S LA
A SOFT LANDING SPACE

WORKBOOK · NEURODIVERGENT BURNOUT · WEEK 2

The Cost of Holding It Together

Masking, hidden load & capacity

A workbook for noticing the work under the work: the energy it takes to mask, to filter, to keep up. Go at your own pace. Skip anything that doesn't fit today.

UNDERSTAND · SUPPORT · CONNECT · BUILD

Welcome back.

Last week, you met the burnout scale: demands on one side, capacity on the other. This week is about the demands that nobody else can see. Masking, filtering, scripting and keeping up all use energy, even when it looks like you're "just" having a normal day.

UNDERSTAND	The load nobody sees, and why masking costs so much
SUPPORT	Unmasking a little, where it's safe
CONNECT	Who gets the unmasked you
BUILD	Name it, price it, set one thing down

LOW ON ENERGY TODAY?

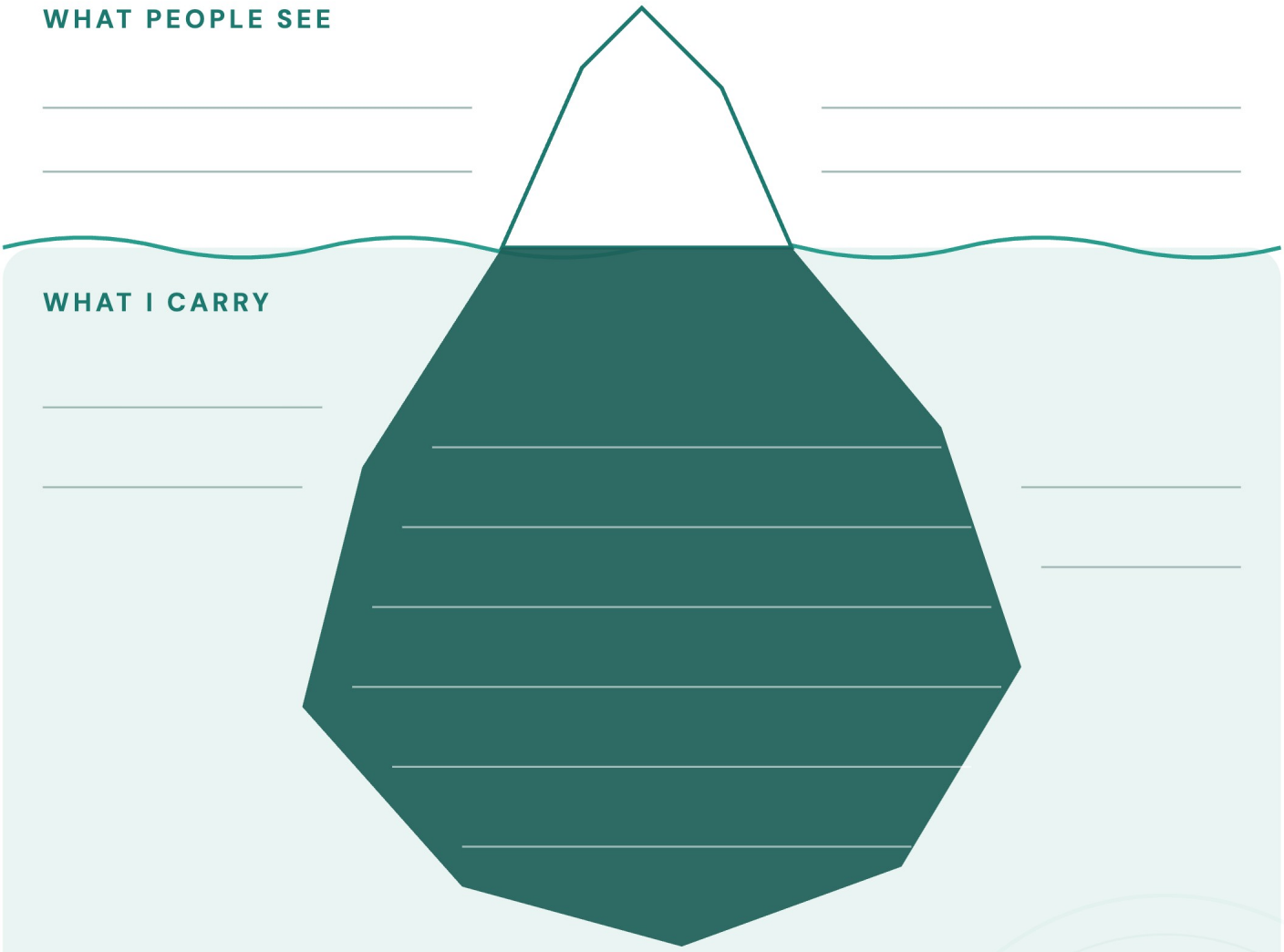
Try just three things: your iceberg on page 3, your energy receipt on page 6, and your one small step on page 11.

