

Brain Club®: The Podcast - S1E11 - Masking in Relationships

Mel Houser: [00:00:00] Hello! Welcome to Brain Club: The Podcast, a space for learning, unlearning, and reimagining new ways of being together in neuro inclusive community. I'm Dr. Mel Houser, Executive Director of All Brains Belong Vermont. Welcome to our podcast.

Brain Club is All Brains Belong's weekly community education program where we demonstrate our approach to neuro inclusive culture through community panels, guest speakers, and book chats. It's a place where we shift broader community awareness about the issues of concern and importance to neurodivergent people in our community and promote new ways of thinking and being in community together.

It's a place where we transform culture by modeling what's possible, with the idea that then you go out into the rest of your lives and carry it forward.

You can already access all the recordings from our website, allbrainsbelong.org, but our community asked us to turn it into a podcast. So here we are. These conversations are not medical advice and they're not support groups.

They're an invitation to think [00:01:00] differently about health, connection and how we build systems that include everyone. Each episode features community panelists, sharing perspectives and lived experiences. We hope you'll listen with curiosity and reflect on what it brings up for your own life.

Today's topic is masking.

Masking sometimes called camouflaging is when autistic and ADHD people suppress, hide, or compensate for parts of themselves to appear more "normal "or socially acceptable. Importantly, it's largely automatic and involuntary. Something that the nervous system learns to do in response to environments that have signaled repeatedly to who you actually are is not safe to show up as examples might be forcing eye contact, scripting conversations in your head beforehand, suppressing stimming, laughing at the right moments, holding yourself together in public and falling apart later. It has layers that keep revealing themselves over time, and that looks different for everyone.

Unmasking is not a goal or a destination. What we actually want is to be in [00:02:00] environments and with people where our nervous system sense that it's safe to show up authentically, comfortably without judgment, without shame, or worse.

Tonight we're bringing that into relationships, the places where we most want to be known.

We will talk honestly about what masking costs us and what becomes possible when safety is genuinely present.

We also want to name something that comes directly from our community: sometimes popular content about autism and ADHD centers experiences that don't feel relatable, and that can bring up real frustration, even resentment.

Some people, never had access to mask. Some people lose the ability to mask particularly while in burnout. Often representation is uneven and so we're trying to hold more of that variation honestly. So in addition to learning from our panelists, we invite you to imagine what it might be like to move through a world where most spaces aren't safe to show up in and you don't have masking as a tool.

Thank you to our panelists. Beck Natale. Elizabeth [00:03:00] Carney, Janelle Starr, and Aniel Kailani.

Obviously we're all on journeys. We're on journeys together, figuring all the things. I wonder do you remember when you first recognized that you were in fact putting a version of yourself out into the world that was different from the version inside?

Elizabeth Carney: It was a lot of tiny revelations of, oh, in that moment I was using masking to get through it.

Beck Natale: That, yeah, I think. I first learned that I was masking, a few years ago when I was kind of in the midst of college, and also, at the worst of the lockdowns, due to COVID. I learned that I have ADHD and autism kind around the same time that I realized I was trans. So during the period of time when I was in college.

Isolated in my room by myself, alone with my thoughts. I did a lot. [00:04:00] I, it was not the easiest time, but I did end up doing a lot of self-reflection during that time, and realized that I felt. Uncomfortable with myself just as a baseline, and that there was something wrong at the core of who I was and who I was presenting to the world.

Janelle Starr: Masking for me is kind of like a survivalist tool. It's not something that feels good, but it's something that I do to survive just showing up for life. And that means that, you know, I

Beck Natale: am capable of doing very difficult things for short periods of time because the masking allows me to enter into conversations that are difficult or emotional or uncomfortable or go into social situations that, again, are uncomfortable, but I'm able to do it because I can sort of dilute Janelle, dilute [00:05:00] myself to be palatable for whatever situation I'm in.

Aniel Kailani: In a way we all do it and most people automatically assume that it is really just with neurodivergence and autism and et cetera. But it is definitely something that everybody does. So yes, we all do this to some extent when

Beck Natale: the environment compels us to mask. When did you first discover that this was happening for you?

