Actually Autistic Educator Episode 3: Autistic Communication Part 2: Masking TRANSCRIPT

JEANNE (she/her): Hello and welcome to another episode of Actually Autistic Educator. Today, we are continuing our larger discussion about autistic communication, but focusing especially on masking and how it interacts with how many autistics communicate. Also sometimes referred to as camouflaging, masking encompasses a wide array of things that autistics may do in an effort to avoid harm or punishment due to living in a deeply ableist society that hates autistic behaviors for seeming different.

It can include hiding our stimming, faking or forced eye contact, modulating our voices in different ways, memorizing scripts or patterns for different small talk scenarios and more historically increased masking has been treated as a positive by non-autistics in that we look less autistic. The major goal of many so-called "treatments" for autism is making an autistic look, "indistinguishable from their peers." And many practitioners assume that this is the best way to improve an autistic's quality of life. That looking autistic must be much worse than any consequences of learning to look more "normal." Fortunately more and more research is finally being done into what the effects this actually has on our mental health. And the results show that this attempt to force ourselves into looking non-autistic causes immense harm and can lead to PTSD, depression, anxiety, and even suicide. We need to seriously evaluate what societal biases we have and look carefully at why autistics say that these attempts to mask or pass as non-autistic can cause horrific issues far worse than just being thought of as weird.

As I mentioned in the previous full episode on autistic communication, one of the problems with autism research and our own observations of it is that we cannot divorce inherent autistic qualities from trauma responses we have due to people hating us for being autistic. Remember the study I quoted that showed neurotypicals disliked autistics based solely on mannerisms and tone of voice within a few seconds of conversation? Think of how many times an autistic person has faced some sort of negative response to their behavior from making the "wrong" facial features and being called rude, not making eye contact because it's painful and uncomfortable and being called disrespectful. Getting excited and stimming, and then being told you were weird or trying to get attention. All autistics have been traumatized by living in a society which has said that we are wrong, broken and bad. This has led to many of us masking in different ways. A new study published online ahead of print last month in the journal autism and adulthood by Louise Bradley, Rebecca Shaw, Simon Baron Cohen, and Sarah Cassidy titled "Autistic Adults, Experiences of Camouflaging and Its Perceived Impact on Mental Health", stated that "autistic people being in the minority, in a society designed for the neuro-typical majority attempt to camouflage mask or compensate for their autistic characteristics and behaviors to fit in and access social spaces, example, relationships, work, education etc. However qualitative research has shown that autistic adults describe camouflaging as highly stressful, exhausting and anxiety provoking camouflaging is also associated with feelings of not being accepted or belonging in society, which in turn increases risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, and behaviors."

And masking is associated with mental stress, depression and suicidality in multiple studies using a variety of types of assessment tools. I recommend checking out Cassidy, Gold, Townson et al's "Is Camouflaging Autistic Traits Associated with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors" from the Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders in 2020 (spoiler alert, the answer is yes) which both studies this and details an extensive collection of other studies with similar results. It's incredibly concerning that so many recent studies have shown the horrible effects on autistic mental health. And yet we have not been examining what teachers, parents, therapists, and others can be doing to try to reduce the pressure to mask that autistic space and the things we may be doing that directly encourage it.

It's also very important to note that in the same way we talked in the mini episode last week, about one of the problems with functioning labels is that autism includes a wide array of traits that an individual may have each to a greater or lesser extent. Masking is something that is incredibly varied from person to person. Your living situation and how much pressure you were put under to conform to societal expectations can mean to people who may have very similar presentations of autism naturally may appear very different. If one is spending extensive effort to look non-autistic, they may have more highs and lows or crashes after appearing "normal" for a time.

Masking is often associated with increased societal pressures placed on people who are assigned female at birth, which is important for clinicians to understand, but these pressures and traits can exist regardless of your gender or sex assigned at birth. It is incredibly important that clinicians really understand both what masking is and how it impacts autistic presentation.

