Behind the *mask.*

Masking means hiding or changing your natural ways of being so you fit in. Here's what it can look like from outside — and what it can cost inside.

THE MASKING ICEBERG

Most of it stays out of sight

ABOVE THE SURFACE

What others see

Making eye contact
Scripted small talk
Hiding stims
Copying others
Pushing through sensory pain

WATERLINE

BELOW THE SURFACE

What it costs

Exhaustion
Performing all day uses energy that doesn't come back fast.

Anxiety
Constantly watching yourself for "mistakes."

Losing track of who you are
The mask can blur what you actually like and need.

Burnout
Many ND people describe masking as a big part of the road there.

Delayed diagnosis
When struggles are hidden well, support can come years late.

WHY WE MASK

Safety · Belonging · Learned early

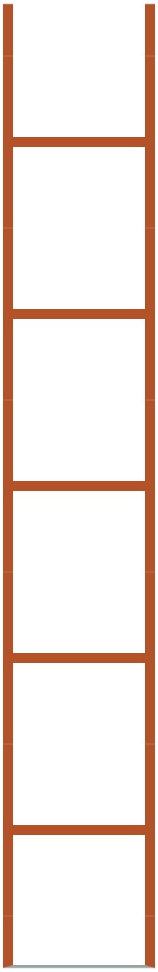
Masking is a survival skill, *not a flaw.* It kept you going. You get to decide when to put it down.

Continued on back →

THE UNMASKING LADDER

One rung at a time

Start at the bottom. Stay on any rung as long as you like — climbing isn't a race, and stepping back down is allowed.



↑ BIGGER STEPS

5 **Ask for what you need openly**
Like: "I focus better with my headphones on — is that okay here?"

4 **Unmask in low-stakes spaces**
Like: stimming openly at the grocery store or on a walk.

3 **Unmask with one safe person**
Like: skipping eye contact while chatting with a trusted friend.

2 **Unmask alone**
Like: letting your face rest and moving how you want at home.

1 **Notice when you mask**
Like: catching yourself rehearsing a phone call three times first.

START HERE

SAFETY FIRST

You get to choose *where and when.*

Unmasking isn't all-or-nothing.

Some places aren't safe to unmask. Masking there is a smart choice, not a failure.

You can step back down a rung any time.

Rest after masking-heavy days counts as care.

YOUR TURN

Where I feel safe to be myself

One mask I'd like to set down