Probably. Middle school, high school. I didn't really have an idea of what it was at the time. No vocabulary or anything like that. I had just noticed this constant, consistent feeling of just performing for others and. It was more attributed to, at the time being an undiagnosed [00:06:00] of everything, undiagnosed, ADHD, undiagnosed autism, undiagnosed depression, anxiety, like the whole, the whole, all of the things.

Basically, the only thing holding me together was this idea of the performance because I felt so isolated. With all the stuff that I was dealing with. So it just, it felt more normal to be in that performative space than not.

There was a deep sense of disconnection between the person I was presenting to the world and the person that I truly was.

And especially the, the process of going to college and really thinking about how am I presenting myself to these people that I'm meeting for the first time in my life, gave me a lot of things to think about, and that's when I started really digging into, neurodiversity and also being gender queer.

Thinking about my own gender identity and how I want it to be perceived in that way as well.

Mel Houser: That is so much to happen in the middle of lockdown. [00:07:00]

Beck Natale: Yes. Yeah.

Mel Houser: Distinguishing between what do I, what is the impression I manage to accomplish a strategic purpose versus what am I hiding because I am deep down, broken and defective.

Like, how did you splice that?

Beck Natale: It felt a little bit like lying at the beginning, because I was doing a lot of experimentation with just how I present myself to other people and I was fortunate enough to be in a group of friends, that was very accepting of my exploring my gender specifically. And, you know, some of them were trans and I just tried out different pronouns with them and felt like sat in that and. Like learned how it felt, and I realized that the default of how I was presenting myself to the world didn't have to be what I was doing all the time. And even if you

make a change as to how you're presenting yourself, you can always just roll that back if you don't like it.

[00:08:00] And I don't know, especially on Zoom, it's just like you can tell how other people are perceiving you.

Janelle Starr: How, when did I first realize I was masking? I would say probably a couple years ago. I'm in my mid thirties now. As a kid, I didn't realize that's what I was doing with masking because it was viewed as this is the way we behave. This is the way we communicate, this is the way we conduct ourselves, this is how our executive functioning should work, even if it doesn't work that way for you. And so, after my kiddo was diagnosed as autistic, I, and at the time was nonverbal, I was like, why do I understand her so well? Why can I sort of read her mind?

I realized it was because there were a lot of things that I recognized in her, like sensory overwhelm, like feeling dysregulated, like not knowing how to navigate a [00:09:00] situation that was causing me like. Just, I could tell she was uncomfortable. I could tell something wasn't off and I could intuitively know what she needed in that moment that she needed like deep pressure.

She needed a squeeze, she needed a quiet moment to step away. She needed a snack, like whatever it was. I could kind of tell that that's what she needed. And basically I was just doing for her what I wish somebody had done for me.

Aniel Kailani: And it wasn't until maybe after leaving the Navy, or heck within even the last five to seven years, whenever I finally had the better understanding of masking and really knowing, okay, I need to allow myself to stop and be able to rest, and it's been a work in progress.

Mel Houser: It's interesting that [00:10:00] you used the word rest. Because I, I think a lot of people aren't aware of the drain, the energy, drain the resources, drain of the performance.

Aniel Kailani: It takes a lot more energy. It takes a lot more of a physical toll sometimes because you get home and there is almost. A need to not let go of the mask, because ultimately masking is really just, at least in my perspective, it's become a survival instinct for multiple different reasons.

And whenever you don't understand what's going on. It's hard to drop that and allow yourself to actually be able to be yourself and rest, so you're constantly sitting in that.

Elizabeth Carney: Somewhere along the line, I realized that I had [00:11:00] constructed my sense of humor as a mask, and so, and the function of it was. Oh, if I say something that, and you laugh, then you know I am safe and I know you are safe.

It was a real, that was so humbling to be like, oh, your entire sense of humor is predicated on making yourself safe in this moment and seeking. Out to understand, is this other person gonna be safe with me? Whoa.

Mel Houser: Yes. And like, of course that is what you have done, right? Like we all need to establish safety before we're able to engage.