Because someone's ability to mask is not directly connected to the level of any other specific autistic trait, someone may have substantial struggles and need support despite masking, but the masking means their needs get missed or ignored, or they end up with a very inaccurate diagnosis. Especially as for most of us masking is at least partially subconscious, even more so if the person doesn't already have an autism diagnosis to be able to understand what makes them different from others, in short meetings with a stranger it's incredibly likely that an autistic may be unintentionally masking many of their more distinctive autistic traits due to being punished for them in the past.

This can also vary by age. Some autistics pick up masking very early, others not until they're older, some never at all. Really, I didn't really mask as a child that much, but I spent a lot of high school and college watching people and creating actual flow charts for eye contact patterns, body language, intonation, and small talk to help me mask better because I finally started to believe all of the people who told me my natural state was bad and I was broken. Meanwhile, one of my siblings figured it out before they even hit middle school. I went from being such a textbook case that I got diagnosed as a girl in the early nineties to most people having no idea that I was different at all, but then I got depression and anxiety I never used to have and really struggled to authentically connect with these people I was speaking with. How autistic I was never changed, but how autistic I appeared to others did. This is why autistics like myself are demanding to be included in research on autism. Anything based only on outside observations of us is always going to be flawed because we know how much time we spend acting.

As mentioned in our first episode, there are numerous serious barriers to accurate diagnosis. And a lack of understanding of masking is one of the biggest I have seen with providers, especially when it intersects with gender and race. If you are in a position of doing formal or even informal diagnostics, instead of solely relying on how the person presents, try asking questions about preferences for communication, if they have patterns for social interactions memorized and such. And immerse yourself in autistic culture and spaces to get a more accurate feel for how we can communicate. Even when we have our peopling faces on. This is why as a whole the autistic community is also very inclusive of self-diagnosed autistics who have not been able to get a professional diagnosis because of lack of access due to money, insurance, or because providers in their area don't have a solid understanding of what autism might look like for a person like them.

Today we'll be speaking with two guests, Dora and past guest Amanda, about their experiences with masking. Dora will be using the term scaffolding. This is a term often used in education to refer to how much support is needed to help someone understand a concept or learn a skill.

Dora has ADHD and autism spectrum disorder and is a multi-lingual early childhood educator who has an emphasis on inclusive classrooms for children with all abilities. So as an adult educator, how do you see masking impact how you interact in the classroom?

DORA (she/her): As an adult with autism. I find that when I am with the kids, I don't have to mask as often is I have to mask when I am around other co-teachers or around other adults. Children are naturally inclusive. We teach exclusion. Children, generally speaking, want to understand, they're curious. And as soon as they kind of understand what's going on, they are very, very, very keen to pull people into their fold, regardless of what abilities they have. Other teachers on the other hand, because they are adults and have been taught what is acceptable behavior and what isn't acceptable behavior have a stronger standard.

I can stim around my kids and they don't care. Sometimes they join in with me. I can't stim around my coworkers. I can't avoid eye contact with a lot of my adult coworkers. I've actually found that the centers and the schools that I've worked at the best experiences I've had is when I've only really had to deal with one to two other adults.

Otherwise, I tend to take the very early morning shifts because it's easier for me to mask in the earlier hours of the day due to my personal circadian rhythm. I can't work the later. Yeah. Because the amount of masking I ended up having to do with other adults just tanks me to the point I come home and I have to take a two to three hour nap.

It's very, very difficult because you have to have a lot of small talk, especially being that I have very classic female traits, and my field is 98% women. There's a lot of expectations of understanding non-verbal behavior. And I have to decode all of that. None of that comes naturally to me. So I guess to kind of wrap up, when I'm with my kids, I don't really have to mask it all. And I don't really find that I have any difficulties or any sort of fatigue, but when I'm around other coworkers, it's exhausting because I basically have to be two people. I have to be Miss Dora. And I also have to be Miss Jay.

