



Beyond the Mask

Reflection, Rootwork & Integration Guide

Understanding ADHD, Adaptation, Internalized Shame, and the Needs Underneath the Pattern

Purpose of This Guide

This guide is meant to help you slow down and make sense of what you just learned.

A lot of the behaviors connected to ADHD, masking, emotional sensitivity, overwhelm, forgetfulness, shutdown, overthinking, or overcompensating are often misunderstood.

They are often labeled as:

- Lazy
- Too much
- Inconsistent
- Dramatic
- Careless
- Unmotivated
- Disorganized
- Irresponsible

But behavior is not random.
Behavior is communication.

And often, behavior is communication of an unmet need, an overwhelmed system, a missing support, or a pattern that once helped you stay accepted, connected, or safe.

This guide is not about fixing yourself.

It is about understanding yourself differently.

Not through shame.
Not through forcing.
Not through “just try harder.”

But through curiosity, rootwork, and learning to ask:

What made this pattern make sense?
What was I trying to protect?
What support was missing?
What do I actually need now?

Important Disclaimer

This guide is intended for **psychoeducation, reflection, and personal growth**.

It is not therapy, crisis care, diagnosis, medical advice, or a replacement for individualized mental health treatment.

Using this guide, purchasing REVAM materials, or participating in REVAM content does **not** create a therapist-client relationship.

Some of the questions may bring up grief, anger, sadness, shame, emotional activation, or memories of being misunderstood. Please move through this material at your own pace.

If this guide brings up overwhelming distress, trauma responses, or concerns about your safety, please seek support from a licensed mental health provider, crisis resource, or trusted support system.

If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services in your area. In the United States, you can call or text **988** for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, text **HOME** to **741741** for Crisis Text Line, or contact RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline at **800-656-HOPE (4673)** if sexual violence is part of what you are processing.



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How to Use This Guide

You do not have to complete this in one sitting.

You can:

- Read it slowly
- Journal through it
- Talk it through with someone safe
- Come back to one section at a time
- Pause when something feels too close
- Skip a question and return later

The goal is not to perform insight.

The goal is to notice what has been there.

If you feel yourself rushing, freezing, getting irritated, going blank, or wanting to dismiss the question, pause.

That reaction may be part of the pattern too.

Grounding Before You Begin

Before you begin, ask:

Am I present enough to reflect right now?

If not, start here:

Place both feet on the floor.

Look around the room and name five things you can see.

Take one slow breath.

Unclench your jaw if you can.

Place a hand somewhere grounding: chest, arm, leg, or stomach.

Say to yourself:

- **“I am reflecting. I am not failing.”**
 - **“I can pause when needed.”**
 - **“I do not have to understand everything today.”**
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Section 1: What Is Masking?

Psychoeducation

Masking is when you adjust, hide, suppress, or perform parts of yourself to meet expectations, avoid judgment, stay connected, or feel accepted.

Masking can look like:

- Forcing eye contact
- Pretending you understood
- Laughing when you are uncomfortable
- Hiding confusion
- Pushing through sensory overwhelm
- Copying how others act
- Overpreparing so no one notices you are struggling
- Saying yes when your body is already at capacity
- Performing calm while internally overwhelmed
- Making yourself smaller so you are easier to tolerate

For many women with ADHD, masking does not always look like “pretending.”

Sometimes it looks like being praised.

- **“You’re so responsible.”**
- **“You always figure it out.”**
- **“You’re so high-functioning.”**
- **“You’re so easygoing.”**
- **“You’re so helpful.”**
- **“You’re so strong.”**

But sometimes what is being praised is not ease.

It is compensation.

It is the version of you that learned how to hide the cost.

Masking often begins as protection.

But over time, masking can make it hard to know:

- What you actually feel
- What you actually need
- What you actually prefer
- Where your limits are
- Who you are when you are not performing acceptability

That is why this work matters.

The goal is not to shame the mask.

The mask may have protected you.

The goal is to understand what the mask cost you access to.

Reflection

Where do you notice yourself adjusting, hiding, or holding parts of yourself in?

At work:

With family:

In friendships:

In romantic relationships:

In parenting/caregiving:

Online/social media:

What are you usually trying to avoid when you mask?

