



There's **more** to me.

#UnmaskingMentalHealth

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE MASK?

Masking can be a helpful tool in our day-to-day lives; it can help us navigate social situations, feel safe, and maintain personal boundaries and privacy. We don't always want to share everything about ourselves with every person we interact with, and masking allows us to decide who gets to see which parts of us. But when someone feels the need to mask who they are all the time just to be safe, keep a job, fit in or avoid judgment, the payoff of maintaining that mask can start to fade. Masking can take a physical, mental, and emotional toll.

Masking can take a lot of effort

Masking all the time can be exhausting and mentally straining.¹ Think back to a recent job interview or imagine being in one. You're sitting in front of one or more people who're asking you questions about who you are, how you handle different situations, and what accomplishments you're most proud of. You show the best image of yourself with careful thought to how these people you've never met before will see you. Even when excited about a new opportunity, most of us find ourselves exhausted by the effort it takes to be that ideal candidate, even just for a short time.

Now imagine living every day of your life as if you're in that job interview. That's what people who mask regularly experience, and the exhaustion from it can lead to worsened mental health^{2,3} and physical health concerns.⁴

For example, people often mask at work to hide feelings of stress or burnout for fear of judgment about their performance, but wearing that mask actually adds to stress and increases the likelihood of burnout.⁵

Masking can lead to isolation, disconnection, and a loss of self-identity

When someone masks most of the time, it's not only exhausting, but it also keeps that person from forming authentic relationships and feeling like they belong.³ This can lead to isolation and loneliness which worsen mental health.⁶

Masking can even affect how someone sees themselves. When someone regularly hides or suppresses part of who they are, they can lose their sense of self⁷ or experience identity conflict.² For young people, sense of self is critical to developing self-identity, and masking can obscure this development.⁷ How we see ourselves is informed by our physical traits, experiences, beliefs and values, relationships and more, so answering the question "Who am I?" becomes more difficult when we constantly mask our natural self.

Masking affects a person's sense of self-worth and can cause feelings of emptiness and shame

People often mask to fit in, and when someone can only fit in by being someone else or playing a part, it can negatively affect their self-esteem.⁷ People may feel shame about who they really are, experience a sense of loss, and have a distorted self-image. Negative self-esteem and low self-worth can also further affect a person's sense of self.⁶

Masking may stop people from getting help when they need it

Without access to help, it's harder to recover from a mental illness or substance use disorder. When people feel they need to hide a mental illness, addiction, or substance use problem, they may not seek help for fear that someone will find them out.^{6,8} Masking can also prevent someone having an illness diagnosed, or lead to misdiagnosis, which means that people who mask don't always get the right help.¹

Given the high cost of masking mental illnesses and substance use disorders, it's critical we all work together to eliminate stigma and create a world in which people feel safe to unmask and be who they really are.

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5 Psychology Today. (n.d.) Masking. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/masking#>

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