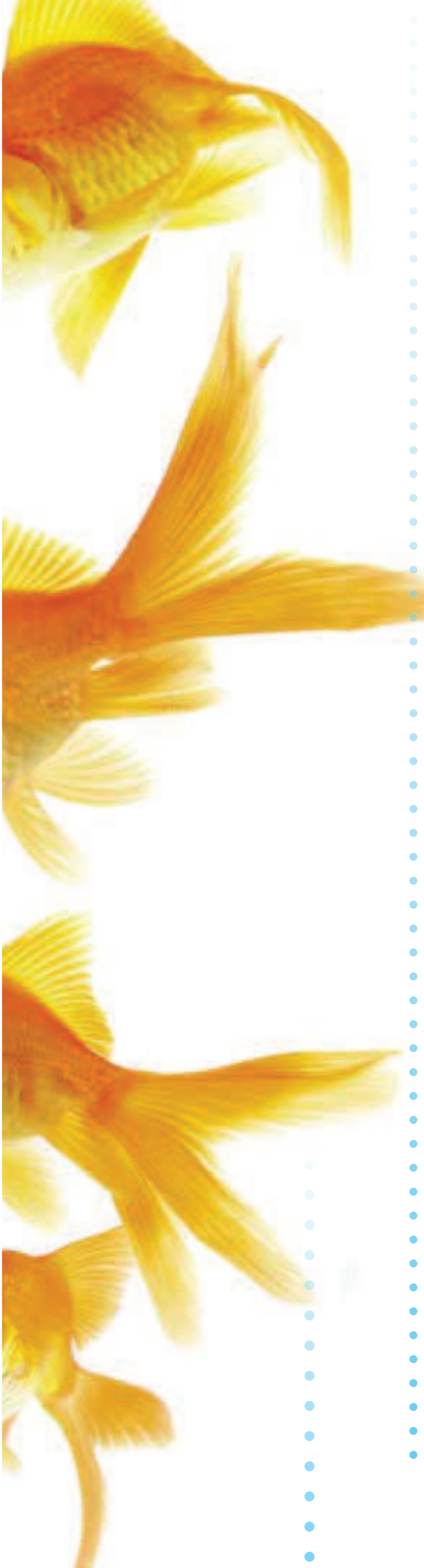


# It's Exhausting Pretending to be Normal

by Linda Roggli, PCC



**T**O PARAPHRASE the title song of the Broadway musical *Cabaret*, for most adults and children with ADHD, “life is a masquerade.” Their repeated ADHD-related calamities—lack of focus, constant tardiness, impulsive spending—force them into hiding. If they can cloak their ADHD under a carefully constructed disguise, they reason, perhaps they can “pass for normal.” Shoving those pesky ADHD traits into a closet may work in the short term. Over the long haul, however, pretending to be normal is exhausting and comes at a dangerously high cost to self-worth and even health.

There is abundant evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, that validates the stigma of ADHD. More than 20 percent of adults surveyed in a 2014 study reported they wouldn’t interact with a child who has ADHD, especially an adolescent. Children with ADHD are more likely to be bullied and to be called “stupid” by their school peers, according to a British study. Adults who don’t have ADHD are more likely to reject coworkers with ADHD traits.

The child or adult who has ADHD learns early on that they are easy targets. They are criticized for talking too much, fired for missing deadlines, divorced for offering too many “excuses,” penalized for late registrations and no-shows, and ostracized for speaking out or for spacing out.

### What's your disguise?

It’s no surprise that many folks affected by ADHD develop a wardrobe of disguises to be pulled out when the situation requires it. Though each manifestation is unique, there are several popular personas.



**The Perfectionist:** *I must do it right every single time; there is no room for error. If I do this one thing perfectly, no one will notice that everything else is a mess.* Perfectionists are working so hard to overcompensate for ADHD issues that they can become over-controlling.



**The Life of the Party:** *I want you to laugh with me, not at me. I always have a joke ready (even about ADHD) so you’ll be entertained and overlook my shameful faults.* The Life of the Party likes being the center of attention, but only when the attention is on the joke, not on him or her.



**The Intellect:** *I need to out-think everyone else in the room and offer brilliant, innovative ideas so you know how smart I am. I spend a lot of energy trying to anticipate where the discussion will go, so I can stay ahead of it.* The Intellect works hard while in the public eye, but may collapse and need to regroup when alone.



