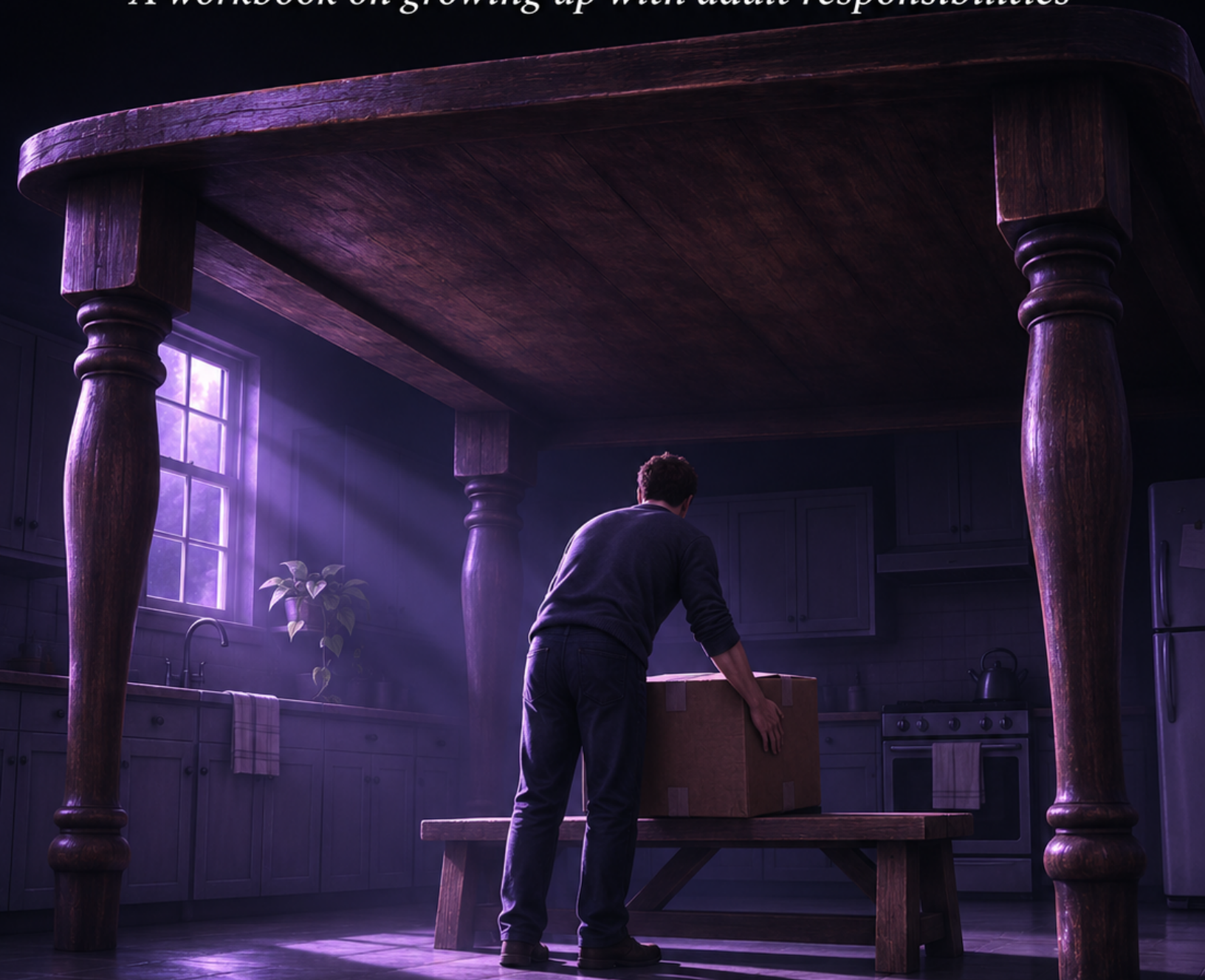
THE UNSPOKEN WORK OF RECOVERY

PACKET 02

Putting Down What Was Never Mine

A workbook on growing up with adult responsibilities



Empower Recovery™

WELCOME

You can choose what to carry

A self-guided, nonclinical workbook for adults reflecting on parentification.

You may have been the child who checked whether a parent was okay before anyone checked on you. Or the one who made sure the little ones ate, made excuses for the adults, or kept a secret because it felt like the family depended on you.

This packet gives you a way to look at what you carried then and what you carry today. Begin with an ordinary situation. You can read without writing, use a fictional example, skip a page, or bring a question to someone you trust. You decide what stays private.

