

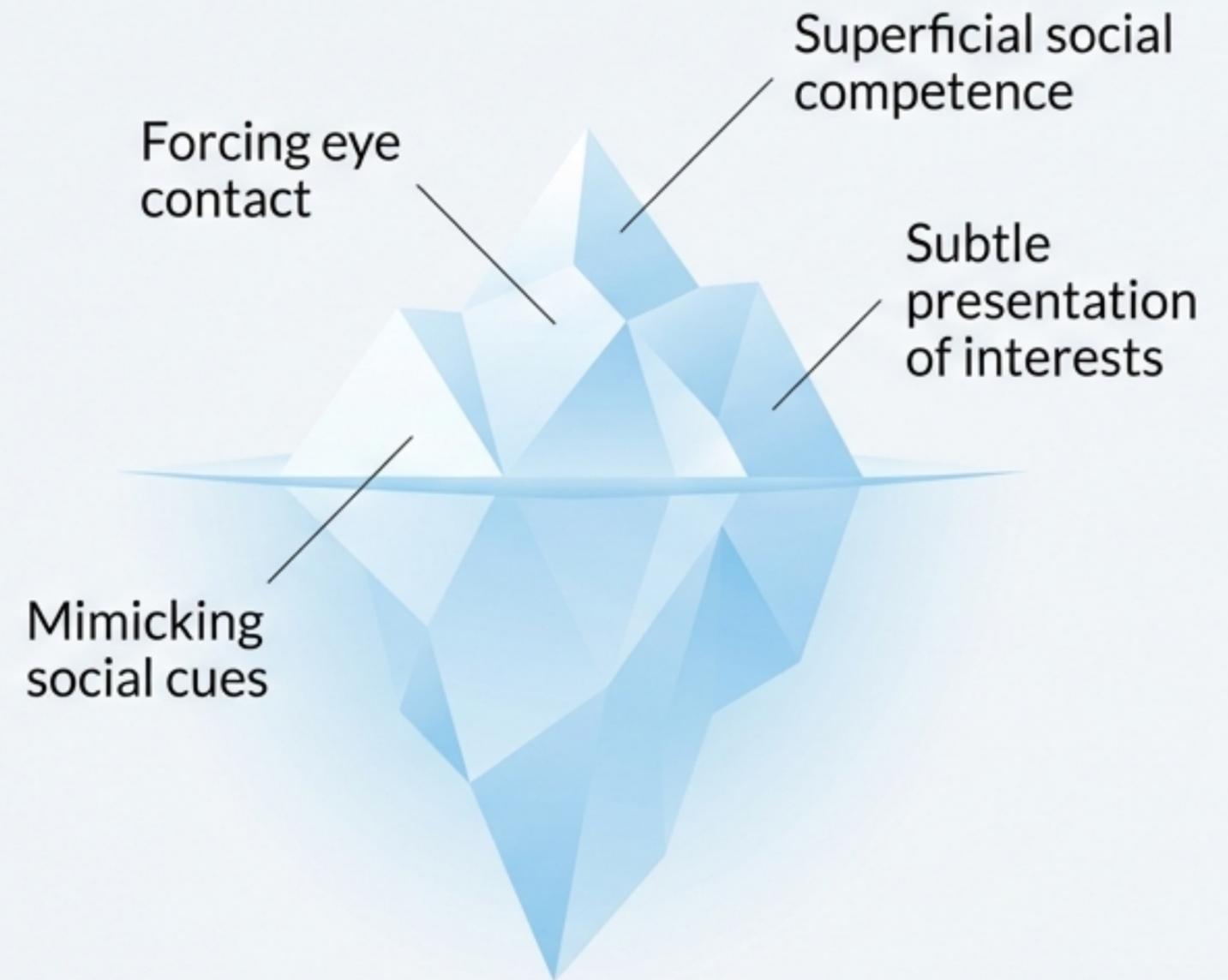
The Iceberg of the Autistic Experience

What Lies Beneath the Mask



What Society Sees Is Often a Performance

Many observable autistic presentations are misinterpreted. What may seem like “social awkwardness” or “lack of empathy” is often the result of a conscious, effortful performance designed to fit in. This performance is called masking.