JEANNE: Thank you so much for sharing that, that, that actually really resonates with my experiences as well. Even though I'm working with older populations. It's a very similar dynamic. And I really wonder if this is why so many of my autistic friends actually have ended up in education. As I've described it, I really enjoy having social interactions, but I like structured social better. And so I find my interactions with my students can be really engaging and interesting and much less stressful.

And as you say, a lot of times, I think, either with young children, even with older, they're not necessarily looking for the same type of social patterns that they would expect, you know, that another adult would expect with a peer. And so it lets us just focus on helping them and teaching them and providing the supports they need.

I find it a lot less emotionally draining than trying to have social interactions with other adults. So thank you for sharing that. I hadn't quite processed all of that myself.

DORA: I look at it as the degree of scaffolding that I have to do with self-scaffolding to kind of get into the conversation or to be able to access the conversation in a way that is beneficial for me, when I'm working with my students, I find that the scaffolding that I have to do to be able to communicate is not anywhere near as complex and energy consuming as it is when I have to try and scaffold into a conversation with adults.

So I completely hear what you're saying. The structured elements is why I got into this field and why I don't think I'll ever leave it.

JEANNE: Thank you so much for being on the show today. I really appreciate it. It's really wonderful to have another autistic educator's perspective here.

DORA: I look forward to hopefully working with you again. Have a good one.

JEANNE: Next we'll be chatting again with Amanda who was featured in our first episode. We've talked before about how non-autistic's understanding of autistic behavior can be extremely flawed, which is the root of how we end up pressured into masking when we are punished for being autistic, because our actions or mannerisms are misinterpreted, but it feels like we are finally starting to see some cultural shifts here, at least in places. What are your thoughts?

AMANDA (she/her): Hi, I do feel like I have seen a good change just in professionals, not as much as I would like, of being like maybe the autistic children are not defective. Because it's all... there's a metaphor, a different metaphor, I've read where someone was like, sometimes people come up, like the thing, white supremacists go, the cultures of people of color are inferior and they deserve to die. And then people who are not white supremacists, but well-meaning allies who aren't actually helping are like, well, the cultures of people of color are inferior, but they can learn to act like white people. So like my, my goal in life is not, not to ape whiteness and erase myself. And that shouldn't have to be anybody's goal in life to be treated well in society.

JEANNE: Yeah. I think that is completely accurate. And it's, as you say, it's something that we've seen in so many, marginalizations where we say, oh, people of color, well, you just need to, you know, learn how to speak in the "right way." And women, you just need to learn how to lean in. And that will fix all of societal sexism. Then we see it again in autism of look, we will, we will cure your autism by making you pretend to not be autistic.

AMANDA: And it's not cured. You've given me trauma. Thank you.

JEANNE: Yes. I'm like, oh, that's a lovely way to trigger anxiety, depression, and PTSD. And also fun fact, I am still a very weird person.

The things that made my life better was not continuing to try to make myself not seem weird. It was accepting that I liked different the things, I get really excited about certain topics. And I'm going to find other friends who also like them and some of my friends who are into these things and think that I'm super cool are autistic.

And some of them aren't. I have a whole bunch of adults who aren't autistic, who are like, yes, I would love to dress up and play, pretend and come to your house and have a Regency theme to tea party. And turns out if you just let us be who we are, we can find other people who will support and value that.

And it's such a better option for actual authentic socialization, rather than just saying, Hey, this isn't a societal problem. Society doesn't need to change. You just need to cut off bits of yourself so that you can fit in. When, when really society has a lot of problems, we need to be doing a much better job of addressing and fixing.

