

AN INSIDE JOB: INTERNALISED ABLEISM, BURNOUT AND SHAME

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(for people who feel like they're
not "reaching their potential")

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Oh hey there my fellow high achieving hot mess!

If you're reading this, you've likely achieved things others admire. You've built a career, maintained relationships, or accomplished goals that seem to prove you're "fine" or even extraordinary.

Maybe you were labelled 'gifted' early on in life; perhaps you seemed to be able to do things easily when others found it hard.

Sounds great on paper, right? But the reality of being a high achieving neurodivergent person is very different. You're likely exhausted, dealing with long term issues in managing your capacity.

You may minimise the struggles and challenges you're experiencing because of your neurodivergency, questioning if they're even 'real' because you've learned to hide them.

You may think your outward achievements negate the right to share how your internal difficulties make you feel. Maybe a constant feeling of not doing enough, or never being good enough, keeps you up at night. Maybe you feel lonely, or lost.

All of these feelings are valid, yet when you try to express them, you may be met with:

**“oH No! “TeLI mE aGaiN hOw HaRD
iT Is to Be glFteD”.**

Enter shame.

How much harder it is to ask for help or admit we're struggling when the external indicators of success all seem to be getting ticked off!

If any of this, or all of this, sounds familiar, keep reading.

This mini-guide is your first step in becoming aware of how our internalised ableism (the ways in which we hide our disability, refuse support and try to mask due to our internalised beliefs about what disability is and isn't), keeps you stuck.

And what you can do about it.

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MEGHANN BIRKS

Meghann Birks is a Certified Professional Coach and trauma-informed Embodiment Educator with almost 20 years of experience in the industry. With a breadth of practise across multiple professional sectors, she is passionate about helping individuals and teams not only survive but thrive.

As an AuDHD woman, she works through a neuroaffirming lens, helping people make the hard things easier and the good things great. With specialities in leadership development, team building and individual coaching, she works with people and organisations to increase employee wellness and create opportunities for values based, impact driven growth and innovation.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A note on the word disability: some people are OK with this word, some are not. Some people are loath to label their autism, ADHD or AuDHD a 'disability' because it 'could be worse', or they don't feel it has negatively impacted them. All of that is fine, and valid.

Disability can be broadly defined as “a condition(s) that makes it more difficult to engage in certain activities, resulting from an interaction between a person's health condition and environmental or personal factors like physical barriers, attitudes, and lack of social support.

Disabilities can be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, or sensory, and they affect daily functioning, but a person's experience is diverse and is not solely defined by their health condition.”

Throughout this document, I will be asking you to reflect on the ways your neurodivergency has impacted you; this may be confronting but it's also where we can really uncover how additional support and resourcing [both internal and external] could make things easier.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Finally, disability exists on a spectrum and there are many factors that impact how we experience them. My experience as a white, middle class, educated woman with AuDHD who lives in a country with access to healthcare and support is vastly different to that of many other people.

It is objectively better, I am safer and in many ways risks have been mitigated by my circumstances.

And, not knowing these things about myself until my late 30s made things very hard at times. I've experienced drug and alcohol addiction; I've made risky and impulsive decisions with terrible consequences. I am, in many ways, 'lucky' to be OK.

I encourage you to hold space for the both/and here. Your experience of neurodivergency can be both challenging and wonderful; something you love and something you would change in a heartbeat if you could.

But it's yours to figure out by being honest about what it means for you, and how it impacts your life now.

Ok, let's begin.

WHAT IS INTERNALISED ABLEISM?

Internalised ableism occurs when we absorb and believe negative societal messages about disability and neurodivergence, then apply them to ourselves.

For people with AuDHD, this often manifests as:

- believing your needs are "too much" or unreasonable
- feeling ashamed about accommodations that help you function
- dismissing the toll it takes to be successful
- comparing yourself to neurotypical standards and feeling inadequate
- believing you must "overcome" or "fix" your neurodivergence
- minimising your struggles because you've achieved external success

The high-performer's paradox:

Have you ever heard (or told yourself):

- "It can't be that bad, look at everything you've accomplished!"
- "You're too successful to need help."
- "If you were really struggling, you wouldn't be able to do what you do."
- "Other people have it worse."
- "You're just being dramatic."

WHAT IS INTERNALISED ABLEISM?

The reality: Your achievements don't negate your struggles, they often magnify them.

High performance plus AuDHD frequently means:

- Massive amounts of energy spent masking
- Constant burnout management (not burnout prevention)
- Success built on unsustainable patterns of sprinting/crashing
- Excelling in some areas while other life domains suffer (where's your passport?)
- Using intelligence and pattern recognition to compensate for executive dysfunction
- Feeling like you have to go it alone, because you're embarrassed to ask for help, or dismissed when you do.

PART 1: IDENTIFYING YOUR INTERNALISED ABLEISM

Reflection Questions

Take your time with these. There are no right answers, only honest ones.

