Radical Acceptance & the Mask

Unmasking rarely starts with a big reveal. It starts quietly, with accepting how your brain actually works, instead of fighting it to look like everyone else's.

WHAT RADICAL ACCEPTANCE IS

A skill from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), developed by Marsha Linehan, for moments when reality can't be changed right now.

It is...

- Seeing what's true, all the way
- A choice you make again and again
- Willingness to work with what's here

It isn't...

- Approving, liking or agreeing
- Giving up, or staying in harm
- Pretending it doesn't hurt

THE EXTRA LAYER

Pain + Non-acceptance = Suffering

PAIN	"Loud rooms drain me fast."
NON-ACCEPTANCE	"I *should* handle this like everyone else."
SUFFERING	Pushing through, hiding it, then shame and a crash.

Acceptance doesn't remove the pain. It removes the extra layer we add by fighting it.

WHAT MASKING LOOKS LIKE

Researchers call it "camouflaging." It's usually learned to fit in, connect and stay safe.

Hiding

Holding in stims or fidgets, forcing eye contact, keeping a "neutral" face.

Compensating

Scripts, rehearsing conversations, overpreparing so no one sees the effort.

Blending in

Copying others, performing "normal," or avoiding places where you'd stand out.

91%

of 202 adults with ADHD in a 2026 study said they mask, most often at work, in public and in relationships.

REPORTED COSTS Exhaustion · Anxiety & low mood · Feeling like an impostor · Losing touch with who you are · Needs going unseen

TWO PATHS FROM THE SAME BRAIN

The mask loop: "My brain is wrong" → Mask harder → Drained & unseen → "See? I can't cope." Repeat.

The acceptance path: "This is how my brain works" → Notice the mask → Set it down where it's safe → Energy back, real connection

WHY ACCEPTANCE COMES FIRST

294 autistic adults: **more camouflaging went with less self-compassion**, and both were tied to anxiety and depression.

The mask is built on a belief that your natural way of being isn't okay. Acceptance loosens that belief, so your needs can become things to meet instead of flaws to hide.

Research on unmasking itself is still early, and most of it centers autistic adults.

A SAFETY NOTE

Unmasking is a choice, not a test.

Accepting reality includes accepting that some places aren't safe to unmask yet. **Masking there is protection, not failure.**

How safe it is to unmask can depend on race, gender, culture, disability, money and your job. That's real, and you get to decide your pace.

Setting the Mask Down, Gently

Go slowly. Skip anything that doesn't fit. There are no right answers here, only honest ones.

NOTICE · ACCEPT · CHOOSE

1 Notice

A mask I wear often is...

I reach for it most when...

2 Accept

The true thing about my brain underneath it is...

That's not a flaw. It's a need for...

3 Choose

One small, safe place to set it down this week:

Small counts: a fidget at a meeting, captions on, sunglasses inside, saying "I need a minute."

WHERE IS IT SAFE TO BE ME?

People, places and spaces. Zones can shift over time.

Mask off

I can mostly be myself here.

Testing the water

I could try setting part of it down here.

Mask on for now

The mask protects me here, and that's okay.

FINISH THE SENTENCE

My brain _____, and that's real.

I wish _____, and I can accept _____.

When I mask, it costs me

If I didn't have to perform, I would

Something I can stop fighting about myself:

TO SIT WITH

- What did I learn to hide, and how young was I when I learned it?
- What feels like grief as I accept how my brain really works? Grief is part of acceptance, too.
- Who helps me feel the least masked? What do they do?
- What would accepting myself *today* look like, in one small action?

Acceptance isn't giving up on change. It's the ground that real change can stand on.