And you at some point figured out that this is a strategy that allows you to do that.

Elizabeth Carney: Yeah. And a quick one, like. You know, right away, like, oh, we got vibes, [00:12:00] or we do not have vibes.

Mel Houser: Layers. Like I keep peeling them like every day. It's like some other thing that I am, and for me it's not like, I mean, I think that often there is an intentional code switch.

If I'm trying to get someone who I don't have vibes with to understand a thing that I need to happen either for my own benefit and benefit of our community like that, and then there's like the unintentional like subconscious stuff that like. I don't know why I don't feel safe with a person, but like, I'm gonna, I'm gonna play my cards closer to the deck 'cause or chest or whatever anyway. 'cause it's like, this is, this is not safe. But even with people I am close with, there's still like layers, and I think that, and like we've talked many times about this, about like core values and core anti values, it's like sometimes the mask for me comes on because I'm prioritizing some of those [00:13:00] values or avoidance of core anti values.

And what that makes me do is hide or suppress parts of myself that would conflict with those presentations. The shadow.

Elizabeth Carney: That is so. That is so true. And it, and, and I think that's why masking feels so multilayered and complex and difficult to understand. If you, if we had been having this interview when I was like eight years old, 15 years old, 23, I don't think I would've said a masked.

Janelle Starr: I think there's a balance between teaching somebody what we can do in certain situations while still honoring ourselves, right? While still like saying, this is what I need in this moment. And giving ourselves permission to have that in a way that's also considerate of like the people around us, right?

[00:14:00] Because if I showed up at work every day and flipped my lid. Because I didn't get enough sleep and I was hungry and whatever, I wouldn't be able to do my job. So there are times where I have to say I have to use the restroom and I just take a couple minutes, I splash some cold water on my face, or I step outside the door and get that blast of cold air.

And I know that that's something that helps regulate my nervous system. I take some deep breathing, whatever I need to do, like right now, I have a fidget in my hand. That wasn't

something that I gave myself permission to have as an adult because I'm like, those are for children. But I'm realizing that like I'm allowed to have those things.

I am just as worthy of having those things to cope with stress as my daughter is watching her go through school, watching her go through social situations, watching her go through all these different things, and being sort of unapologetically herself. I was kind of [00:15:00] envious of that because I was like, I was still being plagued by, that's not how we behave.

That's not what we do. That's not what we say. Right. And so I was trying to constantly compensate for her and then I was like, wait a second. Like I love who she is. I love who she is. Is it difficult sometimes when other people don't accept us the way we are? Yes. Is it difficult? 'cause it's how society sees us as being like too much or dysfunctional or you know, not behaving appropriately or whatever it is.

Yeah, that can be difficult in social situations, but I love who she is. I love that she says what comes to her mind. I love that she's not necessarily concerned about ruffling feathers, about how she thinks and how she feels, and that there's literally almost like not a filter on it. And I'm trying, my biggest thing that I'm trying to do is preserve that in her.

Beck Natale: [00:16:00] Something that comes up often is like, going to Walmart is like one of my least favorite things to do. And you know, in 2020 and 2021 especially, That's when a lot of stores were starting to do curbside pickup. And I still do that both like obviously for COVID reasons and also just because it's so overstimulating to go into the store in person, and have to like interact with people and.

I am masking the whole time I'm in there because I'm like, oh my God, I have to appear like a normal person in this grocery store. Went to Walmart and I picked up a few things. It took me probably a couple hours to get like the 10 or 15 things that were on my list. And I came home, and I was trying to put things away and my partner was there and I was like trying to put like a box of pasta or something in the cabinet and I couldn't figure out how to make it fit. And I just like broke down crying and I was like, Hmm, this is not a, this is not the typical response to having to put [00:17:00] away pasta. and I realized that was a product of like overstimulation and the phys, like the physical and mental effort of masking the whole time that I was there,

Elizabeth Carney: because I think I've always sought to be myself in spaces and yet, and yet the mask was always there. And I think part of that has to do with the fact that have building the mask early on holds you back from really understanding yourself and asking yourself the questions that you need to in those very important like growth times.