**The Loser:** *I’ve failed so many times, I’ve given up. Nothing will ever go right, no matter how hard I try. Don’t expect much from me; I might surprise you with small successes, but I doubt it.* The Loser believes he or she is hopeless and that his or her ADHD governs not only the outcome of a specific task, but of life itself.





**The Space Cadet:** *People think I'm an air-head because I can't pay attention and lose track of time. They might be right, but I'm tired of trying to prove them wrong. I'd rather*

*act like the ditzy person they think I am; it takes off the pressure. The world is often too noisy and busy for The Space Cadet. He or she would rather be alone with his or her own thoughts than make the effort to fit in.*



**The Superhero:** *People like me because I jump in to help even without being asked. I am especially helpful in a crisis. I never ask for help for myself, though. The Superhero/*

*Superheroine gains esteem from his or her generosity, which he or she hopes will mask glaring ADHD challenges.*



**The Black Sheep:** *If something goes awry, you can bet that it's my fault. It's been this way since I was a kid. I really hate being wrong, but now I know my place: I am the*

*scapegoat for everyone and everything. The Black Sheep is frustrated at being labeled but is resigned to blame and guilt as part of his or her fate.*



**The Rebel:** *I'm different from everyone else and I don't care if you don't like it! Don't fence me in; I need my space! I want to do it my way. I hate committees! Related to The Hot*

*Head, the Rebel pushes people away so they can't get a clear picture of his or her ADHD issues.*



**The Hot Head:** *Why can't these people understand me? Cut me some slack, would you? People are so annoying; I am ticked off most of the time—with good reason! The Hot*

*Head has a hair trigger on his or her anger and uses it as a protective shield against criticism as well as intimacy. Close relationships can be difficult.*

Over the years, wearing these disguises takes a toll on the authentic self, that true-to-life person who is allowed to emerge only in the privacy of one's home or room. The disparity between the authentic self and the curtain of normalcy can cause depression, headaches, teeth grinding, fatigue, and even digestive problems.

It's true that everyone masks their true self occasionally, putting on a "happy face" as circumstances dictate. Adults and children with ADHD, however, rely on these scripts far more often than the general public, in part, because they think they have more to hide.

They believe their authentic self is so damaged it has no place in the world; they have been ridiculed when they simply allow

their ADHD to shine through. There is a growing sense of discontent and unease with wearing these personas, but an iron-clad inner dictum to continue.

## Steps to authenticity

Making the decision to "come out" of the ADHD closet takes time and awareness, but is well worth the effort. There are several steps to success:

### 1. Become aware of your disguise(s)

- This step can be difficult because the persona is so firmly attached, it feels "normal."
- Read about or listen to ADHD life stories that can help identify your particular pattern.
- Notice how hiding serves you. Protection from emotional pain or shame? Safety at work? Denial of your ADHD?

### 2. Be conscious about your choices

- You are in control; this process can be gradual versus immediate.
- Check your own comfort and safety.
- You may need to maintain the façade in some places, drop it in others, even temporarily.

### 3. Allow others time to adjust to the new authentic you

- They are accustomed to your alternate persona. Dropping the disguises too quickly may cause shock or even rejection.
- Make a choice about with whom and when you drop the disguise(s).
- Choose your words carefully. You may need to create a new vocabulary for the new you; for example, fewer apologies and more explanations of your ADHD.

### 4. Let your authentic self shine

- Surround yourself with people who accept and love you for who you are.
- You are more than your ADHD; you were born to be extraordinary.

Adults with ADHD will make the decision to step out of the "mask phase" and into authenticity with the love and support of friends and family. Parents can encourage children with ADHD to be true to themselves even in the face of peer pressure.

The vast potential of people with ADHD should not be overshadowed and stifled by a society that promotes conformity of behavior. Unlocking this potential could change the world. 🌍



**Linda Roggli** works with women 40+ and couples who are ready to face their ADHD and step into authenticity. She is the award-winning author of *Confessions of an ADDiva: midlife in the non-linear lane* (2011) and a contributing author to *The Distracted Couple: The Impact of ADHD on Adult Relationships* (2013). She blogs for *ADDitude* magazine and is the ADHD expert on [SelfGrowth.com](http://SelfGrowth.com) in addition to writing her own blog and hosting regular video webinars. She facilitates transformational retreats for women with ADHD near her home in North Carolina. Find out more at [addiva.net](http://addiva.net).