



Stress Management Society
from distress to de-stress

September Purple Paper

The Mask We Wear: Understanding High-Functioning Distress

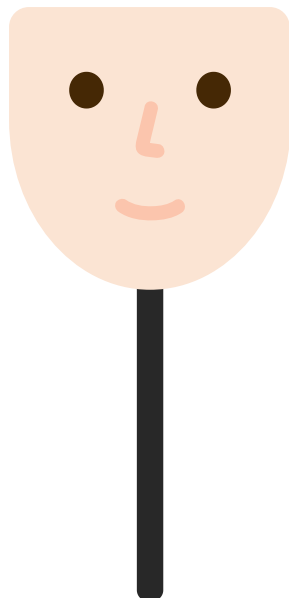


A Smile That Hides

Not everyone who is struggling looks like they are.

In the UK, 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health challenge this year. Yet so many of us will never see it — because distress often hides behind a smile.

Psychologists call this “surface acting” — when people put on a socially acceptable face even when they feel very differently inside. The polite “I’m fine.” The cheerful mask. The British Smile. The problem? When smiles become masks, we stop noticing the real signals of pain. And when we stop noticing, people stay silent.



The Numbers That Matter

Mental Health:

- 1 in 4 people experience a mental health problem each year
- 7,055 people died by suicide in the UK in 2022
- 75% of people who die by suicide are male, often showing fewer obvious signs of distress
- Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental health problem, affecting 8% of people
- Only 26% of people experiencing mental health problems receive treatment

The Hidden Reality:

- 68% of people say they've put on a "brave face" when struggling
- 43% of people have hidden their mental health struggles from their closest friends and family
- 1 in 3 people say they wouldn't know how to support someone with a mental health problem



The Polite Mask

People who appear outwardly successful are often the most skilled at hiding their struggles. They keep achieving. They keep smiling. They keep saying "I've got this."

But inside, survival mode is running the show.

Example: A 2023 study of UK professionals found that 67% of high achievers reported feeling "burned out but unable to show it." When companies introduced "authentic check-ins" — moving beyond "How are you?" to "What's one thing that's been tough this week?" — help-seeking behaviour increased by 34%.

Case studies from workplace wellbeing programmes show that when leaders create psychological safety, people are more willing to drop the mask and ask for help.



Listening With Our Ears, Eyes, and Hearts

Your EARS:

- **Words behind the words** — "I'm fine" might mean "I'm barely holding on"
- **Tone and pace** — rushed speech, flat responses, or forced cheerfulness
- **What's NOT being said** — the topics they avoid, the silence that follows certain questions
- **Changes in speech patterns** — someone usually chatty becoming quiet, or vice versa

Your EYES:

- **Body language** — crossed arms, avoiding eye contact, slumped posture
- **Energy levels** — tiredness that sleep doesn't seem to fix
- **Changes in appearance** — less attention to self-care, weight changes
- **Behavioural shifts** — cancelling plans, avoiding social situations, working longer hours

Your HEART:

- **Emotional temperature** — sensing the mood beneath the surface
- **Your gut instinct** — that feeling that something isn't quite right
- **Empathy over sympathy** — feeling with them rather than feeling sorry for them
- **Presence over pressure** — being there without needing to fix or advise

A Practice of Presence

Time needed: 15-20 minutes

What you'll need: Someone willing to share (friend, family member, colleague)

Instructions:

Step 1: Create the Space (2 minutes)

- Find somewhere private and comfortable
- Put away phones and distractions
- Sit facing each other, at the same level

Step 2: The Ask (1 minute)

Ask: "I'd like to really listen to how you're doing. Not to fix anything or give advice, just to hear you. How has this week really been for you?"

- Ears: Focus entirely on their words, tone, pauses
- Eyes: Notice their body language, energy, expressions
- Heart: Stay present with their emotions without trying to change them

Step 3: Listen with All Three (10 minutes)

- Ears: Focus entirely on their words, tone, pauses
- Eyes: Notice their body language, energy, expressions
- Heart: Stay present with their emotions without trying to change them

Remember

- We aren't trying to solve their problems
- We don't share our own similar experiences
- Avoid saying "at least..." or "you should..."
- Avoiding rushing to fill silences
- Don't judge their feelings as right or wrong

The Practice of Presence

Step 4: Reflect Back (2-3 minutes)

Say something like:

"What I'm hearing is..." or "It sounds like..." Don't interpret or advise, just reflect what you noticed.

Step 5: Just Be (remaining time)

Sit with whatever they've shared.

Let silence be okay. Your presence is the gift.

Reflection :

How did it feel to just listen without fixing?

What did you notice that you might usually miss?

How did the other person respond to being truly heard?

Spotting The Unsaid

Pause for a moment. Think of someone in your life who always say

"I'm fine."

What's their tone when they say it?

Do their eyes tell the same story as their mouth?

Have you noticed changes in energy, attendance, or connection?

Reflection Question:

What's one small way you could let them know it's safe to be real with you?

Moving Beyond The Smile

Here's how you can begin to see beyond the smile:

Notice more than words — pay attention to tone, body language, and changes over time.

Listen without fixing — sometimes presence matters more than solutions.

Ask twice — "How are you, really?" opens a different door than "How are you?"

Check in with the strong ones — especially those who seem like they've "got it all together."

Create safe spaces — does your workplace, community, or family feel safe enough for people to drop the mask?

Evaluate your responses:

- Do you rush to fix when someone shares something difficult?
- Do you change the subject when conversations get heavy?
- Do you assume someone's okay because they look okay?



We provide a range of services across the UK and internationally. We are always happy to discuss how we can support you.

We look forward to supporting your wellbeing journey.

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