Mel Houser: You don't experience that as a mask 'cause this is the way it's always been.

Right? But you, like you're a child, you don't, you're not like, you don't have the metacognitive awareness to see the ways in which your self view is shaped by the people and the environment and all the things.

Elizabeth Carney: You're forming yourself [00:18:00] in, into a need for masking. And so it's not, there's no awareness of that.

Like yourself is being formed with the mask already, already there.

Mel Houser: Yes. Which is why I think that many people, when they are, when they like learn about this concept and they're examining this concept, they're lost. Like they're lost because they're like, if I'm, if I'm not my mask, who am I? Like, I think people don't even know what their, you know, their true self is because we become our masks.

Aniel Kailani: Exactly. Yeah. And that's something that I've been working on with people in terms of being able to figure out their masks or what their true selves are. Identifying beliefs that have become their own because of masking or [00:19:00] because of something else going on. And it's always interesting to. See parallels and mirrors between everyone and the rationales of why, like you said, the mask becomes us, in our own, because that's what we grow to know.

And it's hard to drop that, especially whenever you don't know what's supposed to be underneath.

Mel Houser: You're not really trying to have a relationship with anyone at Walmart. You're just trying to like get your food. And yet that that is also taking a toll. So what about when in relationships, like what is that toll like when you can't be yourself?

Beck Natale: Yeah. I think something I struggle with the most is when I'm switching back and forth between having to mask and not having to mask. Again, also during my first couple years of college, that's when I met my partner. And they're also neurodivergent, they're also gender queer, and they're [00:20:00] fantastic.

And I don't feel like I have to mask with them and I'm really grateful for that. But switching from feeling that security with them to then having to go out and have relationships in other parts of my life where it's not as safe to be authentically myself, it takes more effort because I have to switch back to that mode.

Janelle Starr: The process of unmasking for me has been really, really difficult because. When you have that narrative in your head that you've always been too much, you've always been too sensitive, you've always been too dramatic, or I talk a lot when I'm nervous or fill in the blank with whatever it is. Those thoughts are always there.

It's really hard to undo 30 plus years of being told the same thing. And I think what allows me now to have a little more compassion for myself and to unmask more and more is having the love that I do for my [00:21:00] kids and seeing that they're just doing the best with where they are at right now with where their body is, with how they're feeling in their body, and like they're showing up to the best of their ability in this moment and that moment.

Their best may look different today than it looked yesterday. You know, they, they may not have, like, I have to remember also that my tank today, I may wake it, I may wake up and open my eyes and my tank is at 20% because I burned myself out the day before. Not realizing that that's what I was doing. And so today my distress tolerance, my ability to keep myself regulated, I might have to work twice as hard to do that in public.

And when I come home, I might have a little less bandwidth to keep all that in.

Elizabeth Carney: So like when I first unmasked, I didn't have control over that it, it happened. That was so scary and so vulnerable, and I [00:22:00] felt like I was walking around for a really long time, like a one raw nerve, and it was like I was either going to, just go into a shell and never come out or somebody was gonna like, make eye contact with me and I was going to like dump everything out on them. And it was, that was a really, that was maybe the hardest moment of understanding the masking was, was losing the control and not understanding how to gain it back right away. I think what has happened is, as I have explored it, it has become safer to sort of like meld back the person I am with.

Kind of like what you said about, you know, you will need to switch into, you know, parts of a mask to accomplish things. And I think sort of like the. [00:23:00] That has become easier for me to negotiate. And maybe that's true for you too.

Mel Houser: Yeah, no, I think, and it also like depends on like where I am on my like burnout spectrum and like Oh yeah.

How much access I have to executive functioning. Like, 'cause you know, for me so much of, of masking is like an involuntary automatic safety mechanism. But there are, which is different from, those things are like, I have to hide this part of myself because it would be unsafe. To show this part of myself different from I'm gonna, like, I'm meeting with somebody later who I don't know and they are in some position of power.

