

CAMOUFLAGING AND IDENTITY

Finding space to be yourself as an autistic girl or woman

Many autistic girls and women become very skilled at adapting themselves to the people and environments around them.

You might watch how other people behave before deciding what to do. You may rehearse conversations, copy expressions or gestures, make yourself maintain eye contact, hide movements that help you regulate stress, laugh when others laugh, suppress sensory discomfort, or work very hard to appear calm when you are overwhelmed.

You may have become so good at doing this that other people do not realise how much effort is involved.

Sometimes, **you may not realise it either.**

Researchers commonly describe this process as **camouflaging**. “Masking” is also widely used, although researchers continue to refine exactly what these terms mean. Camouflaging can involve hiding autistic characteristics, compensating for difficulties, learning social strategies and trying to blend into a predominantly non-autistic social environment.

For many girls and women, these strategies are not simply choices. They develop in response to a powerful human need: **to belong, to be accepted, to avoid criticism and sometimes to stay safe.**

1. CAMOUFLAGING IS NOT DISHONESTY

If you have spent years camouflaging, discovering that you do this can feel uncomfortable.

You might wonder:

Have I been pretending?

Is my personality fake?

Which version of me is the real one?

Camouflaging should not be understood as deception.

Research suggests that autistic people often camouflage in response to social expectations, stigma, previous experiences of rejection and a desire for connection. Girls and women appear particularly likely to report camouflaging, although it is important to remember that autistic people of all genders can camouflage.

For a girl who learns that being quiet, agreeable and socially responsive attracts approval, adapting may be a very sensible response to her environment.

For a woman who has spent decades navigating workplaces, friendships, intimate relationships and family expectations, those adaptations may have become highly sophisticated and automatic.

They helped you get somewhere.

The important question is not:

“Why did I do this?”

It is:

“What has it cost me, and do I still need to do all of it?”

2. WHAT CAN CAMOUFLAGING LOOK LIKE?

Camouflaging does not look the same for everyone.

It might mean:

- rehearsing conversations before they happen
- preparing possible answers to questions
- copying another girl’s clothing, expressions, interests or mannerisms
- monitoring how much you are talking
- forcing or carefully managing eye contact
- suppressing stimming or other self-regulatory movements
- hiding confusion and working it out later
- pretending that noise, light, crowds or touch are not distressing
- consciously studying friendship and social rules
- changing your personality between different groups
- appearing composed at school or work and falling apart at home
- laughing or smiling because it seems socially expected
- hiding intense interests because they might be judged
- staying in social situations long after your energy has run out.

Not every adaptation is camouflaging. What matters is the **function, choice and cost**.

A useful question is:

“Am I choosing this because it helps me communicate — or am I doing it because I am afraid of what will happen if people see what I actually need?”

3. WHY CAN IT BECOME EXHAUSTING?

Camouflaging requires work.

You may simultaneously be listening to a conversation, interpreting what another person means, deciding what response is expected, monitoring your face and voice, managing sensory input and checking whether the other person seems comfortable.

That effort may be invisible from the outside.

Research consistently links greater self-reported camouflaging with poorer mental health and well-being, including anxiety, depression, stress and burnout, although the research does **not** establish that camouflaging alone causes these difficulties. Social stigma, rejection, environmental demands and existing mental-health difficulties also matter.

This distinction is important.

The problem is not simply that an autistic person learned social strategies.

The wider environment matters too.

If someone feels that belonging depends upon continually hiding important aspects of herself, the psychological cost can become considerable.

4. CAMOUFLAGING CAN AFFECT HOW YOU UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

This may be particularly important for girls and young women.

Adolescence is already a period in which identity is developing. Recent research with autistic female and gender-diverse adolescents suggests that complex camouflaging can interfere with self-understanding and positive identity development.

A girl who is continually asking:

What should I say?

How should I look?

What does everyone else like?

Who should I be with this group?

may give herself fewer opportunities to ask:

What do I like?

What feels comfortable to me?

What matters to me?

Who am I when I am not trying to get this right?

For women diagnosed later, the same questions can emerge after decades of adaptation.

You might realise that you know how to meet other people's expectations remarkably well but have difficulty identifying your own preferences.

That does not mean that there is no "real you" underneath the mask.

It may mean that **your own signals have had less space to be heard.**

5. THE ANSWER IS NOT NECESSARILY TO "STOP MASKING"

Learning about camouflaging can create another pressure:

Now I have to unmask. You don't.

There is currently no good evidence supporting abrupt, complete "unmasking" as a therapeutic goal, and camouflaging can sometimes serve useful or protective functions.

Different environments carry different levels of safety.

A teenage girl navigating school bullying, a young woman beginning university, and a woman working in an unsupportive workplace may have good reasons for choosing when and where to reveal more of themselves.

The aim is therefore not **zero masking**.

A more useful aim is:

more awareness + more choice + less unnecessary cost.

6. START BY NOTICING WHERE YOU FEEL MOST LIKE YOURSELF

Instead of immediately changing your behaviour, become curious about it.

You could ask:

- Where do I feel most relaxed?
- Who allows me to stop monitoring myself?
- Where do I feel that I am "performing"?
- What happens to my energy afterwards?
- Which sensory discomforts do I routinely hide?
- Which interests do I minimise around other people?
- When do I say yes when I really want to say no?
- Which parts of my behaviour feel chosen?
- Which feel compulsory?

You might notice that you camouflage differently at school, work, home, with family, with friends or with a partner.

There does not need to be one identical version of you everywhere.

All people adapt across contexts.

The goal is to notice when adaptation becomes **self-erasure or chronic exhaustion**.

7. EXPERIMENT WITH AUTHENTICITY RATHER THAN DEMANDING IT

Rediscovering yourself can happen gradually.

Try small, safe experiments.

Perhaps you:

- allow yourself a more natural gaze with someone you trust
- use a sensory aid without hiding it
- tell a friend that you need some quiet
- leave a social event before you are completely depleted
- talk about an interest without first deciding whether it sounds “normal”
- ask for written information instead of pretending you understood
- stop automatically apologising for needing time to process.

Then notice:

How anxious was I beforehand?

What actually happened?

How did I feel afterwards?

Did it cost me less energy?

Did I feel more like myself?

The aim is not to prove that masking is bad. It is to give you back the ability to choose.

8. IDENTITY IS SOMETHING YOU CAN DISCOVER, NOT SOMETHING YOU HAVE LOST

After diagnosis, some women fear that they no longer know who they are. A more compassionate way of understanding this is that you may be meeting parts of yourself that previously had little room to exist.

Rediscovering identity might involve learning:

- what genuinely interests you
- how much social contact suits you
- what your body tells you about overload

- what environments help you think
- what kinds of friendships feel reciprocal
- how you naturally communicate
- which boundaries protect your wellbeing
- what brings pleasure rather than approval.

For girls and young women, having permission to explore these questions earlier may support a more secure neurodivergent identity.

For women diagnosed later, there may also be grief.

You can honour the person who learned to adapt **without requiring her to keep working that hard forever.**

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

For years, the question may have been:

“How do I make sure nobody notices that I am different?”

Post-diagnosis, another question becomes possible:

“Where, when and with whom is it safe for me to use less energy hiding who I am?”

You do not have to uncover a perfectly “authentic” version of yourself.

You do not have to stop adapting.

You do not have to disclose your autism.

The pathway is toward **greater awareness, greater choice, safer environments and a stronger sense that your needs, preferences and ways of being are legitimate parts of you.**

Camouflaging may be something you learned to survive and belong.

Understanding it can help you decide which parts still serve you — and which parts you are ready to put aside.