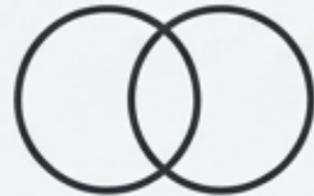
Fact: Autistic women are often diagnosed later in life, partly due to more subtle presentations and successful masking, which diagnostic tools historically designed for males often miss.

Masking Is a Social Survival Strategy

Masking, or camouflaging, is the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic traits to meet neurotypical standards. It is a response to stigma and a world not designed for autistic people.



To stay safe and avoid bullying or harm.



To form connections and relationships.



To be successful at work or school.



To fit in and feel a sense of belonging.

“being me is never acceptable I’m a social lepper”

Below the Surface: “A Lack of Words for Emotions”

Alexithymia

A difficulty identifying and describing one's own emotions. It's not an absence of feelings—often, emotions are felt very deeply—but a disconnect between the experience and the ability to name it.

Alexithymia impacts up to **50%** of all autistic people, compared to roughly 10% of the general population.

“For those of us with alexithymia, we may know in a vague way that we're distressed, but might not be able to name a specific feeling.”

- Dr. Devon Price, Autistic Psychologist



The Mind-Body Disconnect

Interoception

The sensory system that allows us to know what is happening inside our bodies (e.g., thirst, hunger, a racing heart).

+

The Connection

When interoceptive signals are unclear, it's hard to connect physical sensations to emotions. A racing heart might not register as "anxiety," making it impossible to address the feeling before it becomes overwhelming.



Example: An autistic person might not recognize the subtle signs of growing agitation until they are in a **full meltdown** or **shutdown**.

The Crushing Weight of the Mask

The constant effort of camouflaging, driven by a world that demands conformity, comes at a devastating cost to mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

EXHAUSTION
ANXIETY & DEPRESSION
LOSS OF IDENTITY
DELAYED DIAGNOSIS

The True Cognitive Load

“It’s like trying to solve mathematical equations in your head all day long while carrying on as normal.”

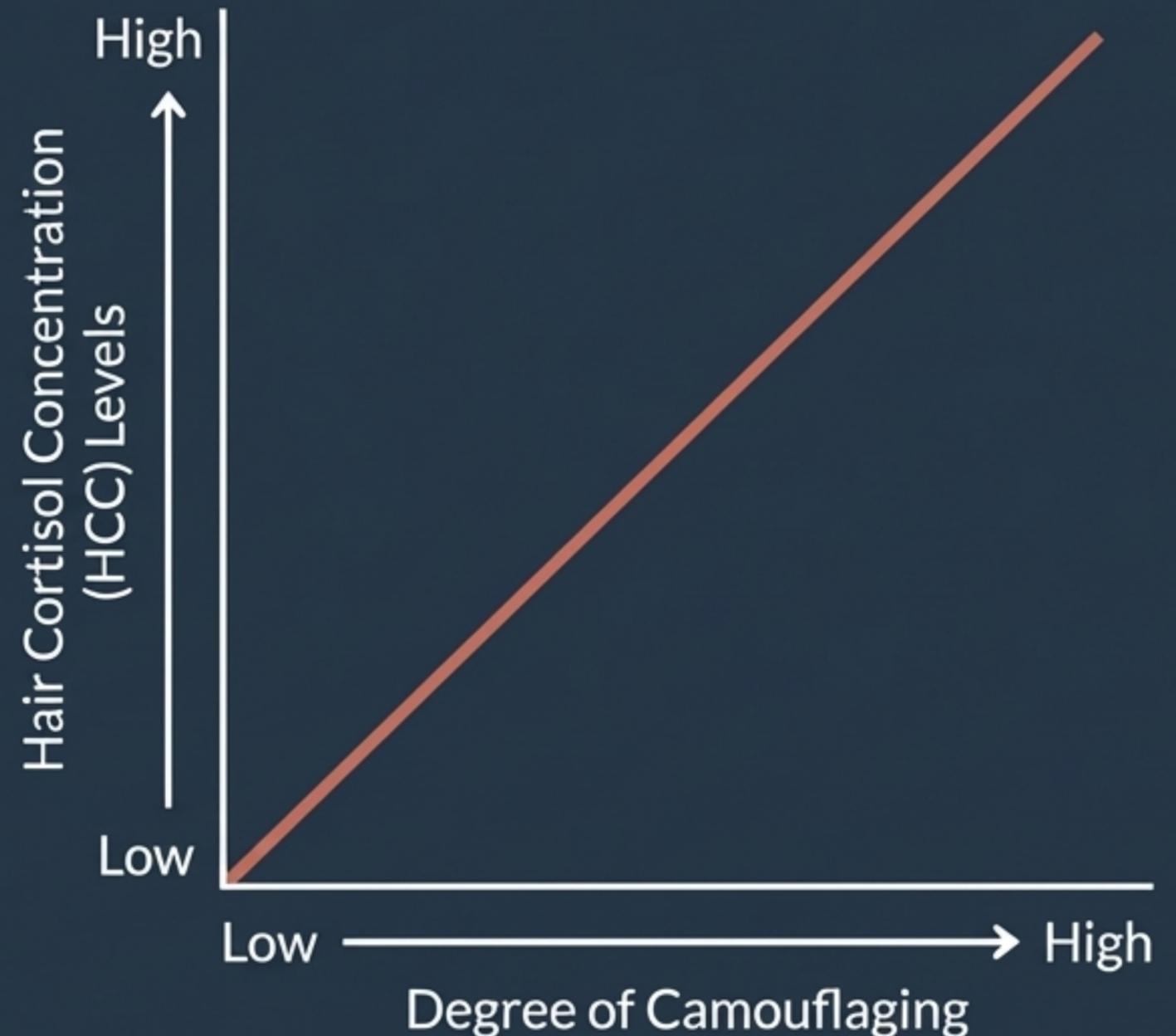
“It’s like I’m running twenty browser tabs in my brain, all day, every day.”

