

Everything Is Fine

Until It Isn't...

Understanding The Correlation Between
Professional Leadership & Personal Mental Health Wellness

Dr. Julie Basler

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MEET DR. JULIE BASLER



- Former President, Platt College, Colorado
- Author of *She's Strong Enough to Break*
- Presidential Volunteer Service Award — Obama & Trump
- Top 20 People Changing Career Education in the US (2022)
- University of Tennessee Outstanding Alumnus of the Year (2023)
- Concordia University Student Center dedicated in her name (2025)
- Chair, Colorado Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, & DeafBlind (2022-Present)

"I am just a normal human being trying to love the good pieces of me and bring light to darkness."

THE GAP WE DON'T TALK ABOUT

Two Worlds. One Leader.

THE PUBLIC FACE

Awards. Titles. Achievements.

Confident decisions under pressure

Always available. Always composed.

Inspiring teams and stakeholders

The person others look up to

THE PRIVATE REALITY

Exhausted. Running on empty.

Anxiety that never fully shuts off

Grieving privately. Smiling publicly.

Feeling unworthy of the room

Wondering when someone will notice

"Somehow I navigated my life using high-functioning anxiety to earn a lot of awards and do a lot of great work."

— Dr. Julie Basler

CEO & Leadership Mental Health — By the Numbers

Source: Businessolver State of Workplace Empathy Study, 2024 | Harvard Business Review

81%

of CEOs believe companies view
mental health as weakness

55%

of CEOs experienced a negative
mental health issue last year

52%

of CEOs consider their own
company culture toxic

48%

of CEOs report feelings of
loneliness & isolation

61%

say loneliness negatively
impacts their performance

8 in 10

leaders do NOT disclose
mental health struggles

"At the end of the day, I'm just a normal human being trying to get through life." — Dr. Julie Basler

How Leaders Learn to Perform “Fine”

The mask isn't dishonesty. It's survival.

Leaders are conditioned — by culture, by expectation, by necessity — to project confidence at all costs. Over time, the gap between what is shown and what is felt becomes a second full-time job.

For me, the mask was built across decades: the young woman from a small town in Tennessee who learned that achievement was armor.

The mask doesn't announce itself. It grows quietly, alongside every award, every promotion, every milestone.

Early Conditioning

"You're strong. Don't cry. Keep going."

Professional Pressure

Success becomes identity. Vulnerability feels like failure.

The Gap Widens

Public success grows. Private pain stays hidden.

High-Functioning Anxiety

Achieving at the highest levels while struggling in silence.

HIGH-FUNCTIONING ANXIETY

The Leadership World's Best-Kept Secret

"If you truly looked around at the people in line, you would see a plethora of people... you don't really look closely at people to see if they're having a mental-health crisis."

— Dr. Julie Basler, MASTERS Podcast with Winn Claybaugh, December 2025

Looks Like Success

Awards, productivity, constant availability — the hallmarks of anxiety mistaken for excellence.

Feels Like Drowning

Irrational thoughts, disproportionate reactions, the inability to stop even when the body demands rest.

Hides in Plain Sight

The highest performers are often the most at risk — their achievement is the camouflage.

Different Conditioning. Same Silence.

WOMEN LEADERS

Glass Cliff

Placed in high-risk leadership roles disproportionately — set up to fail (Ryan & Haslam, 2005)

The Triple Bind

Be competent, be likeable, put others first — simultaneously, without exception

Tokenism & Scrutiny

Heightened visibility and isolation when the only woman in the room (Kanter, 1977)

1 in 5 Women

experience anxiety or depression — twice the diagnosed rate of men

vs

MEN LEADERS

"Man Up" Culture

Boys conditioned from childhood to suppress emotion — the same mask, different words

The Stoic Leader Trap

Showing vulnerability risks being seen as weak or unfit to lead — silence is rewarded