- Judgment
- Rejection
- Conflict
- Being misunderstood
- Being seen as too much
- Being seen as lazy
- Disappointing people
- Being corrected
- Being questioned
- Needing support
- Being vulnerable

Other:

What are you hoping will happen instead?

Rootwork Question

What part of you did masking protect?

What part of you did masking disconnect you from?

Action Tool: Masking Awareness Map

Use this when you notice yourself feeling exhausted after an interaction.

Where was I?

Who was I with?

What did I adjust or hide?

What was I afraid would happen if I didn't adjust?

What did it cost me afterward?

What support or boundary would have made that moment less costly?

Gentle Check-In

If you feel sadness here, that makes sense.

Sometimes we grieve when we realize how long we have been performing acceptability instead of being fully met.

Section 2: Behavior Has Meaning

Psychoeducation

Behavior is not random.

A lot of what we do is connected to a need, even when we do not realize it at the time.

- Overthinking may be about trying to feel prepared.
- People-pleasing may be about trying to stay connected.
- Shutdown may be about trying to feel safe.
- Avoidance may be about trying to escape shame.
- Perfectionism may be about trying to prevent criticism.
- Overexplaining may be about trying not to be misunderstood.
- Procrastination may be about overwhelm, fear, unclear steps, or task paralysis.
- Emotional intensity may be about a nervous system registering disconnection as danger.

When behavior is only judged from the outside, people miss the need underneath it.

That is where shame grows.

- Someone sees the unfinished task, but not the overwhelm.
- Someone sees the emotional reaction, but not the fear of rejection.
- Someone sees the missed text, but not the shutdown.
- Someone sees the clutter, but not the executive functioning load.
- Someone sees the “attitude,” but not the years of feeling misunderstood.

Rootwork does not stop at the behavior.

Rootwork asks:

- **What is this behavior trying to do for me?**
 - **What need is it pointing toward?**
 - **What support was missing before this became the pattern?**
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Reflection

What patterns do you notice in yourself?

- Overthinking
- People-pleasing
- Avoidance
- Shutdown
- Procrastination
- Perfectionism
- Overexplaining
- Emotional flooding
- Irritability
- Task paralysis
- Forgetting
- Disorganization
- Overcommitting
- Minimizing your needs
- Pushing past capacity

Other:

Choose one pattern:

What does this pattern usually look like?

When does it show up most often?

What might it be trying to protect you from?

What need could be underneath it?

Action Tool: Behavior Translation

Use this format:

The behavior I notice is:

The story I usually tell myself about it is:

Example: "I'm lazy," "I'm too much," "I'm irresponsible."

A more compassionate translation might be:

Example: "I may be overwhelmed," "I may need clearer steps," "I may be afraid of rejection."

The need underneath may be:

One support I can try is:

Gentle Check-In

Notice if your mind wants to argue with compassion.

That often happens when shame has been the main language you were taught.

You do not have to fully believe the new story yet.

You can begin by making room for it.

Section 3: What Gets Missed

Psychoeducation

For a long time, ADHD was understood through what could be seen.

- Movement.
- Disruption.
- Impulsivity.
- Difficulty sitting still.
- External disorganization.

But many girls and women learned to adapt in ways that made their struggles less visible.

- They learned to be agreeable.
- To stay quiet.
- To overperform.
- To compensate.
- To become helpful.
- To hide confusion.
- To work harder behind the scenes.
- To become exhausted privately instead of disruptive publicly.

So instead of being recognized, many were praised for masking.

Or mislabeled.

- Forgetfulness became carelessness.
- Overwhelm became incompetence.
- Emotional sensitivity became “too much.”
- Task paralysis became laziness.
- Burnout became weakness.
- Needing help became irresponsibility.

But what if those were not flaws?

What if those were signs of a system working really hard without the support it needed?

This is the shift.

Not:

“Why can’t I just do this?”

But:

“What is making this harder than people realize?”

Reflection

What do people often not see about your internal experience?

Where have you had to work harder than others just to keep up?

Where have you been praised for something that was actually costing you?