And so like, I have prepared scripts and I'm gonna follow them. They're not exactly how I would show up with you. But there's something which just doesn't feel like masking. That feels like, strategic communication. That's a skill. Yeah. It's like a skill versus a need, a survival or, or autonomic response. Yes. And auto, I think thinking about [00:24:00] masking as an involuntary, automatic, like autonomic nervous response, I think that's really powerful. A topic of like, I want to unmask, and you're like, dude, I don't think you can just like decide you're

gonna unmask. I think if you are not with safe people and safe environments, like this is a survival and anyway, like how do you talk about that with people?

Aniel Kailani: Acknowledging again, I am not a licensed professional in terms of psychology. I am a nurse, but I have a lot of experience with psychology and mental health. The biggest thing is finding that safe haven that is. Basically the key, because if you don't have something like that where it's like a safe space to be able to unmask or the people around you, it is extremely difficult.

And I would say probably almost impossible to allow yourself to really be yourself.

Beck Natale: I try to be myself authentically as much as I can. And I'm, again, [00:25:00] I'm really lucky that I'm in a place where I can do that around my partner. I am a patient at All Brains belong, and I'm really grateful that I'm able to not feel like I have to mask in front of like my healthcare providers.

That's a huge thing. And I, I don't feel like I have to put on a performance in order to get the care that I need, knowing exactly what about myself is a result of masking. What is me being authentic and feeling safe and being able to express myself.

Mel Houser: So your comment about I try to show up authentically when I can like is, is I think really well said, because I think that some people who don't really understand masking, don't really understand that this is an involuntary automatic response when we don't feel safe. And so like we could be aware of it, but we could very easily slip back into it because the cues from the environment are compelling us to hide parts of ourselves. What do you think about that?[00:26:00]

Beck Natale: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. , I think this is something that shows up. That I'm kind of constantly thinking about in terms of my work, because I work at an organization that is very inclusive and very accepting of whatever way you work best. You know, that's how you're welcome to show up.

But I find myself masking anyway because of every other experience in my life.

Janelle Starr: I'm gonna try to be myself and when I was looking for new jobs. One of the things that I talked about with my counseling coach was I want a job where I can show up to work every day and be myself. That I don't have to hide who I am from people that like the qualities that make me a good contributor to society, a good support person, a good advocate, those traits that make me so passionate.

I want those to be valued where I go, not something to dull down.

Mel Houser: And you deserve [00:27:00] nothing less than that. And I think that, you know, for a lot of people, I don't know if this is the case for you, but a lot of people who say,

I want to unmask. What, what some people mean by that is I want the environments that I'm in to be safe to unmask as opposed to something I'm doing differently.

I want to, you know, be brave and show myself. It's like, no dude, I want it to be safe because like you started this conversation, masking is a survival strategy,

Janelle Starr: so I am either telling a complete stranger my life story. Or I'm trying to not open my mouth and say anything because I know once that floodgates open, you know when the floodgates open, I will say whatever.

Mel Houser: I deeply get that.

Janelle Starr: Yes, and so I'm basically trying to find the middle, which is that there are some people that are safe for me to be myself around, but not everybody deserves. The [00:28:00] completely raw, unfiltered version of me.

Mel Houser: Like this is not about like a strategic decision to be like, I'm gonna not be consumed with my safety anymore. Like, that's not how it works.

Elizabeth Carney: Yeah. And so like, I think a piece of it for me has , and just, and having and cultivating radical acceptance around. How I'm gonna show up in a given situation and just, and just kind of knowing like I, I will get through this and I will learn from it and I will build on it.

Mel Houser: Yeah. And when there are times where I am noticing myself showing up differently. 'cause sometimes I notice it while it's happening and I, if I'm regulated enough, I can zoom out and like self-monitor and like tell myself the story you just said. Sometimes it's not till later or sometimes it's not like I'll watch a brain club interview and I'll be like, I was not feeling safe in that interview.

Like, who is that person?

Elizabeth Carney: Oh, wild. That [00:29:00] is wild.