The Toll Is Biological, Not Just Emotional

The chronic stress of camouflaging leaves a physical mark. Researchers can measure long-term stress using **Hair Cortisol Concentration (HCC)**, a key biomarker.

The Finding: A 2025 study found that higher levels of camouflaging were directly associated with **increased hair cortisol levels**.

The Implication: The strain of masking creates a physiological stress response, demonstrating a tangible, biological cost.



The Ultimate Price of Conforming

Autistic Burnout: "A syndrome of chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced **tolerance to stimulus** resulting from the cumulative load of living in a world not built for you."

"Having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure and being left with no clean-up crew."

3x

more likely to die by suicide.

66%

of autistic adults have contemplated suicide.

If the cost of conformity is this high, what is the alternative?

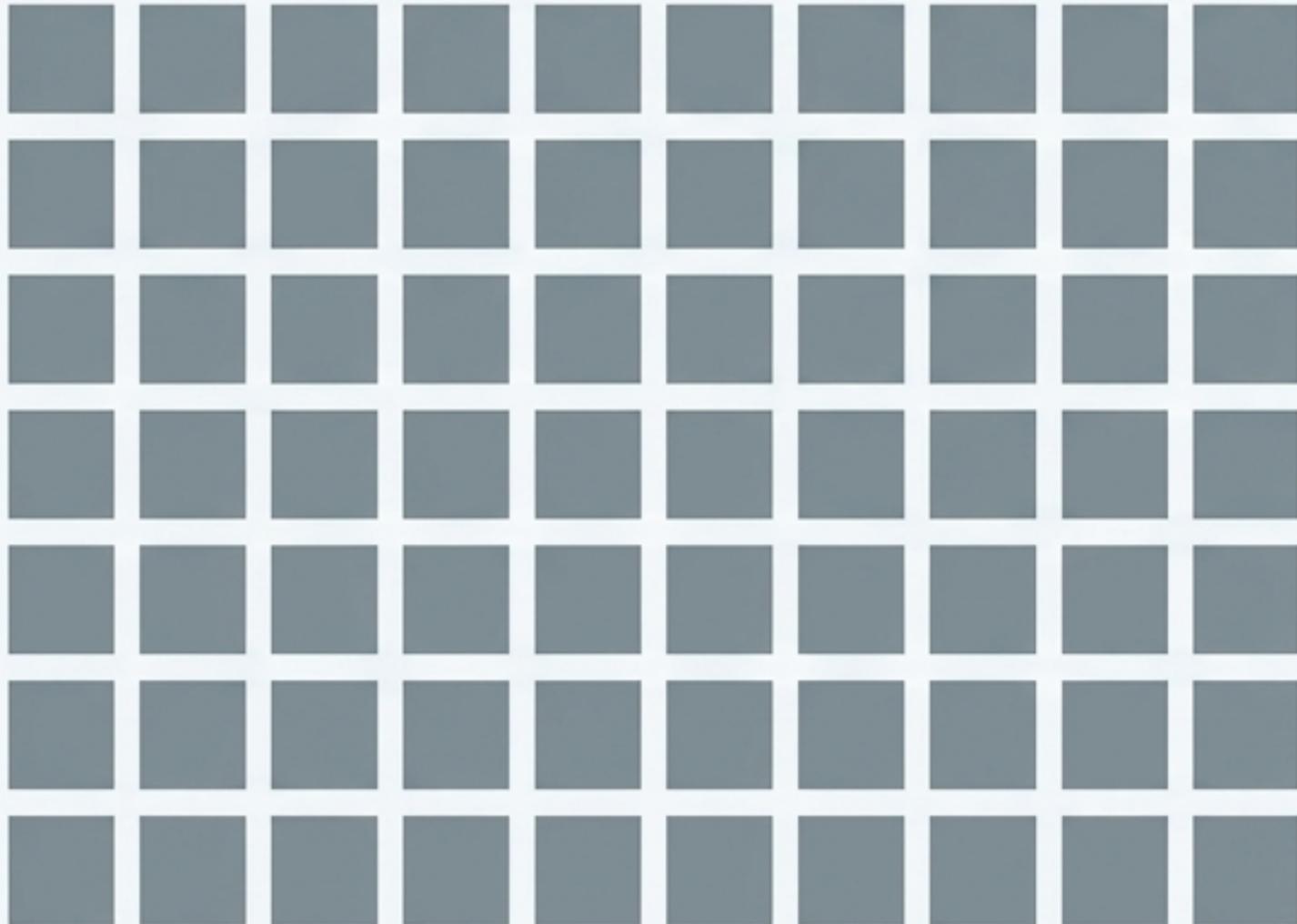
The solution is not to better endure the pressure, but to remove it. **Unmasking** is the process of intentionally letting go of the mask and allowing the authentic, autistic self to emerge. It is an act of reclaiming identity and well-being.

Unmasking should be a choice, made when an individual feels safe and supported.

The Work Is Not to 'Fix' the Person, but to Change the Environment

Neuronormativity

The assumption that there is one "correct" way to think, feel, communicate, and behave.



Neurodiversity-Affirming Mindset

The understanding that the diversity of human brains is a positive. Divergent brains are not broken, just different. The goal is authenticity, not assimilation.



How to Create Safety for Unmasking

