

The Work Situation Energy Map

A tool to understand why certain work situations drain you—and what you can actually change.

What This Is

This isn't about "surviving" work or "being better" at your job.

It's about understanding **why** certain work situations cost you so much energy—and identifying what you can actually change.

For neurodivergent professionals, the problem isn't productivity. It's **regulation**. Some work situations leave you drained, wired, foggy, or shut down—not because you're bad at your job, but because the **design** of the situation doesn't suit how your brain processes information.

This tool helps you map the hidden costs so you can make deliberate choices about what to change.

What Counts as a “Work Situation”?

A work situation is any recurring part of your job that costs you energy.

Examples:

- A team meeting
- A long shift on your feet
- Repetitive lab work
- Customer-facing interactions
- Early starts or late finishes
- Task switching

- Working under time pressure

If it reliably leaves you drained, wired, foggy, or shut down—it counts.

How to Use This

Think of a specific work situation that consistently drains you. It could be:

- A weekly team meeting
- A long shift on your feet
- Repetitive tasks under time pressure
- Customer-facing interactions
- Early morning starts
- Task-switching throughout the day

Many people start with meetings—they’re a common source of drain for neurodivergent professionals. But this tool works for any recurring work situation.

Work through the four sections below. Notice what lights up. You don’t need to fix everything—just identify the patterns.

Step 1: Name the Work Situation

What is it? (e.g., “Weekly team meeting” or “Morning customer service shift”)

Purpose (in plain language):

After this situation, I usually feel:

- ☐ Calm
- ☐ Drained
- ☐ Wired
- ☐ Foggy

- ☐ On edge
- ☐ Shut down

This anchors the tool in **felt experience**, not performance.

The Four Factors

These are the four categories where meeting costs hide. Work through each one and notice what resonates.

1 People

Social and relational load

Meetings aren't just about the content—they're about navigating the **social dynamics** in real-time.

Prompts

- How many people are there?
- Do I know them well?
- Are there authority figures present?
- Do people interrupt or talk quickly?
- Am I expected to “perform”, defend, or justify?
- Do I feel watched, evaluated, or judged?
- Is there unclear power or politics in the room?

What this often reveals

“It’s not the meeting—it’s the social vigilance.”

You’re not just listening to the content. You’re tracking who’s speaking, who’s reacting, who’s agreeing, who’s challenging, who’s watching you. That’s a massive cognitive load that most people don’t see.

What specifically activates me here?

2 Place

Logistical and contextual load

Sometimes the meeting itself is fine—but the **context** around it makes it impossible to arrive regulated.

Prompts

- In-person or online?
- Travel required?
- Rushed from another meeting?
- Time of day (early / late)?
- Camera on/off expectations?
- Is it hard to arrive regulated?

What this often reveals

“I’m dysregulated before it even starts.”

If you’re rushing from another meeting, commuting in traffic, or joining at the end of a long day, you’re already running on empty. The meeting itself might be manageable—but the **logistics** make it costly.

What specifically activates me here?

3 Environment

Sensory load

The physical or virtual environment can drain you before you even speak.

Prompts

- Temperature (too hot / cold)?
- Lighting (harsh, flickering, glare)?
- Noise level?
- Seating (can I move, stretch, fidget)?
- Access to water / bathroom?
- Can I regulate discreetly?

Key reframe

Sensory strain is not a preference—it's a cost.

If you're sitting under fluorescent lights, in a room that's too cold, with no way to move or fidget, you're burning energy just to **stay present**. That's not a personal failing. That's a design problem.

What specifically activates me here?

4 Task / Content & Design

What the meeting asks your brain to do

This is where neurodivergent burnout often hides.

It's not about whether you're "good" at meetings. It's about whether the **design** of the meeting suits how your brain processes information.

Prompts

- Is the purpose clear?
- Is there an agenda?

- Is it:
 - ☐ Mostly listening
 - ☐ Mostly talking
 - ☐ Rapid back-and-forth
- Am I expected to think on the spot?
- Am I processing and speaking at the same time?
- Is there ambiguity about what's expected from me?
- Are decisions being made live?
- Is there task-switching mid-meeting?

What this often reveals

“The design of this meeting doesn’t suit how my brain processes information.”

If you’re expected to:

- Listen to multiple people talking at once
- Think on the spot without time to process
- Switch between topics rapidly
- Contribute while still processing what was just said

...then the meeting is **inherently costly** for your brain. That’s not a weakness. That’s a mismatch between the meeting design and how you think.

What specifically activates me here?

Step 2: Root Cause → Countermeasures

Now that you’ve identified what’s draining you, it’s time to ask: **What can I actually change?**

For each factor that lit up, consider three levels of action:

♦ Self-Managed

Things you can do without asking anyone.

Examples:

- Adjust clothing (layers, comfortable shoes)
- Bring water / fidget tool
- Sit near the exit (or with your back to the wall)
- Take notes after, not during
- Join remotely instead of in-person
- Turn off your camera (if allowed)
- Mute yourself when not speaking
- Stand during the meeting (if on a call)

What I can do:

♦ Ask / Negotiate

Things you can request from others.

Examples:

- Agenda in advance
- Clear role (“Am I listening or providing input?”)
- Camera off
- Contribute asynchronously (via email or Slack instead of live)
- Shorter attendance (“I’ll join for the first 20 minutes”)
- Breaks during long meetings
- Clearer expectations (“What do you need from me in this meeting?”)

What I can ask for:

♦ Accept & Conserve

Things you can't change—so you protect yourself instead.

This is the most important category. Some work situations are **inherently costly**. You can't change the design. You can't opt out. You can't negotiate.

But you can **plan for the cost**.

Examples:

- “This situation is inherently costly. I'll block recovery time after.”
- “I can't change this, so I'll reduce load elsewhere that day.”
- “I'll lower the bar for what I deliver after this situation.”
- “I'll protect the evening—no plans, no extra work.”

What I need to accept:

How I'll conserve energy:

Why This Matters

This tool does three things:

1. Shifts the frame from “me problem” → “situation design problem”

You're not bad at your job. The situation design doesn't suit how your brain works.

2. Makes invisible load visible

Social vigilance, sensory strain, and cognitive processing costs are real—even if others don't see them.

3. Produces specific, actionable adaptations

You're not just reflecting. You're identifying what you can change, what you can ask for, and what you need to accept.

When to Use This

- **Before a recurring work situation that drains you**
Map it once, then implement countermeasures for every future instance.
 - **After a situation that left you wrecked**
Debrief what happened so you can protect yourself next time.
 - **When you're considering disclosure**
This tool helps you name what you need without diagnosing yourself.
 - **When you're advocating for accommodations**
This gives you specifics: "I need the agenda in advance" or "I need breaks during long shifts" is more actionable than "I struggle with work."
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A Note on Work Overload

Work overload isn't about being bad at your job. It's about the cumulative cost of:

- Tracking multiple demands simultaneously
- Reading social cues in real-time
- Masking your confusion or overwhelm
- Holding your thoughts or questions
- Staying still when your body wants to move
- Processing and performing at the same time

That cost is real. It's not a personal failing. It's how your nervous system works.

This tool helps you see the cost—so you can make deliberate choices about what to change.

This tool supports the ZONE Framework: noticing your state, understanding what's driving it, and choosing how to respond.

This tool is part of the ZONE Starter Vault.

For more workplace regulation tools, visit neuroadapt.ai