START WITH A LOW-STAKES SITUATION

Choose a task or request where there is room to pause. If a change affects a dependent person’s care, make sure a handoff is agreed and confirmed. If setting a limit could bring retaliation, seek individualized support before trying it. See page 16.

The exercises are for education and reflection. A licensed clinician can help you assess distress or explore treatment. If this material feels overwhelming today, set it aside and decide whether you would prefer to return to it with support.

What would make working through one page feel manageable today?

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Choose a starting point

Read in sequence or tap a page title to jump there.

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OPENING ARTICLE

The Child Who Kept the House Together

Before he put his backpack down, Mateo listened for his mother's voice. On good days he could tell her what happened at school. On bad days he started dinner, found his sister's shoes for tomorrow, and waited to hear which problem his mother needed him to solve. People called him mature. He liked hearing it. He also wanted to be able to come home and put his backpack down.

Parentification describes a child being placed in an adult-like role beyond what is appropriate for their stage of development. It can involve practical duties, like managing a household or repeatedly acting as the primary caregiver for siblings. It can also involve emotional duties, like becoming a parent's confidant, mediator, or source of reassurance. The two can overlap. Researchers describe a range of experiences and outcomes. [1]

Children can contribute to family life in meaningful ways. Consider how much they carry, how often, what support is available, and whether there is room for school, rest, play, and care of their own. Illness, financial pressure, and other hardships can shape a family's choices. You can acknowledge those realities and still name what the arrangement asked of you.

Years later, an ordinary text can put Mateo back on duty. His sister writes that she and their mother are arguing. He starts composing messages to both before asking what his sister wanted from him. Maybe she wants someone to listen. Maybe she wants help with a specific task. He can find out before deciding what he has to give.

TAKE ONE QUESTION WITH YOU

What did people come to count on me to do, and what did I have to put aside to keep doing it?

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3 / AWARENESS

Recognize the role you were given

PRACTICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Getting a sibling fed and ready for school every day, organizing the household during a crisis, or handling adult paperwork without enough help.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Being expected to calm an adult, mediate arguments, receive adult confidences, or keep the family looking okay from the outside.

Look at the pattern. Was it occasional or expected? Who could step in? How much freedom did you have to say you were tired, confused, or needed help? A general answer is enough.

A role I remember having, or a role I recognize in a fictional example, is…

What support or choice was available? What would have made the load fairer?

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3 / AWARENESS

Catch the moment you take over

Start with the moment just before you volunteer, fix, or step between people.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

What happened: Two relatives disagreed about dinner plans.
What I predicted: If I left it alone, somebody would blame me.
What I did: I called everyone and changed my plans.
What they actually asked me for: Whether I could come.

What happened? What did someone actually ask of me?

What did I predict would happen if I waited before acting?

What did I do, and what did it cost me in time, energy, or choice?

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3 / AWARENESS

Name what the role gave and cost you

You may value being steady in a crisis or knowing how to look after people. You may also wish someone had stepped in so you could sleep, play, or have a bad day of your own. Give both parts room. The abilities you value can become choices you use with more control over when and how.

One ability I respect in myself is…

One thing I missed or put off because someone needed me was…

One way I could use that ability today with more choice is…

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6 / ALIGNMENT

Decide what belongs to you now

Choose one current situation. Separate the pieces before deciding what to do.

MINE / SHARED / SOMEONE ELSE'S

Mine: The commitments I made, my actions, and repairs I owe.
Shared: Work that can be agreed and divided among people.
Someone else's: Another adult's decision or reaction when it is theirs to handle.

Example. You agreed to drive your father to one appointment. The ride is yours to honor or safely reschedule. Coordinating every future ride can be discussed and shared. How another relative feels about that discussion is theirs to work through.

What is mine to handle or repair?

What part could be shared? Who would need to agree?

What decision or reaction belongs with someone else?

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6 / ALIGNMENT

Say what you can offer

Try a sentence you can still say when you are tired. If you need time, take it before making an offer. If you already made a commitment, be clear about what you can keep and what you are asking to renegotiate.

THREE LINES TO TRY

Pause: “I need to check what I have room for. I’ll get back to you tomorrow.”
Limit: “I can bring groceries this week. I can do Tuesday or Thursday.”
Step out of the middle: “I care about you both. Please talk to each other directly about the plan.”

What is the request or expectation I want to respond to?

What can I offer in good faith? What limit do I need to state?

What are the words I would actually use?

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6 / ALIGNMENT

Make a real handoff

Sharing a responsibility takes an agreement. “Someone should handle it” leaves the job floating. “Are you able to take Thursday’s grocery run and confirm by Tuesday?” names the task and gives the other person a clear choice.