AMANDA: Yeah. I think it is a particular type of exquisite if well-meaning cruelty to look at somebody who is different and to tell them that the only way they will be loved or find any sense of belonging is if they basically surrender their will to the will of what people around them want them to be like, wildly unhealthy. That's part of why. So, so many, afab autistic people, and amab for that matter, but I have noticed the rates are a little bit different, are ending up being sexually assaulted because we are told to do what other people want you to do. And I have personally ended up in situations where looking back, I'm like, oh no.

JEANNE: Yeah, I got into some very not good situations, very similar there and tolerated a lot of things that ironically, as a kid I would not have put up with. I was one of those kids that in like middle school and high school, if like when the boys tried to grab at me and I gave them bloody noses or kneed them in the junk. And when the administrators tried to get me in trouble for this. I defended myself well by pointing out that I had friends who wrote for the local newspaper and that this would be a – I was very happy to accept whatever punishment they got, but I would like to have their name and contact information as I'm sure my friend would be interested in writing a story about why me defending myself from sexual assault from three guys older than me was being seen as something I needed punishment for. Uh, yeah. And this was consistent throughout my young life. But when I was in the later parts of high school, I had really started to internalize this message of like, no I'm broken, I'm wrong. I'm bad. When enough people told me it, I started believing. And I ended up tolerating a lot of really inappropriate, not good things and being in some really bad situations because I believed that my boundaries were wrong. I wasn't allowed to set healthy boundaries. I wasn't allowed to say, I'm not comfortable with this.

Then now looking back on it, I'm like, oh man, I really wish I could have kept that view I had when I was 12, rather than having it be beaten out of me, by people who genuinely thought they were helping, but really put me in some not good situations indirectly.

AMANDA: Yep. I think that's one of the hardest bit is that people think they're helping and you can tell they care about you and you internalize. "This is what caring about me is. I am the one who needs to be uncomfortable for other people to be comfortable." And that's it doesn't lead anywhere.

JEANNE: It reminds me of how in education we used to see, um, certain languages and there's a lot of colonialism and racism into it, of which certain languages were seen as lesser. So if a student was a Spanish speaker and an English speaker, well, instead of going, Hey, that's so great. You're speaking two languages. No, that's amazing. Let's talk about cognates. Let's build off of your knowledge of both. Let's validate, you know, how useful it is to be bilingual instead, the idea was okay, but we really only care about English and specifically this one very narrow dialect of English even.

And so we're going to put sometimes really a moral feeling of like, no, that language is bad. That's dirty. We see it with left-handedness, was very common of like, no, that's bad, that's just inherently wrong and different. And we keep looking back on these things that clearly happened, but I think there's a tendency to go, oh yes.

But those were in the far away past times and we don't do those things now. But, you know, in 20 years, these will be the far away pastimes. I think it's really important that we all really, especially those of us who are professional educators, counselors and anyone who people are often paying money to come and get their get support from you.

It's really important to be looking at these biases and going well, I think this is good. And I think the skill is important. But what will this actually mean to their quality of life? What will this mean to their happiness? And to listen to other voices from people in those communities to find out, Hey, what has been, you know, a source of happiness for you and what was a source of stress?

AMANDA: I personally do not speak African American vernacular English because of my upbringing, but many people do. And to see people sit there and correct them like they're wrong, they are not wrong. This has its own grammar just because you do not understand it. There is absolutely value in making sure to teach someone, to give him the way the world works. Like, Hey, this is, this is business language. This is academic language, but you can do that without treating the way that people speak as inferior or wrong. It's like, I mean, I am making some historical assumptions here, but like if a bunch of people who spoke different languages got together and had one main language, that was the trading language that came out of all the languages. But doesn't imply that the other languages, people are speaking are wrong. It's just, we're doing this for ease of use. Like if I'm talking fiber arts, I use specific terminology versus general terminology. It's the same thing, but that doesn't turn out. But mainstream non fiber arts English is wrong because it doesn't have these terms.