What parts of your ADHD experience have been misunderstood or mislabeled?

What did you learn to hide so people would not judge you?

Rootwork Question

What did you have to learn in order to be accepted?

What did that acceptance cost you?

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Action Tool: Invisible Labor Inventory

List the invisible effort people may not see.

Before I start a task, I often have to:

During a task, I am also managing:

After a task, I may feel:

People see:

People do not see:



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Section 4: Internal Experience

Psychoeducation

Many ADHD experiences are internal.

That means others may not see how much effort something takes.

- You may look calm while internally overloaded.
- You may look productive while running on panic.
- You may look like you are listening while trying desperately not to lose the thread.
- You may look like you are fine while your body is pushing past capacity.
- You may look “high-functioning” while privately feeling like you are barely holding it together.

This creates a specific kind of loneliness.

Because if people only see the outside, they may underestimate the cost.

And if you have spent years being misunderstood, you may start doubting your own experience too.

You may think:

- **“Maybe it isn’t that hard.”**
- **“Maybe I’m just being dramatic.”**
- **“Maybe I should be able to do this.”**
- **“Maybe everyone feels this way and I’m just worse at handling it.”**

This is where self-trust gets damaged.

Not because you are weak.

Because your internal experience was not accurately mirrored back to you.

Reflection

What does your internal experience feel like when you are overwhelmed?

What do people see on the outside?

What do they not see?

Where do you feel most misunderstood?

Where have you minimized your own experience because others did not see it?

Action Tool: Outside vs Inside

Use this when you feel unseen.

Outside, it may look like:

Inside, it feels like:

What I wish people understood is:

What I can practice saying is:

Example:

“Even if I look calm, I am overwhelmed and need fewer instructions at once.”

Section 5: Interoception — When Needs Come Late

Psychoeducation

Interoception is your ability to notice internal body signals.

Signals like hunger, thirst, needing the bathroom, fatigue, pain, stress, temperature, emotion, or overwhelm.

For many ADHD and neurodivergent women, interoception can be complicated.

- You may not notice hunger until you are shaky.
- You may not notice stress until you snap.
- You may not notice exhaustion until you crash.
- You may not notice sensory overload until you are irritated.
- You may not know you need rest until your body forces you to stop.

This is often mislabeled as irresponsibility.

But from a different lens, it may be a system that learned to disconnect from needs because needs were inconvenient, unsupported, criticized, or unsafe to have.

- If you were praised for pushing through, you may have learned to ignore your body.
- If your needs were dismissed, you may have learned not to notice them.
- If you were expected to keep up no matter what, your body may have stopped expecting you to listen.

The work now is not to shame yourself for missing signals.

It is to rebuild communication with your body.

Slowly.

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Reflection

Which body signals do you tend to notice late?

- Hunger
- Thirst
- Bathroom needs
- Fatigue
- Pain
- Stress
- Overwhelm
- Anger
- Sadness
- Sensory overload
- Need for rest
- Need for connection
- Need for space

Other:

What usually happens when you miss those signals?

What did you learn about having needs?

Were your needs treated as valid, inconvenient, dramatic, or too much?

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Action Tool: Body Signal Check

Set a reminder 2–3 times a day and ask:

Have I eaten?

Have I had water?

Do I need the bathroom?

Is my body tense? Where?

Is there too much noise, light, or stimulation?

Do I need rest, movement, connection, or space?

What is one small need I can respond to now?

Gentle Check-In

If listening to your body feels unfamiliar, that does not mean you are failing.

It means you are rebuilding a relationship that may not have been supported before.

Section 6: Rejection Sensitivity and the Body's Fear of Disconnection

Psychoeducation

Rejection sensitivity is not just “being hurt easily.”

It is about how deeply the body registers disconnection, criticism, exclusion, disappointment, or perceived rejection.

For many ADHD women, rejection sensitivity can feel immediate and intense.

- A text feels different.
- A tone shifts.
- Someone seems annoyed.
- A friend takes longer to respond.
- A partner looks distracted.
- A supervisor gives feedback.
- A small mistake happens.

And suddenly the body reacts as if connection is at risk.

