

Unmasking in the Workplace

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Embracing Authenticity for Mental Health and Productivity

As we approach Mental Health Week 2025, the theme of "Unmasking" encourages a timely reflection on what it truly means to bring our whole selves to work. While conversations around mental health stigma have gained traction, there's still much to explore about the daily reality of masking—the often invisible effort many employees make to fit into workplace norms by concealing parts of their identity, struggles, or neurodivergence.

For many, masking has been a survival strategy. But at what cost?

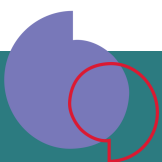
The Hidden Costs of Masking

Masking, also known as camouflaging, involves suppressing authentic thoughts, emotions, or behaviors to align with perceived professional expectations. This is particularly common among individuals facing mental health challenges, neurodivergent traits (like autism or ADHD), or those from marginalized communities.

While masking can help people "blend in," it comes with downsides including emotional exhaustion and burnout, isolation & disconnection, reduced productivity over time from negative impacts to one's creativity, collaboration, and engagement.

The Case for Unmasking: Why Authenticity Matters

Unmasking—allowing oneself to be seen authentically—can transform both individual well-being and organizational culture. When employees feel safe to express their true selves, research shows there are improvements in their mental health, job satisfaction, productivity, and team cohesion. Fostering psychological safety—where employees know they won't face judgment or repercussions for being open—is foundational to these benefits and creates workplaces where diversity isn't just accepted—it's valued.





The Challenges: When Unmasking Isn't So Simple

While the benefits of unmasking are clear, it's important to recognize that it's not always easy—or safe—for everyone.

- **Psychological Safety Involves Risk:** True psychological safety isn't about comfort—it's about knowing you can take interpersonal risks, like admitting struggles or asking for help, without fear of negative consequences.
- **Managers Aren't Therapists:** Leaders can foster supportive environments, but they aren't equipped to handle deep personal disclosures. Boundaries matter.
- **Privilege Plays a Role:** For some, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, unmasking can increase exposure to bias or discrimination. In these cases, masking may remain a protective tool.
- **Personal Boundaries:** Unmasking isn't about full transparency or unprofessionalism. Everyone has the right to choose what they share and when. It's about having the option—not the obligation—to be authentic.

Unmasking in the workplace isn't about oversharing or abandoning professionalism—it's about creating a space where people don't feel forced to hide parts of who they are.

When workplaces foster psychological safety, respect personal boundaries, and value authenticity, everyone benefits—through healthier employees, stronger teams, and a more resilient organization.

Masking isn't something easy to navigate, but being aware of it is the first step and your EAP is here to help. Reach out to FSEAP 24/7 for confidential mental health services and resources if you are struggling and need support.

Tips for Employees: How to Safely Unmask at Work

1. **Assess Your Environment:** Before unmasking, take stock of your workplace culture. If the environment doesn't feel safe, it's okay to continue masking where needed for protection.
2. **Start Small and Choose Trusted People:** Begin by sharing with someone you trust—perhaps a supportive colleague, mentor, or HR representative. Gradual unmasking allows you to gauge reactions and build confidence.
3. **Define Your Boundaries:** You control the narrative - Decide what you want to share, clarify why you're sharing (e.g., to request accommodation, foster understanding, or simply to be authentic), and know where your comfort zone ends.
4. **Focus on Needs, Not Labels:** If you're unmasking to seek support, you don't have to disclose a diagnosis or personal history. Instead, frame conversations around what helps you thrive, or what challenges you're managing.
5. **Prepare for Different Responses:** Even in supportive environments, not everyone will fully understand your experience. Have a plan for redirecting unhelpful comments, seeking support if challenges arise, and practicing self-care after vulnerable conversations.