JEANNE: Completely agreed. And I think it's... we put these hierarchical models of, and sometimes even applying morality to these things, we know there's differences and yes, when I'm working with a student who has only come to the country a few years ago is hoping to get a job in an office and needs to be able to write letters and fix typos and do various business work, then yes, these are things that are useful to them and what they need to know. But that's a student who's opted in, who has told me this is their goal and has the ability to consent. And I'm not telling them, Hey, the way you're doing things is wrong. It's, they're saying I would like to have the ability to speak this specific type of language.

And I think, and I think that ties into the autistic experience of masking.

AMANDA: Definitely.

JEANNE: There are times and places where I find it very useful because we live in such a severely ablest society that refuses to accept me when I don't mask. But at the same time, it's incredibly important for professionals to understand that it carries a serious burden on my mental health.

I used to be vastly better at recall, until I started learning more socialization patterns. I have found a pattern for eye contact that I could mimic. I found patterns for how to vary my voice in quote-unquote, natural ways. I also raised it. I used to have a much lower voice. I'm still trying to unlearn some of this, but it's really hard after doing it for like 15 years.

But all of that work that I learned how to do has made it much harder for me to interact with people authentically. It's given me severe anxiety, which I never used to have and has really taken a toll. I've just feel so much more exhausted after social interactions than I used to before I tried to learn all of these things.

And I'm curious what your experiences have been.

AMANDA: My experience is very similar on that. Because I didn't get diagnosed until later, I wasn't quite so conscious of what I was doing. I actually had this thing where I go back and forth with my partner who is also autistic. And I'm like, what if I'm faking being autistic?

And he's like... yeah. Okay. No. And I describe this to a friend as like, he's like, but you're so good at social stuff (not my partner, but different person) and I was like, imagine that every time you do social interaction, all throughout the conversation, one of those like puzzle mini games, and the video game pops up and you need to do that, but you also need to carry on the conversation and make it work natural.

This is why like, people are like you're so social at our hobby events. I'm like, yeah. And then I go home and I don't talk to anybody for a week because I've had to expend so much energy on that.

JEANNE: I realized for the hobby we share. For ages, I was overclocking my social without realizing it. And about every third or fourth time that I would participate in events, I would trigger a horrifically bad migraine and after a year of this, so after about four or five horrible migraines happening with such frequency, I finally made the connection that I was focusing so much on having to keep my facial features running because that takes effort, but I've put it on enough autopilot that if there are people around, I feel like I have to.

And so it's not a conscious choice because when you're trying to remember all of this really sort of programming, you eventually do it enough that it doesn't actually become second nature, but you just kind of get into the pattern of it, but it still has a cost. Not something you can necessarily easily turn off.

And I spent about six months at these events purposefully going like, okay, I'm going to carve out time when I don't have to make facial features. And I identified multiple people and told them that it was the thing I was doing. And so they knew if they came over and sat that they could remind me or that I could just, you know, feel that I could drop it down.

And I did a variety of these things and it's been really good. Not that I've gone to any events in the past year due to COVID, but for about the two years before that it really improved my experiences, but that's so the reverse of, I think, how most people think of how to "help" someone with autism is like, look, now you can make these facial features and what improved my mental health was learning to not make facial features.

AMANDA: Yes. Cause the you're going to fit into... people will like you at the cost of, like, that functioning is just... will people like me or will people like the act I'm able to do for them? Because I am fairly good at both making neuro-typical people like me, and making sure white people like me because I had to learn how to do that.

I was one of three black children in the very white town that got put aside as a bad kid, very early on. And sometimes I don't, I don't know how to turn that off. I met up with a friend who I have not seen in about a year and a half and prior to us meeting, he was like, is there anything that I do to make you more comfortable before we see each other? I know it's been a while and you have not been out for much. And I was like, I am worried that I have completely forgotten how to suppress stimming because I am normally very good at that because very unpleasant things happened to me when I did it in the past. And so there's both the double bind of like, I don't, he was like, I don't care if you re you don't need to repress that around me, but also like "danger will Robinson" if I don't suppress that.