WHEN SOMEONE RELIES ON THE TASK

Name what needs to happen, who agreed to do it, when it is due, and what happens if the plan falls through. If you have a caregiving responsibility, protect continuity while you ask for help. A trusted supporter or service coordinator may help you explore options.

What task needs an agreed handoff, and by when?

Who could take a specific part? How will I confirm the agreement?

What is the backup plan if the person cannot do it?

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9 / INTEGRATION

Try one change this week

Choose a small, low-stakes change you can observe.

AN EXAMPLE YOU CAN SCALE

For one week, when an adult relative vents about a disagreement, I'll ask "Do you want me to listen or help you think it through?" I'll offer ten minutes if I have room. I'll review on Sunday how it felt to listen without volunteering to settle it.

When this situation happens…

I will try this small action or use these words…

If that feels too hard in the moment, a smaller step would be…

I'll check in on this day and look for…

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9 / INTEGRATION

Respond to guilt and pushback

Guilt can point to an agreement you need to repair. It can also show up when you change a familiar role. Ask what happened, who was affected, and whether you broke an agreement. A person's disappointment is worth hearing. You can then decide whether it changes what you can offer.

TWO SITUATIONS

I missed a commitment: "I said I'd call Tuesday and forgot. I can call today at six."
Someone dislikes my limit: "I hear that you wanted me there all day. I can still come from two to four."

What did I agree to? Is there something specific I need to repair?

If my limit still fits, how can I restate it in one calm sentence?

What support would help me keep my perspective afterward?

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9 / INTEGRATION

Review the result and adjust

You can learn something even if you put the step off. The wording may have felt too exposed. The other person may have offered more help than you expected. Look at what changed for you and for anyone affected.

What did I try, postpone, or change?

What actually happened? How did it compare with what I expected?

Did the change leave any work or care unaccounted for?

What will I repeat, adjust, ask for, or repair?

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OPTIONAL REFLECTION

What does care ask of me?

Some people seek guidance from a Higher Power. Others find it through quiet reflection, community, or a conversation with someone they trust. Think of a moment when you felt pressure to keep everything together. What would it mean to act with care for the people involved, including yourself?

GOOD ORDERLY DIRECTION

"With Good Orderly Direction today I choose to be honest about what I can carry. May I recognize the work that belongs to me, ask for help where I need it, and give others room to make their own choices."

Which value do I want to guide my next decision?

What would that value sound like in a conversation this week?

Where can I make room to receive care?

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REUSABLE WORKSHEET

My responsibility check card

Use this page when a familiar responsibility lands in front of you.

3 · Awareness | What was asked? What did I immediately assume?

6 · Alignment | What is mine, what can be shared, and what belongs elsewhere?

9 · Integration | What will I do, say, or confirm? When will I check back?

A LINE TO KEEP

“I can care about what happens and be honest about what I can carry.”

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SUPPORT AND REFERENCES

Find support and further reading

If these experiences are affecting your daily life, you can bring a present-day example to a licensed mental health clinician and ask about options. In the United States, FindTreatment.gov is a directory for mental health and substance use treatment. [2]

If you are concerned that a partner may retaliate when you set a limit, consider contacting a domestic violence advocate using a device you can access privately. The U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline offers individualized safety planning and information about internet safety. [3]

WORDS FOR ASKING FOR SUPPORT

“I’m used to being the person who keeps things together. I want help sorting out what I’m responsible for now and how to change one part of it without taking on more risk.”

Sources

[1] Dariotis and colleagues (2023). Parentification Vulnerability, Reactivity, Resilience, and Thriving: A Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review.

[2] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. FindTreatment.gov.

[3] The National Domestic Violence Hotline. Plan for Safety.

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REFERENCE

Glossary and topic finder

Parentification. A child being placed in an adult-like role beyond what fits their stage of development.

Emotional responsibility. In this packet, the work of managing an adult's feelings, conflict, or need for reassurance.

Practical responsibility. Tasks such as running a household, coordinating care, or looking after siblings.

Handoff. An agreed transfer of a specific task, with a clear owner, timing, and backup when needed.

Repair. An action that addresses harm or follows up on a commitment you missed.

FIND A TOPIC

Caregiving and continuity	**02, 10, 13**
Guilt and pushback	**12**
Limits and sample language	**09, 12**
Practical and emotional roles	**04–05**
Responsibility sorting	**08, 15**
Spiritual reflection	**14**
Weekly practice and review	**11–13**

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