This can lead to:

- Overthinking
- People-pleasing
- Apologizing quickly
- Pulling back first
- Becoming defensive
- Trying to fix the mood
- Replaying the interaction
- Assuming you did something wrong
- Feeling physically sick after criticism

This is not weakness.

This is protection.

Somewhere along the way, connection may not have felt secure.

So your system learned to scan for signs that belonging might be at risk.

The work is not to shame the sensitivity.

The work is to slow down the meaning your nervous system attaches to the moment.

Reflection

What tends to activate rejection sensitivity for you?

- Tone changes
- Delayed replies
- Criticism
- Correction
- Being excluded
- Someone seeming annoyed
- Making a mistake
- Asking for help
- Conflict
- Feeling ignored
- Someone needing space
- Being misunderstood

Other:

What does your body do when you feel rejection sensitivity?

What story does your mind tell you?

What do you usually do to protect yourself?

- Over-apologize
- People-please
- Explain
- Withdraw
- Get defensive
- Shut down
- Seek reassurance
- Become angry
- Try to fix everything

Other:

Action Tool: RSD Reality Check

When activated, ask:

What happened factually?

What story did my nervous system create?

What else could be true?

What do I need right now: reassurance, space, clarity, grounding, or repair?

What is one response that does not abandon me or overwhelm the other person?

Script Options

“My brain is reading this as rejection, and I need a moment to slow down before I respond.”

“I am feeling activated and may be adding meaning that is not confirmed yet.”

“Can I ask for clarity instead of assuming?”

Write your version:

Section 7: The Story You've Been Told

Psychoeducation

Over time, outside messages can become your inner voice.

Messages like:

- "I should be able to do this."
- "Why can't I just..."
- "I'm too much."
- "I'm not enough."
- "I'm lazy."
- "I'm dramatic."
- "I'm careless."
- "I always mess things up."
- "I need to try harder."

That voice may feel like truth.

But it may be learned.

- It may have been shaped by environments that did not understand your ADHD, your nervous system, your needs, your processing, or your capacity.

This is internalized ableism.

Internalized ableism is what happens when you begin to believe that the way you think, feel, process, or function is wrong because it does not match the expectations around you.

It is not something you chose.

It is something you learned.

And if it was learned, it can be questioned.

Reflection

What are some of the messages you learned about yourself?

Where did those messages come from?

- Family
- School
- Work
- Religion
- Relationships
- Social media
- Culture
- Productivity expectations
- Past criticism
- Undiagnosed ADHD experiences

Other:

Which message still feels the loudest?

Does that message still feel true when you look at your experience with more context?

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Action Tool: Inner Voice Audit

Write the harsh thought:

Whose voice does it sound like?

What expectation is underneath it?

What need or support does this thought ignore?

A more accurate statement would be:

Example:

Harsh thought: "I'm lazy."

More accurate: "I'm overwhelmed and need smaller steps, clearer structure, and less shame."



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Section 8: Internalized Ableism and the Pressure to Perform

Psychoeducation

Internalized ableism often sounds like motivation.

But it is usually shame in a productivity costume.

It says:

- “Push harder.”
- “Stop making excuses.”
- “You should be able to handle this.”
- “Other people can do it.”
- “You are falling behind.”
- “You do not deserve rest until everything is done.”

For ADHD women, this can become deeply tangled with masking and overperformance.

- You may become driven by the fear of being exposed as struggling.
- You may overwork to outrun shame.
- You may create systems that look impressive but are actually built on panic.
- You may say yes because needing limits feels like failure.
- You may judge yourself for needing support that others seem not to need.

But needing support is not failure.

Support is not weakness.

Support is access.

The question is not:

“How do I force myself to function like everyone else?”

The question is:

“What actually works for my nervous system in a sustainable way?”

Reflection

Where do you push yourself past capacity?

What are you afraid would happen if you stopped pushing?

Where do you confuse rest with failure?

Where do you confuse support with weakness?

What would become possible if support was allowed to count as responsibility?

Action Tool: Support Instead of Shame

Choose one area where you are struggling.