So either way it's, it's a losing battle and I never would have been put between that rock and a hard place if I hadn't been taught that my natural reactions to happiness were somehow wrong. It's something I learned very early on.

JEANNE: So my brother was classified as a non-verbal autistic and received a lot of services in our house. And since I was homeschooled, I saw a lot of them. So I didn't necessarily get the same explicit training that a lot of people did. But it was so present. I remember that the two big mantras of my childhood were "use your words" and "quiet hands." And I didn't understand why or the reasoning or how it all worked. I just knew that waving my hands, even though it felt good was bad and, and that would be bad and I shouldn't do it. And if I did it, people said I was weird. And you know, there was a lot of stuff, which obviously now I'm like, oh, that was a great way to internalize ableism right there. But I stopped doing that, but the problem is I still had these sensory regulation needs. And so I swapped away from very harmless ones that would "look weird." And as a result, when I get slightly overstimulated or out sensoried, and I need to regulate if I can't stim easily and don't, and remind myself that that's the thing I need to be doing, because I don't do it automatically in healthy ways anymore. I start chewing the inside of my mouth until it bleeds. Or I bite my cuticles until they bleed, or I grab my hands and I don't mean to, but all of a sudden I look down and what I thought were light scratches I've, you know, either scratched pretty hard or even dinged myself. And it's not self-harm in the way that it's often thought about, but I am harming myself in an effort to regulate my sensory overload.

But because I'm not allowed to do it, or I wasn't allowed to do it as a kid in healthy ways, it all came internalized and now comes out in very unhealthy ways that I'm still working at on learning and it's hard and I'm having to consciously be like, no, I'm going to let myself move my hands. And it's a very weird thing to try to suddenly retrain yourself into doing when you haven't been able to.

AMANDA: Absolutely. Yeah. I like, I can't, I can't fix what happened in my case, but if people could really, really, especially looking at stims and being like, is this an actually harmful stim or is it awkward for me? Am I worried about people staring? Is this actually disruptive or it's just a weird. Some weird is fine.

JEANNE: And that's something you see a lot of ableism in general. I feel like comes from this. "Well, why are you looking weird in my line of vision?" So like I've in recent years been focusing on like, I call it Marie Kondo-ing my life, which is, I've been looking at all of my behaviors and going, is this actually a good behavior that sparks joy for me? Or is this something I taught myself to do because the world is awful to autistics. And I realized I can just carry around earplugs and sunglasses and wear them indoors, or when people are talking loudly. And if they don't like it, there's a lot of people who want to be my friend, like a concerning amount.

I need very few friends to be happy. And there's a lot of really cool people who want to be my friend. And so if anyone... I finally hit the point in my life at 34 where I'm like, if you can't be cool with the fact that I might need to put in earplugs or put my noise canceling headphones on, then that's fine. I've got a lot of options. I don't need to make myself miserable and give myself headaches just because you think I "look weird." It's been glorious.

AMANDA: This honestly seems like a carry-over of like, the ugly laws from earlier in America's history of people, people shouldn't be in public, not because they're doing anything, but because they are unsightly and to be unsightly is to be ungodly. And it just ties into some really disturbing things to the American psyche.

JEANNE: I feel slightly guilty because for so many people, it's been really hard with this whole pandemic, but I am naturally a hermit. And not having to make facial features all of the time at work and with other people has been absolutely glorious.

And it has really reinforced that I need very little social activity to be happy. And so being able to set those boundaries around, okay, well what works for that individual and what makes them happy rather than assuming that, oh, well, the only way they're going to be happy in life is if they can become, you know, pretend to be gregarious or have a bunch of people and know how to make them feel like they're friends with them, like quality over quantity is, is likely a much better option.

I mean, I think for most people that's probably a good option, but definitely for autistics, it seems to be.

