



# SOCIAL CAMOUFLAGING

in Girls with ASD

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## The Chameleon in the Room

Over five million adults in the United States are autistic, and many are diagnosed later in life.<sup>1</sup> Several factors appear to contribute to a delayed diagnosis for a person with autism, including being female,<sup>2</sup> the absence of co-occurring cognitive impairment, and a lack of resources.<sup>3</sup> A behavior called camouflaging, or “masking,” may also contribute to delayed or late autism diagnosis for some individuals.

Camouflaging occurs when a person with autism does not exhibit obvious behaviors or characteristics that are usually associated with autism. For example, an individual may camouflage or hide some repetitive behaviors or restricted interests when in a social setting in order to fit in or avoid social challenges. The act of hiding or repressing natural traits or behaviors that are commonly associated with autism can result in some people not receiving an autism diagnosis until later in life. In some cases, it prevents them from receiving a diagnosis at all. As a result, many autistic people may miss out on services and supports that could be beneficial to their well-being.

## Why Do Some Autistic People Camouflage?

An autistic person may want and need to copy the behaviors of others to be socially included and to be safe from stigmatization. Individuals who camouflage describe the experience as wearing “a mask.”<sup>4,5</sup> Camouflaging is a subconsciously and consciously learned coping mechanism to fit in socially, and may be convincing enough to fool acquaintances, social partners, and even clinicians.

Why do autistic people adopt behaviors that are not natural to them? Contrary to some common misconceptions, many autistic individuals are socially motivated.<sup>6,7</sup> Autistic adults also show a greater desire to have friends than is seen in the general population.<sup>8</sup> A strong desire to have friends and to make connections may prompt camouflaging behavior.

Camouflaging may also be a strategy when an individual faces stigma.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that autistic people are more often harassed and bullied when openly autistic than when they are camouflaging.<sup>10</sup> It becomes even more difficult to “unmask” when a person is actively trying to hide differences, both out of a desire to be socially included and the need to be safe from stigmatization.

## Gender Differences in Camouflaging and Underdiagnosis

Both camouflaging and underdiagnosis are more common for autistic women than for autistic men.<sup>11,12</sup> Girls’ autistic symptoms, while very present, are not as easily seen or recognized, and may never be diagnosed or may even be *misdiagnosed*. Why are females overlooked? Since autistic girls tend to have more friends, their social rejection is harder to see compared to that of their male peers.<sup>13,14</sup>

Autistic girls often experience being “socially overlooked.” As a result, they hover in the periphery of a group of peers but do not actually participate. Generally, girls’ social relationships also have greater nuance and social rules, which can lead to greater rejection for autistic girls.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, autistic boys typically receive more overt social rejection, which is manifested as physical distance from peers.<sup>13,14</sup>

The experience of autistic girls who have more friends and are seemingly more included could be compared to sunlight that is filtered out by the sunglasses worn by the observer. Since there are no obvious signs of the level of social exclusion that affects autistic boys, the exclusion suffered by girls often goes undetected.

*As a child, I was diagnosed with ADHD. At a superficial level, the diagnosis seemed to be a good fit. I had attention issues, was impulsive and forgetful, and I would fidget and fiddle with everything. However, I also had other issues. I was easily overwhelmed by the unfamiliar, had difficulty organizing my thoughts, made seemingly outlandish statements and connections, and consistently committed social errors that were mostly minor. I had friends, though, and could mostly navigate social situations by following the examples of others. I always thought I'd grow out of most of my social awkwardness.*

It may be that the social environment of girls makes them better at hiding the usual signs of autism that are most identifiable. Since they do not fit the stereotypes and expectations of what autism looks like, they are never identified as autistic by peers.

## The Hidden Cost of Camouflaging

Camouflaging has a significant effect on the mental health of autistic individuals. Neurodivergent individuals who are navigating a neurotypical-dominant society may find the experience too taxing on their mental resources. Camouflaging may lead to additional mental strain and burnout for both autistic men and women.<sup>10,15,16</sup> In fact, camouflaging is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress in autistic women.<sup>15</sup> The negative impacts of camouflaging on mental health could be attributed to confusion about one’s true identity under the mask.<sup>17</sup>

*As a young adult, my social skills were in a sweet spot of being good enough not to be given a label, but not good enough to pass closer inspection as I tried to make better and long-lasting connections. Meanwhile, social interactions made me more and more exhausted. At the same time, however, I wished I could connect better to others and for longer periods of time. Pretending not to be different seemed to fill me with social anxiety and drained me of energy, particularly when I wasn't successful.*

## Where to Go from Here

In general, we need a better understanding of how female social culture and an over-reliance on a male autism profile impact camouflaging. Delayed access to supportive services and a lack of knowledge about one’s own identity are both detrimental to autistic individuals. There’s also a need to better understand the relationship between camouflaging and mental health, and how to support those on the spectrum with mental health challenges.

Individuals who camouflage miss out on significant opportunities to identify with the autism community and to benefit from an inclusive and supportive network.<sup>17</sup> Parents and families should look for supports and services that help their autistic family member connect with others on the spectrum and with those who are well-versed in autism or who can empathize with the family member. It is important for autistic individuals to have places where they do not have to camouflage and where they can be social, while also being true to themselves.



I was finally diagnosed with autism in my early 20s. Since then, I've been put in contact with services that have helped me and that have strengthened my social skills. As I look back now, I realize my ADHD diagnosis did not prepare me for my struggles with emotional regulation, sensory sensitivities, adapting to new situations, and executive function challenges. I've finally been able to address these challenges now that I am equipped with an autism diagnosis. It is important that we "chameleons" get connected sooner to services and opportunities for interaction with the larger autistic community in order to improve our lives.

It is my hope that the future for neurodivergent individuals such as myself will continue to get brighter, and that we can get the help and community support we need through early and accurate diagnosis.

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