



ADHD Women Unite – Session Summary

Topic: Masking in ADHD Women – Understanding, Exhaustion, and Beginning to Unmask

Facilitator: Katherine Irvine

Format: Online peer support session via Microsoft Teams

Approximate Attendance: 7 participants

Key Themes: masking, people pleasing, identity, assertiveness, rejection sensitivity, friendship dynamics, family relationships, menopause, impulsivity, emotional exhaustion, unmasking, peer support

Overview

This ADHD Women Unite session explored masking in ADHD women, using ideas drawn from research by Dr Devon Price (particularly around neurodivergence and unmasking).

The discussion focused on the ways women learn to suppress, hide, or adapt their authentic selves in order to fit social expectations and avoid judgement. Participants reflected on how masking develops through childhood conditioning, gendered expectations, people pleasing, and fear of rejection. Many women described the emotional exhaustion that comes from constantly monitoring behaviour, filtering responses, rehearsing conversations, and prioritising other people's needs.

The discussion moved beyond identifying masking and explored the practical realities of trying to unmask safely, particularly after decades of adapting to others. Participants spoke openly about friendships, family expectations, impulsive decision-making, menopause-related changes, and the difficulty of identifying personal needs after years of self-suppression. The session also highlighted the importance of peer spaces where women feel able to show up authentically without judgement.

1. Understanding Masking in ADHD Women

The session began by exploring what masking looks like in everyday life and why many women may not recognise they are doing it.

Participants reflected on:

- hiding struggles to appear “normal”
- suppressing needs to avoid judgement
- overthinking social interactions
- people pleasing and conflict avoidance
- feeling pressure to appear agreeable or emotionally regulated
- performing socially acceptable behaviour despite internal overwhelm

Several women reflected that masking had become so automatic they struggled to separate who they truly are from the version of themselves created for others.

2. People Pleasing and Loss of Identity

A major discussion theme centred on the emotional cost of spending years prioritising others.

Participants described:

- agreeing to activities they did not want to do
- struggling to express preferences
- fear of disappointing others
- difficulty identifying their own interests and needs
- adapting personalities depending on who they were with

One participant reflected that after years of adapting to others, she no longer knew who she was or what she genuinely enjoyed, recognising how deeply masking had shaped her identity.

3. The Exhaustion of Constant Monitoring

Women strongly identified with the hidden emotional labour involved in masking.

Participants spoke about:

- rehearsing conversations beforehand
- analysing interactions afterwards
- monitoring facial expressions and body language
- trying to avoid upsetting others
- feeling constantly “on alert” socially
- emotional and physical burnout

The group reflected that many neurotypical people may not recognise the level of internal processing and monitoring ADHD women experience simply to participate in social situations.

4. Learning to Say No and Assert Needs

The discussion explored how difficult it can feel to express needs, change plans, or advocate for oneself.

Women described:

- anxiety around disappointing people
- fear of conflict or damaged friendships
- agreeing impulsively and regretting it later
- worrying about backlash after setting boundaries
- delaying difficult conversations for weeks or months

A practical strategy that resonated strongly with the group was giving themselves permission to not answer immediately, using phrases such as:

“Let me think about it.”

or

“Text me and I’ll get back to you.”

Participants recognised this as a way of reducing impulsive “yeses” and creating space to make decisions based on genuine needs rather than anxiety or people pleasing.

5. Family Relationships and Masking

Family environments were discussed as particularly demanding spaces for masking. One participant shared concerns about an upcoming family holiday, describing the emotional labour of:

- keeping the peace
- suppressing overwhelm
- masking around relatives
- managing sensory and emotional exhaustion
- feeling unable to fully relax

The discussion highlighted how family settings can intensify masking behaviours and leave women emotionally depleted.

6. Impulsivity, Menopause and Emotional Dysregulation

Participants explored the interaction between ADHD, hormones, and emotional regulation, particularly during perimenopause and menopause.

Women described:

- increased irritability
- emotional sensitivity
- impulsive responses
- frustration and snappiness
- withdrawing from friendships due to anxiety or overwhelm

Several participants reflected that hormonal changes appeared to intensify emotional dysregulation and social difficulties. Others discussed hopes that ADHD medication may help reduce emotional impulsivity and improve regulation.

7. Safe Spaces and Unmasking

The group reflected on the importance of spaces where women feel safe to be themselves.

Participants valued:

- joining sessions from bed or comfortable spaces
- multitasking while listening
- not needing to “perform”
- being understood without explanation
- the flexibility to attend when needed

The session reinforced the importance of peer-led environments where women can begin to explore authenticity and feel accepted without judgement.

Emerging Insights

Key Observations from Discussion

- Many ADHD women experience masking as a lifelong survival strategy rather than a conscious choice.
- Long-term masking can contribute to exhaustion, burnout, and uncertainty around identity.
- Women often struggle to identify personal preferences after years of adapting to others.
- Fear of rejection or conflict frequently prevents women from expressing needs.
- Impulsivity may contribute to agreeing to plans before having time to reflect.
- Menopause and hormonal changes may intensify emotional dysregulation and social difficulties.
- Peer support spaces reduce shame and help normalise experiences.
- Small practical adjustments (such as delaying decisions) may help women begin to unmask safely.