

Actually Autistic Educator

Episode 3: Autistic Communication

Part 2: Masking, August 2021

Overview

Jeanne (she/her) discusses autistic masking and how it impacts autistic communication and presentation, as well as the consequences the pressure to mask can have on autistics. Jeanne shares studies showing a concerning relationship between autistic masking and suicide, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Jeanne is joined by fellow teacher Dora (she/her) and previous guest Amanda (she/her) as they share their personal relationships and experiences with masking as autistics.

Key Points:

- Autistic masking is a collection of things autistics may do, either consciously or unconsciously, to attempt to hide their visible autistic traits, such as stimming, avoiding eye contact, etc., which they have previously associated with being harmed, shamed, or shunned for due to living in an ableist society that punishes such differences. Unfortunately, while masking may allow access to spaces autistics would otherwise be kept out of (work, social) it also carries significant costs to an autistic's mental health.
- Professionals in mental health and education settings, as well as parents of autistic children, should understand both how masking can influence diagnosis and how pressure they may be accidentally placing to look "normal" can cause depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidality in autistic children and adults.
- Time: 47:35

Quotes:

"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." – Jeanne

"I can stim around my kids and they don't care. Sometimes they join in with me. I can't stim around my coworkers." – Dora

"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.' My goal in life is 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." – Amanda

"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... That's part of why so many [autistic people] are ending up being sexually assaulted, because we are told to do what other people want you to do." – Amanda

"Imagine that every time you do social interaction, all throughout the conversation, one of those puzzle mini games pops up and you need to do that, but you also need to carry on the conversation and make it look natural." – Amanda

"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." – Jeanne

"I swapped away from very harmless [stims] that would 'look weird' and as a result, when I get slightly overstimulated or out sensoried... 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

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pretty hard or even cut 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." – Jeanne

"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... 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.'" – Jeanne

"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." – Jeanne

Studies referenced:

Louise Bradley, Rebecca Shaw, Simon Baron-Cohen, and Sarah Cassidy. Autistic Adults' Experiences of Camouflaging and Its Perceived Impact on Mental Health. *Autism in Adulthood*. Online Ahead of Print: June 3, 2021 <http://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0071>

Cassidy, S.A., Gould, K., Townsend, E. et al. Is Camouflaging Autistic Traits Associated with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours? Expanding the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide in an Undergraduate Student Sample. *J Autism Dev Disord* 50, 3638–3648 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04323-3>

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