

I NEED TO SCREAM

I'm Tired of Pretending I'm Okay

When hiding how you really feel becomes exhausting

Space to Breathe Therapy - Depression & Anxiety Library

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from struggling internally while continuing to look as though everything is fine. You may go to work, answer messages, care for other people, smile, make jokes and say 'I'm okay' - while anxiety, depression or overwhelm is taking up enormous space underneath.

Sometimes pretending begins as protection. You may not want to worry anyone. You may fear being judged, misunderstood, treated differently or told to 'cheer up'. You may have become so used to functioning through distress that even you find it difficult to recognise how much effort it is taking.

This resource is not asking you to perform recovery

It gives you somewhere to be more truthful. You can write what you show other people, what is happening underneath, what you need, what you are afraid to say and what might make life feel a little more manageable.

What pretending can look like

On the outside: capable, cheerful, productive, sociable, helpful, calm, organised or 'the strong one'.

Underneath: dread, racing thoughts, low mood, numbness, irritability, loneliness, shame, fatigue, tearfulness, panic, difficulty concentrating or a strong wish to withdraw.

This mismatch can be draining because you are managing both the distress itself and the work of concealing it. It can also make support harder to access: other people may assume you are coping because they only see the version of you that you have learned to present.

A useful question

If nobody needed me to look okay right now, what would I admit I am feeling?

WHAT I SHOW / WHAT I REALLY FEEL

You do not have to censor this page.

What I show people	What may actually be happening
'I'm fine.'	_____
I keep smiling.	_____
I keep working / functioning.	_____
I help everybody else.	_____
I say 'don't worry about me.'	_____
I cancel, withdraw or go quiet.	_____

The sentence I keep swallowing

What do you want to say but keep stopping yourself from saying?

I am tired of pretending that...

What I wish somebody would notice

What are you protecting?

Pretending often has a reason. Circle or write what fits: protecting other people • avoiding questions • fear of judgement • work expectations • not knowing how to explain • feeling ashamed • believing you should cope • previous experiences of not being heard • wanting privacy.

My reason: _____

What this protection costs me: _____

WHEN 'I'M FINE' BECOMES EXHAUSTING

Notice the cost of keeping everything contained.

The emotional cost

Constant self-monitoring can leave little energy for anything else. You may replay conversations, worry that somebody noticed, feel guilty for struggling, or become frustrated that people do not understand - even though you have been working hard to hide what is happening.

The physical cost

Stress and anxiety can be accompanied by muscle tension, headaches, stomach symptoms, disturbed sleep, restlessness, shallow breathing and fatigue. Depression may bring heaviness, low energy, slowing, sleep changes and difficulty concentrating. Physical symptoms deserve appropriate medical attention when new, severe or concerning.

The relationship cost

Masking can create distance. People may respond to the version of you they can see rather than the experience you are actually having. This does not mean you owe everyone full disclosure. It means you may benefit from identifying at least one person or professional with whom you can be more honest.

My honesty ladder

Level 1: 'I've had a difficult day.'

Level 2: 'I'm struggling more than I look.'

Level 3: 'My anxiety/depression has been difficult and I could use some support.'

My own words: _____

You can choose who gets access to your story

Being honest does not mean telling everybody everything. Privacy and openness are not opposites. You can decide who feels safe, what you want them to know, what you do not want to discuss, and what kind of response would actually help.

What I need from somebody

- ☐ Listen without fixing ☐ Sit with me ☐ Practical help ☐ Check in later
☐ Help me contact support ☐ Give me space without disappearing

Something else: _____

A boundary can be part of honesty

'I want you to know I'm struggling, but I don't want lots of questions right now.'

'I don't need advice; I need somebody to listen.'

'I can't take that on today.'

PUTTING DOWN THE PERFORMANCE

You do not have to go from hiding everything to sharing everything.

A small experiment

Choose one safe situation where you can reduce the performance by 5%. Perhaps you answer 'I've had a rough day' instead of 'fine', decline one non-essential demand, allow yourself to be quieter, ask for company, or tell a trusted person that you are finding things difficult.

Where could I be 5% more honest? _____

What am I worried might happen? _____

What would help me feel safer? _____

Anonymous personal perspective

"I became very good at looking capable. I could work, laugh and ask everybody else how they were. Then I would get home and have nothing left. Because I looked okay, people thought I was okay. Eventually I realised I was waiting for somebody to see something I was actively hiding. I started with one person and one honest sentence: 'I'm struggling more than you realise.' I didn't tell them everything. I just stopped pretending for a moment."

A message from Maggie

If you recognise yourself in these pages, please do not measure how much you are struggling by how well you can hide it. Being able to function does not automatically mean that functioning is easy or sustainable.

You may have very good reasons for learning to say 'I'm fine'. Perhaps it once kept you safe, stopped difficult questions or helped you get through what had to be done. But you are allowed to notice when that strategy has become exhausting.

You do not have to tell everybody everything. Start where it feels safe. One honest sentence, one boundary, one request for help or one moment where you do not force yourself to perform can matter. Your internal experience deserves attention even when nobody else can see it.

When additional support may help

If anxiety or depression is persistent, worsening or interfering with daily life, consider speaking with your GP or an appropriate mental-health professional. NHS talking therapies can provide support for common mental-health difficulties in England.

Urgent safety: if you are in immediate danger or cannot keep yourself safe, call 999 or go to A&E.; NHS 111 can provide urgent mental-health guidance in England. Samaritans offers free emotional support on 116 123.

Books and further reading

Overcoming Depression - Paul Gilbert • **Overcoming Anxiety** - Helen Kennerley • **The Compassionate Mind** - Paul Gilbert • **Reasons to Stay Alive** - Matt Haig

Information sources

NHS - depression, anxiety, NHS Talking Therapies and urgent mental-health support. NICE - guidance on depression in adults and generalised anxiety disorder/panic disorder. Samaritans - emotional support and crisis listening.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Support • Understanding • A Brighter Tomorrow