AMANDA: Honestly. Yeah, because why, why are we spending this energy on people who don't like who we are authentically? That doesn't even necessarily make them bad people, but it's just what utility does the serve? Which I'm sure someone will be like, that's too mercenary. You should. But sometimes being friends with people doesn't serve either of us and that's okay. Yeah, we can be different, but you know, why should I pretend to be friends with someone Just because I've been told that that's the socially appropriate thing, when they wouldn't like me if I was being myself, they're never going to actually be friends with me.

They're going to think they're friends with what's really just an illusion that I have crafted that might be pretty heavily divorced from who I am as a person. And really? That's kind of creepy. It's honestly, one of the things I find disturbing about our mutual hobby people will be like, oh yes, I know you. I'm like, oh, you've only met weekend me in some funny clothes, but it's not because I open up.

JEANNE: People tell me they think I'm an extrovert. And I'm like, I am not. I'm like, no, no. If I go to one of those events per month, that's a good number. That's that fills me up for the whole rest of the month. I'm good. I don't need to talk to literally anyone else. I am set. And it's funny because I've had so many people tell me very similar things of like, you're just so naturally social. I'm like, oh, oh no, I am not.

AMANDA: It's that gif, "acting"

JEANNE: Yes exactly! I got my first paid acting gig at 11. I am very good at it. I understand that that is acting. That does not mean you actually know me as a human being, which then makes me feel very awkward when there are these people who are like, we're just so close and I'm like, oh shoot. We are, are we? I didn't think so. You've only seen my facade. Like, you just saw my peopleing face. Oh God, this would be too late if I took my peopleing face off around you. And so now I've just felt awkward around for the last like five years. Cause they're very sweet and wonderful, but I'm, I don't know how to handle that.

AMANDA: Oh no, it's absolutely a thing it's like, I don't want to crush your spirit, but also, um, we were coming out with a two very different ways.

JEANNE: I find it amusing because there's a line in My Fair Lady, the musical, "her English is too perfect, which clearly indicates that she is foreign." And it, so is how I feel about social activity. And I'm like, no, I am very good at pretending, but that doesn't mean that's who I am. And that doesn't mean it's not stressful. It's just something we've been taught we have to do.

Well, thank you so much, Amanda. I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts and perspectives here.

All autistics have been traumatized by living in a society which has said that we are wrong, broken and bad. This has led to many of us masking in different ways, but trauma responses are not always helpful long-term – think denial, fawning, or avoidance. Masking, however, is complex because while it seriously taxes our mental health, our society is so deeply ableist it is often the only way we will be allowed to access large parts of the world, especially work and many social environments. I mask a lot. I feel like I shouldn't, but I do.

Even for this podcast, I'm modulating my voice to make it sound more engaging or to sound more friendly, to highlight concepts. I found people can sometimes subconsciously react to if your lips are smiling, as it changes the pronunciation of different words. So even though I'm only recording audio right now, I make facial features in places to change how my listener subconscious reads me as being happy or sad or friendly.

I do this for this podcast because I think it's incredibly important for teachers, therapists, medical professionals, and others to have a better understanding of autism and how to actually support autism. Because I've been a student and patient and had horrific experiences due to a lack of understanding, and I've seen it happen to so many of my friends and family too. So in order for me to do this most successfully, I have to make myself sound like someone neurotypicals want to listen to, but it's hard, exhausting.

And in general, it's just so frustrating to have to constantly calculate if I should stress and traumatize myself by masking or be my more real self and more relaxed, but deal with the consequences when people decide that, despite me saying explicitly otherwise, my flat tone or facial features must mean it's all about them or who just don't find me interesting enough to engage with or pay attention to if I'm not putting on all of this.