Mel Houser: But yeah. Yeah. Anyway, because I think that like, sometimes it's also the, the retrospective like, I felt terrible or I feel terrible. What happened today? Oh, I had an, I had an interaction with a bunch of strangers. Yeah. So I didn't know if I were safe or not.

Like, so just sort of taking stock of that you're autonomic nervous system state may be, or you're just your, your. Your resources, your bandwidth, like Yes. How much res when you're, when you're spent, like it is quite possible that you are spending, you're spending, you're spending spoons on a whole bunch of stuff.

Mm-hmm. Being upright, feeding yourself, you know, all the things, but some of it you might be spending masking. What do you think about that?

Elizabeth Carney: For sure, for sure. That's probably a heavy spoons thing for me. Yeah. And I think, I've been thinking about this lately because I, I see this in my kids as I think.

At some point I realized what my bandwidth was from an early [00:30:00] age and when people like teachers wanted me to go beyond. That bandwidth. It was, it was bad. It, it wasn't stretching me. You know, academically it was harm harming me and it was causing me to put the mask on.

Mel Houser: That, you know, for so many people, they think they're the only ones going through this process.

Aniel Kailani: Exactly. And that is definitely the isolation of masking because again, it's, it's a performance, so you're not really letting people in or seeing you. So there is that, there is going to be that isolation and kind of disconnecting from people because of, you know, not wanting to get hurt.

Self-awareness is [00:31:00] definitely a major portion of it. It took me a long while to kind of really know who I was and kind of come into my own to really start understanding and knowing, okay, this is. Kind of pushing the limit a little bit whenever it came to, you know, the masks that I wear, masks are a necessary evil, but that doesn't mean we have to become the masks we wear.

For me, it was just getting to really know myself and then actively. Just listening. Trusting instinct. Trusting intuition.

Mel Houser: Like a sensing process, like sensing, you're taking in cues from your environment, from the people in your environment. Cues at the level, like cues to the, that the body is receiving in terms of like, what's my next move?

Aniel Kailani: Exactly.

Janelle Starr: The consequences of me being myself with everybody and it [00:32:00] not being a safe situation. That I'm opening myself up to consequences or scrutiny or judgment or what? Criticism and like, I'll be honest, that does not roll off my back. I take it all very much to heart. I'm very sensitive to rejection.

Thank you. AuDHD for rejection, sensitivity dysphoria. I really appreciate it. and so, you know, when when I do get rejected, it hurts, right? So like I have been trying to. Find people that feel safe

Mel Houser: that, like, now that you've had the experience of, you know, safe, not safe. I actually know what a safe relationship feels like.

Beck Natale: It is very much involuntary. Um, in the same way that a trauma response is involuntary. , I try to, I mean, I've been to years of therapy, so I've, I have, I'm familiar with a lot of. Strategies for interrogating your own thoughts [00:33:00] and, thinking about like, is this actually the reality or is this your brain telling you something that's not actually the case?

So I, I do try to think about my, the way that I present myself and think about my behavior and, notice when I am masking and it's not something that I can really change in the moment, but. At least thinking about it like afterwards and being able to acknowledge what caused me to feel the need to mask.

And then thinking about how I might either do things differently if I need to or just accept that like, you know, if I'm expected to give a presentation, in front of a bunch of people, you know, I'm, I'm gonna be masking. And that's just how it is like. That's, that's my survival strategy.

Elizabeth Carney: What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to narrate my access needs into those spaces, because that's neutral, that's not threatening and [00:34:00] encourages other people to say what they need.

And it's, it's not raising any red flags to do that. It might at first because people aren't used to kind of conceiving of their needs that way. But I think people are getting more used to having those types of discussions.

Mel Houser: Yeah, I love that. And you know, I try to spend as little time as possible with people I can't do that with.

Elizabeth Carney: Yeah, I mean, I think, in so far as it, the, the benefit was, it, it protected me and it kind of, and it acted like a screen. It screened out unsafe people. Right. We talked about that. I mean, I think what it cost me was mostly time. Self-esteem because I couldn't, I couldn't build a self-esteem if I couldn't build a true self, right?

