is often felt afterwards for their actions during Meltdown.



SHUTDOWN

What is Shutdown?

It is an intense response to an overwhelming situation where they temporarily lose control of their behaviour, and their brains struggle to process the volume of information that it is receiving. (It is the same as a Meltdown, in this respect).

What does Shutdown look like?

When an Autistic person shuts down, they can become completely mute, may shut themselves away from the world, be unable to move from where they are, lay on the floor or curl up in a protective foetal position, or be completely unable to communicate in any way.

How can I prevent Shutdown from happening?

Please see the same question in the Meltdown part of this section.

How can I help my child/young person during Shutdown?

Please see the same question in the Meltdown part of this section. Also, if they shut themselves away in their room or somewhere that they feel safe, then give them space.

How does it feel to be in Shutdown?

You feel, generally, numb to everything. Like you are trying to think through fog and are frozen to the spot. You feel like you want to hide or disappear to feel safe from the trigger.

OVERWHELM

What is overwhelm?

Overwhelm is also known as Sensory Overload.

This is where your brain is taking in more sensory information than it can process or cope with. This could take the form of too many noises or voices in one area, too much light, or too much physical contact – it is very individual to each ND person.

What does overwhelm look like?

From the outside, it can look like the child/young person is having great difficulty in focusing on a task or conversation. They could be highly irritable and restless or cover their eyes or ears with their hands to block out sensory input.

It will likely be that their sensory sensitivities will significantly increase, so you may notice that they are less tolerant of sensory input. They may become tearful and clingy or try to escape the area or situation.



How can I help my child/young person when they are feeling overwhelmed?

Like with Meltdowns and Shutdowns, the first thing to do would be to remove them from the environment or situation they are experiencing overwhelm.

Take them to a quiet area with low levels of lighting or to their safe place (like home) and help them regulate their sensory needs. If you have a sensory bag or items that your child/young person finds comforting, give these to them. Setting up a sensory area in your home is an excellent idea – this can be in their bedroom. (Please see the Sensory Section).

How does it feel to be overwhelmed?

Any number of the following can be experienced whilst in overwhelm;

- ▶ Great difficulty focusing
- ▶ Increased anxiety
- ▶ Extreme irritability
- ▶ Restlessness and discomfort
- ▶ Urge to cover your ears or eyes to block out sensory input
- ▶ Feeling stress, fear, or anxiety about your surroundings
- ▶ Increased sensory sensitivity
- ▶ Nausea,
- ▶ Lightheadedness
- ▶ Feeling restricted or trapped
- ▶ Tearful
- ▶ Needing reassurance; clingy
- ▶ Like your head is spinning.