Over 66% of autistic adults have reported feeling suicidal and multiple studies I've referenced today have shown a direct correlation between the shaming of autistic behaviors and mannerisms and negative mental health conditions. Eye contact is uncomfortable for me. If I'm forced to do it, it not only stresses me out, but it also means it's taking away my attention from what I'm actually listening to as I have to run a pattern to fake "natural" eye contact. If I have to be making facial features on a zoom call, I'm not going to be paying as much attention to what's being said, because I'm trying to perform, this is a constant thing.

My autistic students say one got in trouble recently because they were focusing hard and let their face go. And the professor called them out in front of everyone for spacing out and not paying attention, rather than asking people to thumbs up or down in zoom or use the emojis to react or use any of the many options for online surveys, which would have been a much better way to check attention and comprehension, he made an assumption based on a facial feature and humiliated a student who was actually desperately trying to learn.

So guess what many of my autistic students have admitted? They have been having a hard time with cameras, making their faces so close for others to see, and professors explicitly saying they are judging them based on their expression that they can't actually focus in class. So they're trying to just learn from books or slides because the pressure to perform facial features stops them from being able to pay attention to the lecture. But when they are allowed to turn off their cameras, most of them suddenly find it way less stressful than in-person classes because they can stim or not emote and not be punished for it.

For professionals, I really ask that you consider how much you rely on nonverbal cues in your work and think critically if you might be judging or punishing someone because of your own assumptions about what different mannerisms mean.

And masking causes issues beyond just mental health and education. We often don't know how much to emote when dealing with doctor's offices or other people in authority. I now tell every doctor that I'm autistic and they need to not make judgments based on my facial features when doing an assessment for my joint issues; it has to be a verbal check. I have been misdiagnosed repeatedly, even as recently as last year when I was in so much pain, I forgot this pattern because stress or pain alters my masking unconsciously.

Misunderstandings about masking also caused serious issues with diagnosis. As mentioned before, many professionals are thinking autistic behavior as specific classical traits, missing that many of us have been forced to hide these traits associated with autism, but we still desperately require support. Acceptance and knowledge of who we are, the ways multiply marginalized, autistics are forced to mask also varies. People presumed female are often held to a different social standard for how emotionally in tune we're expected to be and how we are expected to perform femininity or face consequences from people for being harsh or bossy or mean, even when someone who was presumed male would not face consequences for such mannerisms. A lot of my masking concerningly ends up being parts of performing femininity. And I really struggle with what I should be doing to both keep people engaged in listening, but at the same time, am I perpetuating sexist stereotypes by allowing myself to continue feminized masking patterns?

Autistics of color face multiple issues as white people can decide that a black autistic stimming in public or who speaks differently is being aggressive or threatening. This forces parents to choose between letting a child have healthy sensory regulation and be themselves versus forcing them into behaviors that are emotionally harmful, but less likely to result in their abuse or death.

We live in a society that has said it's okay to shun or punish those who are different across so many marginalizations but the solution to societal problems cannot be individual. Women can't fix the sexism around them by leaning in and being more aggressive, because often when we do that, we are then punished. Trust me, as someone who missed a lot of the feminized social conditioning and used to be very bold and take up space. I was heavily punished for it. Similarly, we can't stop homophobia through gay conversion therapy. Being gay isn't the problem, people being homophobic is. There's no magic mix of behaviors that people of color can follow to avoid people being racist. Autistics don't need to learn to look less autistic at the expense of their mental health. We, as a society, really need to get better about acknowledging, accepting, and valuing differences rather than judging and punishing anyone who is different from us.

Autism is a set of neurological differences, not behaviors. Our brains and bodies are wired very differently from non-autistics. And when we try to pretend otherwise, or when we are pressured into a neuro-typical mold, it can cause so very many harms. I have to mask right now in a lot of spaces because this world won't let me accomplish my goals otherwise, but I hope the effort and anxiety and stress it takes me and so many others working in these fields pays off. So that future autistics will be able to one day have a world where they don't have to mask to exist. Hopefully then we can finally find out what it's like to be an autistic without being traumatized.

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