Supporting someone means helping them feel safe enough to be their authentic self. Your role is to walk alongside them with openness, patience, and trust.



Listen **Listen Without Judgment**

Validate their experience. Avoid saying “everyone feels that way.”



Remove Pressure

Advocate for environments that don’t demand constant eye contact or small talk.



Let Go of Expectations

Reframe behaviors from “noncompliant” to “authentic” or “needs-based.”



Educate Yourself

Learn about autistic culture and communication from autistic people.

Unmasking Is Not Regression—It Is Growth

As someone feels safer, their authentic communication and self-regulation may become more visible. This is a sign of trust and progress.



More visible stimming
(rocking, hand-flapping,
fidgeting)



Setting firm
boundaries around
social energy



Communicating
differently
(e.g., using AAC,
less eye contact)



Wearing sensory support
items (headphones,
sunglasses)



Stronger adherence
to routines that
reduce stress

The Rewards of Authenticity

When unmasking is supported, the negative consequences of masking can be reversed, leading to profound improvements in well-being and connection.



Stronger sense of identity and self-acceptance



Improved mental health and reduced anxiety/depression



More **energy** for interests and relationships



Deeper, more authentic connections with others

“Being around autistic people is like breathing for the first time.”

Seeing the Whole Iceberg



The goal is not to eliminate the depths, but to make the water clear enough for the whole person to be seen, understood, and valued. When we create a culture of acceptance, the mask is no longer a tool for survival, but a relic of a less understanding time. Authenticity becomes the new standard.