On Masking and Authenticity

1. When do you feel most like yourself? When do you feel like you're performing?
2. What parts of your AuDHD do you work hardest to hide? What would happen if others saw these aspects?
3. How much of your daily energy goes toward appearing "normal"? What would you do with that energy if you didn't have to mask?
4. Do you have different versions of yourself for different contexts? How exhausting is it to maintain these versions?

On Achievement and Worth

1. How do you feel about yourself on days when you're less productive? Does your sense of worth fluctuate with your output?
2. When you accomplish something, do you attribute it to your skills or to "just working harder than everyone else"?
3. Do you believe you have to achieve more than neurotypical peers to deserve the same recognition or accommodation?
4. What are you trying to prove? To whom?

PART 1: IDENTIFYING YOUR INTERNALISED ABLEISM

On Needs and Accommodations

1. When you need help, support, or accommodation, what feelings come up? (Shame, guilt, fear, anger, relief?)
2. Do you believe your needs are valid, or do you think you should be able to "handle it"?
3. Have you avoided seeking accommodations because you fear being seen as less capable?
4. Do you have a voice in your head that sounds like: "Everyone else manages, why can't you?"

On Self-Criticism

1. How do you talk to yourself when you make a mistake or struggle? Would you talk to a friend that way?
2. Do you hold yourself to different (higher) standards than you hold others?
3. What would it mean about you if you couldn't keep up your current pace?
4. Do you believe your AuDHD is something to overcome, manage, or accept? What's the difference?

PART 2: TRACING THE ROOTS

Where did these beliefs come from?

Internalised ableism doesn't appear in a vacuum.

Early Messages: reflect on your childhood and early experiences:

1. What were you praised for? (Being "normal," achieving, not causing problems, being independent?)
2. What were you criticised or punished for? (Sensory needs, stimming, emotional regulation challenges, forgetting things?)
3. Were your struggles acknowledged or dismissed?
4. Did adults in your life say things like "you're so smart, you just need to apply yourself" or "you're just not trying hard enough"?

Journal prompt: Write about a time when you expressed a need or struggled with something AuDHD-related as a child. How did the adults around you respond? How did that shape what you learned about your needs?

Educational Experiences

1. Were you labelled as "gifted" or "twice exceptional"? How did that affect expectations?
2. Did you receive support, or were you expected to figure it out because you were "smart enough"?
3. Were you compared to other students? How did that shape your self-perception?

PART 2: TRACING THE ROOTS

Workplace and Adult Life

1. Have you received messages that accommodations are "special treatment"?
2. Have you witnessed others being judged for their needs?
3. Have you been rewarded for overworking or pushing through?
4. Reflection: What have you learned about productivity, worth, and capability in professional spaces? How has that shaped your relationship with your AuDHD?

PART 3: THE COSTS OF INTERNALISED ABLEISM

Taking Inventory

Consider what maintaining these beliefs has cost you:

Physical Health

- Sleep deprivation
- Chronic stress and cortisol dysregulation
- Burnout cycles
- Ignoring body signals
- Sensory overload consequences

Mental Health

- Anxiety (often about being "found out")
- Depression
- Imposter syndrome
- Difficulty experiencing joy in achievements
- Suicidal ideation (particularly during burnout)

PART 3: THE COSTS OF INTERNALISED ABLEISM

Relationships

- Difficulty being vulnerable
- Keeping people at arm's length
- Believing you must earn love through achievement
- Struggling to ask for help
- Isolation

Lost Opportunities

- Projects not pursued because you couldn't do them "perfectly"
- Careers or paths abandoned due to executive dysfunction shame
- Accommodations not requested that could have helped
- Joy sacrificed for productivity

Reflection Exercise: If you could quantify the energy you've spent trying to appear neurotypical, what could you have created, experienced, or enjoyed with that energy instead?

Part 4: Challenging Internalised Ableism

Internalised Ableist Belief	Reframe
I should be able to do this without help.	Asking for support is a sign of self-awareness, not weakness.
Everyone else manages, why can't I?	Everyone has different needs and different brains. My needs are valid.
I'm just lazy/stupid/making excuses.	My brain works differently and I need different strategies
I don't deserve accommodations because I manage well.	I deserve support regardless of my achievements.
I should be over this by now.	Neurodivergence isn't something to get over. It's how my brain works and that's OK.
My struggles aren't real because I can hide them.	The ability to mask doesn't make my struggles less real; it can actually make them harder.

PART 5: RECLAIMING YOUR NARRATIVE

The Grief Process: recognising and challenging internalised ableism often involves grief:

- Grief for the childhood you deserved
- Grief for the energy you spent masking
- Grief for the self-compassion you didn't have
- Grief for the accommodations you didn't know you could ask for

Allow yourself to feel this grief. It's not self-pity, it's acknowledgment of real loss.

Building a New Relationship with Your AuDHD

What if your AuDHD isn't something to overcome, but something to understand and work with?