And so it, it [00:35:00] blocked me from knowing what I wanted in my, in my heart, knowing, like, knowing, knowing what moves to make. Like I was the kid who like did not know what I wanted to be. When I grew up, I still don't, I'm still looking for that one to answer that question, but I have a feeling that if the mask hadn't been there, that might have been more, a more overt thing for me. I might have been able to explore that more.

Mel Houser: Yeah. Yeah. And it's hard to like see the signs from the universe that point you in different directions when like, there is not a connection with like an aligned, unified purpose. It's like you are this hodgepodge of shaped forces from the external world.

Elizabeth Carney: Yeah. Ugh. Yes. That's so poetic.

Mel Houser: I would never be able to reproduce that, but yeah.

Elizabeth Carney: You don't need to.

Mel Houser: Like, what has it been like? To [00:36:00] know that you are not the only person in the universe on this journey, like to be connecting with other people who get this, the things you're talking about.

Janelle Starr: I think there's something incredibly invaluable.

Every person needs to feel a part of the community that's like that. It is essential to our existence. And when I first got an autism diagnosis and. It was ABB honestly, that connected me to other people and going to appointments and going to group appointments, going to brain clubs, going to different community events online and hearing other people talk about their experience and kind of a lot of what you were doing when I was talking where you're like, yeah, me too.

Like just having that validation that I am not the only person who feels this way. definitely. Keeps me from feeling alienated or from getting like [00:37:00] a huge sense of imposter syndrome or like feeling like I, maybe I don't belong here. I hear things that people say all the time and I'm like, I have that exact feeling, but that's not something I've said out loud.

Elizabeth Carney: And when I started to come to Brain Club was kind of like the next place that I confronted it and just kind of. Seeing and collecting people's experiences and stories and kind of immediately recognizing like, oh, that's me. Oh, that's a great way to put it. Oh, I've had that experience. And between kind of like people sharing and making connections in the chat and people that you've interviewed over the years and that just really built up a real expanse of experiences that I could, that I could look at and see myself.

Beck Natale: Joining All Brains belong as a patient has changed my life and has changed how I see my own [00:38:00] future. I was diagnosed with, ME/CFS chronic fatigue syndrome shortly after becoming a patient at all Brains Belong.

I didn't even really, I kind of knew it was a thing. I knew the term, but I didn't know. I never had pursued a diagnosis because everything I knew about it was just like, well, you're fatigued all the time. That sucks the end. , But now knowing that there are treatment strategies and ways that I can like actually pace myself and address my needs and acknowledge my limits,

In order to really make the most of, my life and what my body can do and what my brain can do, that's really significant. Being able to actually do something about what I've been struggling with. And on the topic of masking, like just learning more about what masking is again, has really helped me put words to my experiences [00:39:00] and has helped me.

Learning more about masking has helped me recognize how much energy I'm spending on it and how much that's contributing to my fatigue and how much that's contributing to, how much time I spend in crashes or in burnout. The fact that that masking is kind of taking away the energy that I could be spending on, you know, hobbies or things I enjoy, or spending time with the people that I don't have to be masking around.

And I really appreciate everything that All Brains Belong has done, and continues to do for me and for everybody in this community. I feel like not only am I respected, but I'm also gently challenged when I slip back into those patterns of, pushing my myself kind of to the point of destruction.

Janelle Starr: And I think that's why it's really important that we say the quiet part out loud sometimes, because we don't know who could be listening, who could feel validated in their perception of how. [00:40:00] Things are for them and have the courage, then it's kind of like a trickle effect, right? Like the more I talk about what it's like in my experience that someone else might relate, gives them the courage to say something about it.

Hey, does anybody else feel this way when this happens? And then another person might go, oh my gosh, I totally feel that way. That's how our world, like our community gets bigger.

Mel Houser: So is there anything else that you would like to share about, like, now, now that you have this knowledge and you are, you know, moving through your world to, with awareness, yeah.

How is your life different with awareness of the mechanisms that are happening?

Elizabeth Carney: Well, I think I will never not be doing the work of trying to understand. My relationship to masking. Yeah. And I think I will never, I don't think I can put that awareness back in the bottle. It's out now. Right?

