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Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children aged 0-18 years

What is Masking?

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When a neurodiverse child hides certain behaviours, many people refer to this as masking. This often looks like changing behaviours others might see as 'socially unacceptable', and supressing stims (self-stimulating behaviours) in public. Although 'stopping' these behaviours might be considered socially appropriate, the need to self-stimulate is still underneath the surface and now being ignored. This can be exhausting, and can cause anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

What might masking look like?

- Becoming withdrawn and quiet in certain environments, so that any neurodiverse traits are less obvious.
- Supressing self-stimulating behaviours, such as hand flapping, tiptoe walking, chewing, or making repetitive noises.
- Some individuals may prepare topics of conversations and jokes in advance of social situations.

What effects can masking have?

- May cause stress responses in an environment where an individual feels safe and comfortable. For example, an individual might be able to mask at school, but sensory behaviours or 'meltdowns' may be a lot more apparent at home.
- Can have a negative impact on mental health in the longer term.
- Can cause individuals to burn out, causing them to become withdrawn.
- Reduces self-esteem and self-identity.

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How can we reduce masking?

- Provide regular proprioceptive activities or other feel-good strategies in all environments.
- Allow movement breaks or opportunities to engage in feel-good strategies as these are essential for children to remain regulated; they should never be used as an incentive or reward or denied as a form of punishment.
- Provide discreet signals for when things are too much and when a break is required.
- Help people to identify more 'socially acceptable' ways of sensory seeking.
- Support the culture of neurodiversity.

For more resources like this, you can visit our website:
sensoryprocessinghub.humber.nhs.uk

Or you can contact us with a question on the email address below:
hnf-tr.humbersensoryprocessingservice@nhs.net

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