

Signs of Neurodivergence in Adults (Including Masking)

TL;DR · QUICK SUMMARY

- Adult neurodivergence often looks different from childhood checklists, especially in people who've learned to mask.
- Masking means consciously or unconsciously hiding or suppressing traits to fit in.
- Common adult signs include sensory sensitivities, executive function struggles, and social or emotional patterns.
- This isn't a diagnostic checklist, just a starting point for reflection.

A Note Before You Read On

This resource offers general guidance and reflects common experience, not professional, legal, medical or financial advice. It is not a substitute for employment law, HR policy, occupational health guidance, or individual professional assessment. Every person's experience of neurodivergence is different, so please adapt anything here to your own situation. The Uniquely Wired Network does not accept liability for decisions, actions or outcomes arising from the use of this material. If you need advice specific to your circumstances, please consult a qualified professional (e.g. HR, legal, medical, or financial advisor).

Why This Matters

Many adults (especially women, AFAB people, and those who were high-achieving at school) go undiagnosed for years because their traits were hidden by masking.

Recognising the signs, including well-hidden ones, can be the first step toward understanding yourself and getting the right support.

What This Might Look Like

- Feeling completely drained after a normal social day, needing hours or days to recover.

- Being told you're "very capable" at work while privately feeling like you're constantly just about holding it together.
- Rehearsing conversations in advance, or replaying them afterward, analysing every detail.
- A lifelong sense of being "slightly out of step" with peers, without being able to say exactly why.

Common Signs in Adults

Sensory differences

- Strong reactions to noise, light, textures, smells or crowded spaces.
- Either seeking out or avoiding certain sensory experiences.

Executive function patterns

- Difficulty starting tasks, switching tasks, or estimating how long things take.
- Strong hyperfocus on some tasks alongside real struggle with others.

Social and communication differences

- Preferring direct, literal communication or written information.
- Finding unstructured social situations (e.g. networking events) more tiring than structured ones.

Emotional regulation patterns

- Feeling emotions very intensely, or needing extra time to process them.
- Strong sensitivity to perceived criticism or rejection.

What Masking Looks Like

Masking is often subtle, learned early, and so automatic it can be hard to notice in yourself.

- Copying others' facial expressions, tone or body language to “fit in.”
- Forcing eye contact that feels uncomfortable, because it's expected.
- Scripting or rehearsing everyday conversations, even ones with people you know well.
- Suppressing stimming (self-soothing movements like fidgeting) in front of others.
- Pushing through sensory or social overwhelm until you're alone, then crashing.
- A strong sense of exhaustion, burnout, or “autistic/ADHD burnout” after sustained masking.

Helpful Phrases You Can Borrow

You don't have to use these exact words. Take what fits and leave the rest.

“I think I've been masking a lot without realising. I'm often exhausted after things that seem to be easy for other people.”

“I hold it together well at work, but it takes a lot out of me that isn't always visible.”

Quick Tips

- Masking can hide real struggles behind an appearance of coping well.
- Exhaustion after socialising isn't laziness; it can be a genuine sign worth exploring.
- Traits can look different in women, AFAB people, and those diagnosed later in life.
- You don't need every sign on this list to be neurodivergent; everyone's pattern is different.
- Masking often increases in high-pressure or unfamiliar environments.
- Unmasking safely takes time and often feels vulnerable. Go at your own pace.

Want to Know More?

- See our companion guide: “Self-Reflection Tools & Screening Questionnaires” for structured ways to explore this further.

- See “How to Seek a Diagnosis in the UK” if you're considering a formal assessment.
- Books and resources on autistic/ADHD masking and burnout can offer deeper insight (ask us for current recommendations).

Before You Go

If you recognise yourself in this list, that's meaningful information, not proof of anything, but a valid reason to explore further.

Masking well doesn't mean you're not struggling. Your effort deserves recognition, not dismissal.