

Masking and ADHD

- (1) What exactly is masking?
 - a. Masking is what neurodivergent individuals do to present in a way that makes them seem like they are not living with a disorder such as ADHD or Autism. They do this to blend in the with group, maybe to protect themselves from being judged or made fun of by copying or mimicking what they see others in the group or situation do.
 - i. To fit in socially
 - ii. To avoid being stigmatized
 - iii. To apply learned behaviors not inherently present in a person
 - b. Other terms for the same or similar behavior: impression management and camouflaging
 - c. May occur initially in response to “being themselves” and having been embarrassed, bullied, ridiculed or otherwise shamed
 - d. Can take the form of “coping strategies”
 - e. Coined by psychologist, Russell Barkley, who said it occurs in about one-third of all people with ADHD in his book, Taking Charge of Adult ADHD (2015?)

- (2) Where do individuals with ADHD mask? Does that differ for men and women?
Different for individuals who identify as women vs those who identify as men?
 - a. Socialization and stereotyping as influences
 - b. Research also suggests that women with ADHD are less likely to be diagnosed than men with ADHD due to these compensatory mechanisms and masking behaviors

- (3) What are the different types of masking we see among individuals with ADHD?
Does it look different for Inattentive vs Hyperactive types?

One of the articles listed below suggested these as examples of masking for inattentive:

- Coming up with excuses for being late or distracted (without harmful intentions)
- Putting in twice the amount of effort and time than others to achieve a goal
- Working extra hard to complete tasks right before the deadline
- Checking your work multiple times before submission
- Focusing intently during conversations to keep up
- Being extra early to events to avoid being late
- Having multiple alarms and reminders set up
- Writing everything down

And these for hyperactive:

- Staying silent in conversations or being extra cautious with your words
- Suppressing your energy to appear calm
- Suppressing the urge to fidget or stim
- Bottling strong emotions up

Other sources listed things such as:

- Staying too quiet and being overly careful about what you say to avoid talking too much or interrupting people
- Obsessively checking your belongings to make sure that you don't lose things
- Reacting as you are expected to during class or a meeting instead of how you feel inside
- Seeming "fine" and not showing any signs that there is a problem when in reality, you are struggling to keep up or maintain relationships
- Being overly conscientious about how clean the house looks even though you may be overwhelmed by all the work it takes to keep it tidy
- Hiding hyperactivity through calmness, so people think everything is fine, but in reality, you have trouble focusing because your mind jumps from one thing to another too quickly to process what anyone around you is saying at the moment
- Being unable to relax leading up to appointments or event and arriving much too early, as a way to ensure that you are not late due to time blindness
- Listening carefully and focusing too hard when someone is talking to not miss anything they say
- Excessively writing everything down so you don't forget it later because of memory issues with ADHD
- Obsessively organizing paperwork and creating systems to make sure you can find what you need
- Bottling up intense emotions until you feel sick inside without knowing why (this can sometimes also lead to depression)
- Calling in sick to avoid being placed in stressful or anxiety-inducing situations
- Being irritable when you force yourself to concentrate on something that doesn't interest you for an extended period of time
- Taking on too much responsibility to make up for what you perceive as your faults
- Attempting to cope with the world by developing perfectionistic tendencies (e.g., expecting that you will never do anything wrong)
- Overdoing something until exhaustion sets in so that others see how capable and reliable you are even though deep down you are struggling
- Hiding that you may feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities leads to feelings of shame and guilt.

- A need to always appear in control to avoid feeling ashamed about whether others see your struggles
- Suppressing stimming behaviors like leg bouncing so you don't disturb others even though you feel uncomfortable sitting still
- Mimicking or copying other people in social situations so that you will be accepted

(4) What are the impacts or potential impacts of masking?

One of the sources listed below suggested potential negative impacts of engaging in ADHD masking:

- draining and isolating to maintain the mask. That's why it can lead to burnout and affect a person's mental health.
- ADHD masking can hide symptoms, which may lead to a delay in diagnosis
- People who engage in ADHD masking might be unaware that they have undiagnosed ADHD, which can lead them to develop depression and anxiety
- If you are very good at masking your ADHD symptoms, people may not believe you when you tell them that something is wrong or that you are struggling
- People who engage in ADHD masking might also be at higher risk for developing substance abuse problems to cope with how they feel inside, which can lead to even more health issues down the line
- ADHD masking replaces outward stress with internal stress. People who engage in ADHD masking can continue to go undiagnosed for years because they are able to hide their struggles well
- ADHD masking can make it hard for you to know what is real and what is an act. You may feel as if you are not able to be yourself and instead turn into someone else so that others will like you

(5) What is the alternative to masking? (Managing, Unmasking) What might some positive benefits of managing symptoms, behaviors and/or unmasking be?

- allow your friends and family to understand your ADHD challenges and refine support needs and options
- reduces the emotional and mental weight of having to act and talk a specific way

(6) How do we move from masking to managing/unmasking?

One of the sources below offered this approach.

1. **Identify when and why you mask your symptoms.** Many ADHDers mask unknowingly. Try to be aware of how you behave around certain groups of people. Identify situations that cause discomfort, and reflect on why your mask

goes up. This allows you to assess all your masking behaviors and differentiate helpful from harmful ones.

2. **Explore alternatives for unhealthy masking behaviors.** If loud parties and large gatherings drain you, make it a point to leave the event earlier. Instead of suppressing all your emotions, talk to a therapist to learn how to acknowledge and regulate them better.
3. **Don't be afraid to speak about your ADHD challenges.** Inform your closest friends and family members about your struggles with ADHD. Then gradually move on to other relationships. You can also ask those around you to help spot and point out your usual masking behaviors, so you're more aware of when they happen.
4. **Understand that you don't have to journey alone.** Living with ADHD can sometimes feel like an isolated and lonely path. By connecting with other ADHDers, you can seek support, encouragement, and advice from others who have been down the same road. ADDA's [virtual support groups](#) can help you find an online community where you can express yourself without judgment.
5. **Seek professional treatment and support.** ADHD medications can improve symptom management. Additionally, therapy can help you learn how to replace self-limiting thoughts with healthier self-motivating ones. An ADHD therapist or [ADHD coach](#) can also help you improve your organization, prioritization, and time management skills.

Also from one of the articles below:

Here are some examples of healthy compensation mechanisms of masking:

- Making it a point to listen actively during conversations, especially with a partner or loved one
- Setting multiple reminders to ensure you remember important work and family events
- Jotting down ideas or important things to remember whenever they come into mind
- Decluttering and organizing your workspace to help you focus
- Identify which form of ADHD masking behaviors are healthy and which are hurting you. For example, learning to keep a [reasonably tidy home](#) might be helpful, whereas needing everything to be perfect would be harmful
- Learn how to deal with your emotions instead of avoiding them. Seek out a [therapist](#) or [coach](#) who understands what you are going through
- Understand that you are not alone in how you experience life. Connect with other people going through the same struggles so that you can feel less alone. For example, join a [support group for people living with ADHD](#). Find an online community where it will be safe to express yourself without judgment

SOURCES:

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<https://www.simplypsychology.org/adhd-masking.html>

<https://www.healmyheart.ca/blog/pulling-off-the-armour-why-unmasking-in-adhd-can-help-us>

<https://medium.com/invisible-illness/i-was-masking-for-so-long-i-lost-myself-4be35fe2cd35>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/09/25/i-overachieved-mask-my-adhd-its-common-women/>

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-adhd-masking-5200863>