Area:

What shame says:

What my nervous system may need:

One support I can add:

One expectation I may need to adjust:

One person/resource/system that could help:

Section 9: Reframing Without Bypassing

Psychoeducation

Reframing is not pretending something does not hurt.

It is not saying:

- “It’s fine.”
- “It made me stronger.”
- “At least I understand now.”

Reframing is not bypassing.

Real reframing tells the truth with more context.

Instead of:

- **“Something is wrong with me.”**

You might begin to ask:

- **“What happened enough times that I started believing this?”**

Instead of:

- **“I’m lazy.”**

You might ask:

- **“Is this task unclear, overwhelming, under-supported, or connected to shame?”**

Instead of:

- **“I’m too sensitive.”**

You might ask:

- **“What is my body registering as unsafe or painful?”**

Instead of:

- **“I can’t do anything right.”**

You might ask:

- **“What support would make this more accessible?”**

Reframing is not about removing accountability.

It is about removing shame so accountability can actually happen.

Reflection

What is one pattern you are ready to understand differently?

What is the old shame story?

What is the more accurate story?

What support does the new story point toward?

What responsibility is still yours?

Action Tool: Shame to Support Reframe

Shame says:

Rootwork asks:

My need may be:

One supportive next step is:

Section 10: Moving Forward Without Forcing

Psychoeducation

You do not have to change everything at once.

For many ADHD women, the pressure to transform can become another place to fail.

- A new planner.
- A new routine.
- A new system.
- A new version of yourself that is finally organized, calm, consistent, and acceptable.

But sustainable change does not come from self-rejection.

It comes from building support around the truth.

- The truth of your capacity.
- The truth of your processing.
- The truth of your needs.
- The truth of your energy.
- The truth of your patterns.

Moving forward may begin with noticing.

- Noticing when you are masking.
- Noticing when your body is overwhelmed.
- Noticing when rejection sensitivity is activated.
- Noticing when internalized ableism is speaking.
- Noticing when you are pushing instead of listening.

Awareness is not passive.

Awareness is where choice begins.

Reflection

What is one way you can respond to yourself differently this week?

What would it look like to pause instead of push?

What might it feel like to consider your needs, not just your responsibilities?

What is one small support you can put in place?

What is one expectation you can release or adjust?

Action Tool: One-Week Support Plan

This week, I will practice noticing:

When I notice shame, I will try:

When I notice overwhelm, I will try:

When I notice masking, I will ask:

One support I will use is:

One need I will take seriously is:

Section 11: Belonging and Reconnection

Psychoeducation

When shame loosens, connection becomes possible again.

Not just connection with others.

Connection with yourself.

Many women with ADHD spend years trying to become easier to accept.

- Easier to understand.
- Easier to manage.
- Easier to love.
- Easier to approve of.

But belonging that requires you to abandon yourself is not true belonging.

- You deserve support that does not require self-erasure.
- You deserve tools that honor your brain instead of punishing it.
- You deserve relationships where your needs can be named without immediate shame.
- You deserve to understand yourself with more accuracy and less cruelty.

This does not mean every pattern stays.

It means change begins from care, not contempt.

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Final Reflection

Where did you learn to override yourself?

What part of you is asking to be listened to now?

What need have you been minimizing?

What pattern are you beginning to understand differently?

What would it mean to believe there are reasons?

Final Grounding

Before you close this guide, pause.

Look around the room.

Name three things you can see.

Take one slower breath.

Say:

“There is nothing wrong with me.”

“There are reasons.”

“Those reasons deserve to be understood with care.”

“I can build support without shaming myself into change.”

Closing Reminder

- You are not lazy for needing support.
- You are not dramatic for feeling deeply.
- You are not careless because your brain tracks differently.
- You are not broken because you learned to mask.
- You are not failing because old systems did not make room for you.

There are reasons.

And those reasons deserve to be understood with care, not judgment.

This guide is meant to help you slow down and make sense of what you just learned.

A lot of the behaviors we talked about are often misunderstood. They are not random, and they are not character flaws. They are ways your mind and body learned to respond, adapt, and get through.

This is not about fixing yourself. It's about understanding yourself differently.

Take your time. You can write, reflect, or just sit with the questions.

— Phoenix Within REVAM Healing

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