"Holding it together is work. It counts."

UNDERSTAND

My iceberg.

Above the water, write what other people can see you doing. Below it, write the work underneath: the masking, filtering, planning and recovering that nobody notices.



Ideas for below the line: hiding stims, rehearsing what to say, tuning out noise, watching my tone, remembering everyone's needs, recovering after.

What surprised you about how much is below the line?

UNDERSTAND

Why I mask.

In a study of 92 autistic adults, people described masking for two big reasons: to blend in and stay safe, and to connect with others. Masking usually starts as a smart way to protect yourself. Tick the reasons that fit you.

- [ ] To stay safe or avoid being judged
- [ ] To fit in at work or school
- [ ] To make or keep friendships
- [ ] To avoid conflict or upsetting people
- [ ] To get help or be taken seriously
- [ ] Habit. I don't always notice I'm doing it
- [ ] Something else: _____

What has masking protected you from?

What has masking cost you?

energy, time, feeling known, getting support…

Source: Hull et al. (2017), "Putting on My Best Normal." People with ADHD describe masking too; that research is newer.

UNDERSTAND

Masking and compensating.

Researchers describe two kinds of camouflaging. **Masking** hides who you are. **Compensating** works around what's hard. Both take energy. Mark how often you do each.

MASKING

I…	Often	Some	Rarely
hide stims or fidgeting	○	○	○
hold back big reactions	○	○	○
copy how others act or talk	○	○	○
use a "work" or "public" persona	○	○	○

COMPENSATING

I…	Often	Some	Rarely
script or rehearse conversations	○	○	○
force eye contact	○	○	○
watch my face and tone	○	○	○
study people to know what to do	○	○	○

Which one costs you the most energy? When do you notice it most?

Which one would you most like to do less of?

SUPPORT

My energy receipt.

Pick one ordinary day. List what you did, then the hidden work it took, then what it cost you from 1 (light) to 5 (heavy). The receipt shows what your day really cost.

Today's Receipt

WHAT IT REALLY COST

WHAT I DID	THE HIDDEN WORK	COST
e.g. team meeting	*scripting, eye contact, tuning out the AC*	*4*
TOTAL		

Which line was the most expensive? Was any of it optional?

SUPPORT

My unmasking map.

You don't have to unmask everywhere. Write people and places along the line, from where you can be most yourself to where the mask stays on.

MORE OF ME — MORE MASK

Where is one place you could let a little more of you through?

- Let one stim back in at home
- Skip one script with a safe friend
- Plan recovery time after masking

After you mask, what helps you recover?

Where does the mask still keep you safe right now? It's okay to keep it there.

SUPPORT

Give the hidden work credit.

It's hard to rest from work you won't admit you're doing. Rewrite a few of the things you tell yourself about your energy.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"I didn't even do anything today."	*"Holding it together all day was the thing I did."*
"Everyone else manages fine."	*"Everyone else may not be working a second shift."*

The second shift is real work, even when no one pays you for it.

CONNECT

Who gets the unmasked me?

Write names, groups or places in each space. There's no right amount in any of them.

Fully me

I don't have to perform at all.

Partly me

I can drop some of the act.

Mask on

Masking still keeps me safe here.

Who is one person who might be able to move toward "fully me"?

What would make that easier?

CONNECT

Letting someone see it.

Hidden load stays hidden until you name it. Draft a short note to someone you trust about one piece of work they might not see.

For example: "Something you might not see is how much energy loud restaurants take for me. By the end I'm exhausted, even if I seemed fine. What helps is picking quieter places, or leaving early without it being a big deal."

Something you might not see is _____

It takes a lot of energy for me to _____

What helps is _____

Who would you share this with? How: a text, a note, in person?

If saying it feels like too much, what's the smallest version?

● BUILD

This week's practice.

Three small moves to make the invisible visible, then lighten it a little.

Name it
Fill in the Hidden Load Inventory, one kind of load at a time.

Price it
Mark which loads cost you most. Those are where a change helps most.

Set one thing down
Choose one piece of hidden load to shrink, share or drop this week.

End of the week: what did I notice about my hidden load?

What did setting one thing down feel like?

Before you go.

Hidden load is real load
Masking, filtering and planning all draw from the same tank.

Masking made sense
It often starts as protection. You get to choose where to set it down.

Not all or nothing
Unmask a little, where it's safe, and plan recovery after.

Name it to change it
You can't lighten a load you haven't counted.

One thing I want to remember from this week:

Come as you are. Learn at your pace.
You belong here.

If you're in crisis or thinking about ending your life, please reach out now. In the US, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). Outside the US, contact your local emergency or crisis line.

Sources: Hull, L. et al. (2017), "Putting on My Best Normal": Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*; Raymaker, D. M. et al. (2020), "Defining Autistic Burnout," *Autism in Adulthood*.