What are the strengths that come with your neurotype? (Not the "superpower" narrative, but genuine appreciation for how your brain works)

What accommodations or supports would actually help you thrive? (Without the filter of "should" or "deserve")

What would self-compassion look like in practice?

How would you live differently if you believed your needs were valid?

PART 5: RECLAIMING YOUR NARRATIVE

Permission Slips

Write yourself permission for the things internalised ableism has told you aren't allowed:

- I give myself permission to rest without earning it.
- I give myself permission to ask for help.
- I give myself permission to struggle even when I appear capable.
- I give myself permission to need what I need.
- I give myself permission to be authentically myself.
- I give myself permission to fail and still be worthy.

What other permissions do you need to give yourself?

PART 6: PRACTICAL STEPS FORWARD

Immediate Actions

- Audit your accommodations: What do you actually need? Make a list without judging whether you "deserve" them.
- Practice self-compassion: When you notice harsh self-talk, pause and reframe with the compassion you'd show a friend.
- Reduce masking incrementally: Choose one safe context where you can unmask slightly. Notice what happens.
- Connect with community: Find other AuDHD people, or a coach or therapist, who understands the high-performer experience.
- Educate yourself: Learn about neurodivergence from neurodivergent creators, not just medical models.

PART 6: PRACTICAL STEPS FORWARD

Daily check-in:

- What am I feeling in my body?
- What do I actually need right now?
- Am I masking unnecessarily?
- Have I been kind to myself today?

Weekly reflection:

- When did I honor my needs this week?
- When did I override my needs? Why?
- What progress did I make in challenging ableist thoughts?
- What support do I need for the week ahead?

Monthly review:

- How has my relationship with my AuDHD shifted?
- What patterns am I noticing?
- What accommodations have I implemented?
- Where am I still struggling with internalised ableism?

PART 7: WORKING WITH OTHERS

Practice some responses you could try when other people dismiss or minimise your experience:

1	When someone says: "But you're so high-functioning!"	You might respond: "High-functioning doesn't mean not struggling. It often means I've learned to hide my struggles well, which is exhausting."
2	When someone says: "Everyone has a little ADHD/autism."	You might respond: "While many people experience some similar traits, AuDHD significantly impacts my daily life in ways that go beyond typical variation."
3	When someone says: "You just need to try harder/be more organised/focus."	You might respond: "My brain works differently, and what works for neurotypical people doesn't always work for me. I need different strategies."

BOUNDARIES: Let me get on my high horse for a second here. We're living in systems that literally profit from leaders (especially women) having shit boundaries. If we all woke up tomorrow and started saying no to unreasonable demands, the whole dysfunctional system would collapse.

That's exactly why boundary-setting is a revolutionary act.

Unfortunately boundary setting can be even more challenging for neurodivergent people.

Here are some examples of when boundary setting is needed:

Examples:

"I need to decline this invitation because I'm managing my energy."

"I work best with written communication rather than phone calls."

"I need advance notice for changes to plans."

"I'm not available for last-minute meetings."

Your boundaries: What boundaries would help you protect your energy and honour your needs?

PART 8: CELEBRATING NEURODIVERGENT STRENGTHS

This isn't about toxic positivity or the "superpower" narrative. It's about genuinely appreciating what your brain does well:

Pattern recognition: Your ability
to see connections others miss

Hyperfocus: Deep engagement
when interest and dopamine align

Creative problem-solving: Thinking
outside neurotypical boxes

Attention to detail: Noticing
what others overlook

Authenticity: When you're not masking,
your genuine self is a gift

The Path Forward

Unlearning internalised ableism is not a linear process.

You will have days where you're compassionate with yourself and days where the old narratives resurface.

That's normal and expected.

Remember:

- Your worth is not determined by your productivity
- Your struggles are real, regardless of your achievements
- You deserve accommodations and support
- Masking is survival, not authenticity
- Rest is not earned; it's required
- You are not broken; you're neurodivergent in a neurotypical world

The work of challenging internalised ableism is not about becoming a better performer or achieving more. It's about becoming more authentically yourself, with self-compassion, honoured needs, and the freedom to exist as you are.

If You're Ready to Get Into It:

Look, reading about how your neurodivergence impacts your life and leadership is like reading about swimming-helpful to a point, but eventually you need to get in the bloody water. Here are some resources to help you dive deeper:

ME!

If you're ready to go all in on getting to know yourself please get in touch to explore how I can support you. There are short-term and long-term options available, as well as 1:1 and self-paced resources.

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Resources for Further Exploration

Books:

- *Unmasking Autism* by Devon Price
- *Divergent Mind* by Jenara Nerenbergz
- *Laziness Does Not Exist* by Devon Price
- *ADHD After Dark* by Kat Brown (on adult AuDHD experiences)

Concepts to Explore:

- Neurodivergent burnout vs. neurotypical burnout
- The social model of disability
- Neurodiversity paradigm vs. medical model
- Spoon theory and energy accounting
- Autistic inertia and ADHD task paralysis

Reflection: What one step can you take today to challenge your internalised ableism?