



Trauma-informed support for women rebuilding after abuse

Understanding The Hidden Side of Coping

Many people living with ADHD, trauma or long-term stress spend years trying to appear “fine” on the outside while struggling internally with overwhelm, exhaustion, emotional pressure or burnout.

Some people become so used to masking, pushing through or surviving that they no longer recognise how overwhelmed they really are.

ADHD is not simply about being distracted or forgetful.

For many people, it affects emotional regulation, focus, organisation, nervous system overwhelm, self-esteem and the ability to consistently manage everyday life.

When ADHD overlaps with trauma, stress, abuse or emotional instability, coping can become even more exhausting.

1. What Is Masking?

Masking is when someone hides, suppresses or compensates for their struggles in order to appear more organised, calm, capable or socially acceptable.

Many people mask without realising they are doing it.

This may look like:

- Forcing yourself to appear calm when overwhelmed
- Rehearsing conversations beforehand
- Overthinking social interactions afterwards
- Copying how others behave to “fit in”
- Hiding emotional distress or exhaustion

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Registered Address: c/o RISC, 35-39 London Street, Reading, RG1 4PS

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- Working twice as hard to appear organised
- Pretending to cope while struggling privately

Example:

Someone may appear confident and capable in public but completely shut down once they are alone.

2. Emotional Dysregulation

Many people with ADHD experience emotions very intensely.

This can include:

- Feeling emotions very deeply
- Becoming overwhelmed quickly
- Struggling to calm down after stress
- Rejection sensitivity or fear of criticism
- Feeling embarrassed after emotional reactions
- Shame around being “too much” or “too emotional”

Example:

A small criticism or misunderstanding may trigger a strong emotional response that feels difficult to regulate.

3. Burnout & Exhaustion

Burnout is more than simply being tired.

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Long-term overwhelm, masking and nervous system stress can leave people emotionally and physically exhausted.

This may look like:

- Struggling to start simple tasks
- Feeling mentally blocked or frozen
- Constant fatigue even after rest
- Difficulty concentrating or processing information
- Emotional numbness or shutdown
- Irritability, overwhelm or tearfulness
- Losing motivation for things once enjoyed

Example:

Someone may continue functioning outwardly while internally feeling completely drained.

4. Executive Functioning Difficulties

Executive functioning affects planning, organisation, memory, focus and task management.

Difficulties in these areas are often misunderstood as laziness, carelessness or lack of effort.

This may include:

- Forgetting appointments or deadlines
- Difficulty prioritising tasks

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- Becoming overwhelmed by small responsibilities
- Struggling to begin tasks even when they are important
- Losing track of time
- Starting many things without finishing them

Example:

A person may want to complete something badly but still feel mentally unable to start.

5. Sensory Overwhelm & Nervous System Stress

Many people with ADHD experience heightened sensitivity to noise, light, interruptions, emotional tension or overstimulation.

This may lead to:

- Irritability or shutdown
- Feeling emotionally overloaded in busy environments
- Difficulty concentrating around noise or chaos
- Needing recovery time after social interaction
- Emotional exhaustion after masking all day

Example:

After appearing fine socially or professionally, someone may return home completely depleted.

6. ADHD & Trauma Overlap

ADHD and trauma can sometimes affect the nervous system in similar ways.

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Both can contribute to:

- Emotional overwhelm
- Hypervigilance
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Concentration problems
- Shame and self-criticism

Some people spend years believing they are “bad at life” when they are actually carrying unrecognised trauma, neurodivergence or both.

7. The Pressure to Keep Coping

Many people with ADHD become highly skilled at surviving under pressure.

They may:

- Push themselves beyond exhaustion
- Feel guilty for resting
- Hide struggles to avoid judgement
- Overcompensate to prove themselves
- Continue helping others while neglecting themselves

Over time, this can lead to chronic burnout and emotional exhaustion.

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8. Support, Understanding & Self-Compassion

Understanding ADHD, burnout and masking is not about making excuses.

It is about recognising the difference between struggling and failing.

Support may involve:

- Reducing shame and self-criticism
- Understanding nervous system overwhelm
- Creating manageable routines
- Building emotional regulation skills
- Accessing practical support
- Allowing rest without guilt
- Learning healthier boundaries

Healing and stability often begin with understanding.

If This Feels Familiar

You are not lazy, dramatic or incapable because you are overwhelmed.

Many people spend years surviving silently while appearing functional on the outside.

Recognising these patterns can be an important step toward self-understanding, support and recovery.

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Support & Further Resources

You deserve support that understands both emotional wellbeing and nervous system overwhelm.

WeAreUnmuted

Turning silence into understanding through lived experience.

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