The Masks We Wear



<https://www.focusonthefamily.ca/content/how-vulnerability-can-create-a-strong-marriage>

You don’t even have to know what Bill and Tracy started arguing about to understand their problem. Their intimacy and communication are stymied by the masks they wear. No matter the problem of the day, they fall into the same pattern – he plays the comedian; she takes the part of the perfectionist.

Masks come in many forms: comedian, perfectionist, victim, know-it-all, peacemaker, wallflower, overachiever. Starting in adolescence, we learn to rely on superficial identities that define our place in the world. As we mature, our masks become more sophisticated and entrenched in our personalities.

By wearing masks, we make our relationships safer and more predictable. We protect ourselves from rejection, presenting the "me" that others will embrace or accept. What if others knew the fears, insecurities and thoughts behind my mask?

Masks in marriage

You might think that the commitment and intimacy of marriage would make authentic communication easier. If you share a bathroom, bed and checkbook with someone, why hide behind a mask?

Ironically, marriage is often where we become most guarded – because no other relationship is potentially more hurtful. Although being betrayed by a friend or co-worker stings, the rejection of a spouse is devastating. We cannot simply walk away from wounds inflicted in marriage. So we choose to stay safely behind masks rather than reveal our vulnerability.

Not long ago, my husband, Mike, and I were discussing a stressful decision I had to make. Mike astutely pointed out that I was avoiding the decision because of the conflict it was sure to cause. I didn’t want to admit he was right. Instead, I slipped on my scholarly mask, listing a handful of rational but superficial reasons for my procrastination. Only several discussions later did I admit that I was stalling to avoid a painful conflict.

What lies behind the mask

Our masks might be one of the greatest threats to intimacy in marriage. In fact, many people understand their spouses in terms of their masks, never considering what might lie beneath: "Joe is a workaholic." "Sara is someone who can never say no." "Kris is the life of the party, but she’s a grump once she gets home." "Never start an argument with Keith; he won’t ever let it go."

Knowing each other behind the masks, however, helps couples understand why they respond the way they do. I have been privileged to sit in counseling sessions in which a husband and wife really see each other for the first time. She sees his fear of failure behind his perfectionism. He sees how terrified she is to trust his leadership because of the ways her father abused his authority.

In some ways, we are all scared kids in a grown-up world, afraid of failure and rejection. Our masks help us feel in control. The intimacy we desperately long for, however, can only be established once we reveal our vulnerability.

Removing your mask

Here are three suggestions I often give to couples who are trying to remove the masks in their marriage:

Someone has to go first. People often ask me, "How do you pry the mask off someone you love?" The only mask you can take off is your own. What masks do you wear in front of your spouse? What vulnerable feelings or fears lie beneath?

Express the desire to create a safe environment. Unfortunately, many marriages have evolved into interpersonal war zones. Unmasking is unthinkable, given toxic exchanges from the past. If your marriage falls into this category, you and your spouse need to set some ground rules to establish a foundation of safety. A trained counselor can help you begin this process.

Learn to ask and listen. People love to talk about themselves. Even shy and reserved people will gladly unload their thoughts and feelings if you ask the right questions and show them you genuinely want to know.

Authenticity and unconditional love

The Biblical ideal of marital oneness includes authenticity and unconditional love. Our marriages, scarred by sin, will never achieve perfection, but we can strive toward God’s design by choosing to relate to one another beyond the masquerade.