Yeah. And, and I think I'm grateful for that. And I think [00:41:00] that, kind of like you said, choosing to put myself in spaces that, that honor true self. ABB being a primary one for me. Places that signal safety, places where people can bring curiosity and not stigma. You know, those are the, those are the places where unmasking can happen and just trying to fill my life with that.

Janelle Starr: It's just having more people that have the, ability to communicate what's going on, how they see things. And that doesn't always have to be mouth words. That could be a facial expression. That could be, you know, some people like to write better, some people, honestly. And what I love about ABB is the low pressure situations that you guys allow a lot of [00:42:00] people to exist in this space.

How they are able to show up. If you're really uncomfortable having your camera on, it's okay to have it off. If you really don't feel like talking or like using mouth words, you're welcome to type in the chat. And that's I think, what is so different.

Beck Natale: Nice to have that mirror where somebody else who actually understands is able to communicate with me when it's like, Hey, maybe you shouldn't do these 5,000 things this week because you're in the middle of a crash. Because I won't really always say that for myself. I will try and talk myself into doing it. I'm very much a perfectionist and a people pleaser and, being able to have a safe space to have discussions about the fact that I am a human that has multiple disabilities is really helpful, and has kind of impact how I go about my day-to-day life.

Mel Houser: Amazing. Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think, you know, the idea of having a mirror or being a mirror, I mean, I think that's what we do for each other, you know, of being a community of [00:43:00] people who have similar challenges and have, have a limited energy.

And I mean, everyone has a finite capacity. It's just that some people can pretend they don't. And masking and energy conservation, like are really just, they're not, they're not compatible. Yeah. And I, and I think that, um, for many people being around people who get it, who are. Also experimenting with showing up authentically is, um, you know, like gives people that contrast, right?

Of like, oh, these are people I can be myself with and now I notice all the places that I can't. And oh wow. That actually has an impact on my health.

A lot of the time, maybe we don't have privilege to avoid. Yeah. Those spaces. But to like have a different narrative of it. Yes. I'm, I'm, I'm showing up differently to stay safe in this space, not because there's anything wrong with who I am.

Elizabeth Carney: Hmm. Yeah. [00:44:00] It's an, it's an empowered stance for sure.

Mel Houser: Like, I don't really like to participate in. Like neurodivergent advocacy spaces. I get like irritable and dysregulated a lot. Um, 'cause there's like, you know, it's, it's, it's a lot of binary. Like, you know, masking is good, masking is bad. It's like masking is involuntary.

It is neutral. Like it is a neutral state that comes out when you're not safe. And it will be less when you are safe., Like I don't, I don't know that it's more complicated than that, but that doesn't stop people from making it more complicated than that.

Elizabeth Carney: What I love about that, the idea that masking is neutral, it makes me think of, so I've been thinking a lot about burnout in my family, in me, you know, and you hear masking contributes to burnout.

But it's not contributing to the burnout, it's the need for the masking. It's the environment [00:45:00] that calls on the masking.

Mel Houser: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, I freaking love that. That is like that, that shift. It's very subtle, but it really makes a difference. It's if your circumstances were better aligned with your access needs, you would not feel compelled to mask and to recognize that the involuntary automatic autonomic nervous system response also drains your battery. Yes, because of these conditions, making it so that you didn't have a choice.

Relationships don't automatically become safe just because we want them to be. And for many of us, the people closest to us have only ever known a version of a shaped by survival. It's not a personal failure. It's what the nervous system does when it hasn't had evidence that something different is possible.

We're so grateful to this community for being honest about how hard and how layered that actually is. If [00:46:00] this conversation resonates, we'd love for you to subscribe and leave a rating wherever you listen to podcasts. It takes about 30 seconds and can help more people find these conversations.

Mel Houser: If you wanna keep exploring with us, you can join our Live Brain Club events most Tuesdays at 6:00 PM Eastern. You can also dig into our free digital resource library with all the recordings from the past four years at allbrainsbelong.org.

You're not alone, and we're glad you're here. See you next time.