

**Vauna Beauvais
&
Eoin Stephens**

**Working therapeutically with masking
and unmasking of autistic adults**

1

Context:

“Late-discovery Masked Autistic Adults”

2

What is Masking/Camouflaging...?

Can also be described as: *Over-adaptation, overcompensating, camouflaging, self-censoring, mimicking, impression management, stigma management, identity management, double consciousness, false self, self-forgetting, self-betrayal...*

Anyone who feels very different & marginalised may mask, because they are seeking:

- Safety, survival, self-protection, comfort, peace...
- Validation, acceptance, love, belonging, fitting in...
- Success, achievement, productivity, contribution...

Leads to low self-esteem, negative self-view, self-criticism, self-hatred, shame, imposter syndrome...

3

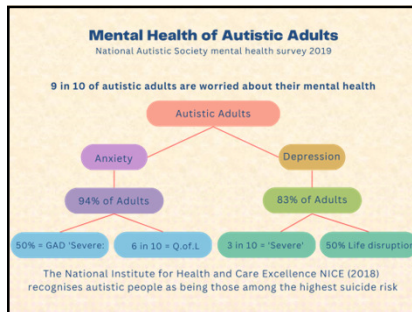
“The Normalisation Agenda”

- Damien Milton & Lyte Moon

A personal story - by Damien and Lyte.

A dear friend died by suicide. It wasn't their inability to fit into society, but society's inability to fit their needs as an outlier from the norm. Attempts at normalisation did little to help.

4



5

Normalisation is trying to turn me into something I am not. On being told and shown that I am not okay, not acceptable, in many ways, from many directions, and for the majority of the time:

Lyte:

"I became a frightened, passive prisoner, in a world I was alienated from, by their violent attempts to avoid seeing who I really was and what I may contribute to humankind.

A lifetime spent aping a socialised human - in a despairing attempt to substitute for my lost autonomy and spirit.

My human need to belong, to be loved and respected for who I am was so profoundly and deeply unmet that I almost caved in - almost making the Faustian deal."

MANY HAVE!

Faustian bargain: a pact whereby a person trades something of supreme moral importance, such as personal values or the soul, for some material benefit, such as magical powers that give them access to all the world's pleasures. A Faustian bargain is made with a power that the bargainer recognises as evil or amoral. Faustian bargains are by their nature tragic or self-defeating for the person who makes them, because what is surrendered is ultimately far more valuable than what is obtained.

6

Point to ponder:

Once clients realise that they've been subject to the expectation to 'act as everyone expects' - can they simply 'unmask'?

Lyte:

"I can get a bit lost to who I am when in contact with neurotypical people, so I conform and act and then feel horrible inside and get exhausted and worried, because I then get TOLD who I am and what I am or am not capable of.

I do think that I have more hope now that there are more like-minded advocates amongst us."

7

Masking

Masking is denying or hiding the existence or expression of the true self in times when that true self is not representative of the predominant neurotype. And, instead, is showing a socially appropriate version of a relevant human in that situation or environment.

	OTHERS	SELF
CONSCIOUSLY	I'm ensuring others don't see/know that I am... That I need...	I don't want to be... Need...
UNCONSCIOUSLY	I don't know why others can't see or know that I am... That I need...	I don't know that I am... That I need...

8

Normative assumptions of what constitutes well-being are not good for autistic people - as they usually are based on 'improvement in functioning'.

Instead: Therapists must focus on the constructs of the autistic individual as to what constitutes health and well-being, and what is a fulfilling life and how to live it.

Internalised oppression has effects on the development of identity. Clients can move away from self-blame for being excluded, punished, attacked, or rejected, and towards understanding living with an 'othered' identity.

Therapy can facilitate:

- The development of a positive (autistic) identity - rather than feeling 'wrong' or defective.
- Self-empowerment, Social navigation, and connection.
- Meeting personal needs.

Rather than seeing autistic people as broken and in need of fixing, focus on diversity of world view, and on personal strengths as well as challenges.

9

How do we help autistic clients with unmasking?

- Exploring personal history through autistic lens...
- Lost dreams?
- Energy drain?
- "Oughts/shoulds" (therapist may collude?)
- Masking in session? - *right answer, apologising, fawning...*
- Self-disclosure?

10

Exploring history of masking process:

Starts much earlier than consciously remember or were aware of:

1. Primary school age.
2. Secondary school age/adolescence.
3. Young adulthood.

Censor - don't do what comes naturally.

Mimic - do what most people are doing.

Fawn - do what pleases people around you.

Build defences - protect your sensitive true self.

11

References/Reading

Belcher, H.L. (2022) *Taking Off the Mask: Practical Exercises to Help Understand and Minimise the Effects of Autistic Camouflaging*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Chapman, R.:
<https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/neurodiversity-paradigm-psychiatry>

Milton, D. & Moon, L. (2012) *The Normalisation Agenda And The Psycho-emotional Disablement Of Autistic People*. *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Pearson, A. & Rose, K. (2021) *A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusion of Choice*. *Autism in Adulthood*, Vol. 3, No. 1.

12



Vanguard Neurodiversity Training

For enquiries about Autumn Certificate Course:

Email:

vauna@vanguardneurodiversitytraining.com

Website:

vanguardneurodiversitytraining.com

13