3-4x Higher Suicide Rate

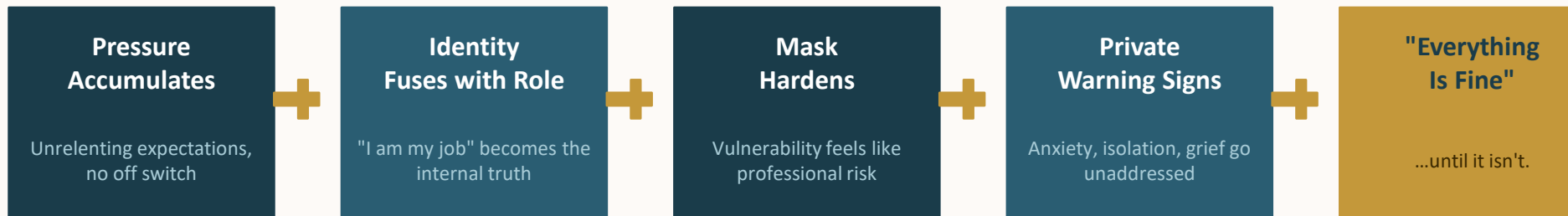
Men die by suicide at nearly 4 times the rate of women, yet seek help far less often (CDC)

Only 1 in 3 Men

with a mental health struggle ever seek treatment — silence is cultural, not a choice

The language is different. The cost is the same. The silence protects no one.

How Professional Pressure Erodes Personal Wellness



The Real Cost of the Correlation

- Relationships suffer as emotional reserves are depleted at work
- Physical health declines — the body keeps score when the mind won't
- Grief goes unprocessed, weaponized into performance instead
- The people closest to the leader bear the overflow of what was suppressed at work

UNTIL IT ISN'T.

The Moment the Mask Cracks

"There were a couple of times I tried to soften that... but if I'm really going to write a book that says what I want to say — why write it if I'm not going to be truthful?"

— Dr. Julie Basler

Warning Signs Leaders Often Dismiss:

- Emotional reactions disproportionate to situations
- Feeling like your personal worth = your professional output
- Chronic exhaustion that sleep doesn't fix
- Isolating from people who genuinely care
- Contemplating — or no longer caring about — what comes next

A Disease People Get Mad at You For Having

"If we see somebody in a cast or a sling on their arm, we want to hear that story. But we don't really look closely at people to see if they're having a mental-health crisis."

Visible Pain Gets Compassion

A broken arm draws questions and concern. A broken spirit draws judgment and avoidance.

Achievement Becomes a Shield

Leaders hide behind their accomplishments. "Look at what I've done" becomes "I'm fine."

Silence Is Cultural, Not Chosen

Historically, leaders — and especially women — have never been given permission to not be okay.

"It's okay to be not okay. You should never shame yourself." — Dr. Julie Basler

The Skill That Protects — And the One That Gets Weaponized

What the Research Shows:

86%

more likely to demonstrate consistent self-awareness
(Korn Ferry Hay Group, 2016)

45%

more likely to demonstrate consistent empathy
vs. male counterparts

11/12

emotional intelligence competencies where
women outperform men

The Double-Edged Sword:

High emotional intelligence is a leadership superpower — and a vulnerability. Leaders who feel deeply for others often stop feeling for themselves.

50% more likely for managers to assign non-promotable work to some leaders — who are 50% more likely to agree (Babcock et al.)

Empathy fatigue — giving emotional labor all day with nothing left in reserve for yourself or those at home

High EI, hidden cost — the most emotionally tuned-in leaders often carry the most that others cannot see

Leading with Authenticity — Without the Mask

For Individual Leaders



Name It First

Acknowledge the gap between what you project and what you feel. Name it — to yourself first.



Seek Therapy Without Apology

Professional support is not weakness. It is the most strategic investment a leader can make.



Separate Identity from Role

You are not your title. Your worth was never contingent on your output.



Process the Grief

Unprocessed loss becomes weaponized performance. Give yourself permission to grieve.

For Organizations



Normalize the Conversation

Mention mental health at the same level of seriousness as physical health — in every leader development program.



Model from the Top

When leaders name their struggles, they give everyone below them permission to do the same.



Create Psychological Safety

Ensure that disclosing a mental health challenge will never be the reason someone is passed over.



Measure What Matters

Burnout and attrition are expensive. Investing in wellness is not altruism — it is smart business.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

What Reaching Out Actually Looks Like

A Story from Dr. Julie Basler:

At Denver International Airport, I noticed a woman waiting for her luggage — hands shaking, tears streaming down her face. I walked up to her and I put my arms out and I said, "I don't know what's going on for you right now, but I feel like you might could use a hug."

She wrapped her arms into mine and she sobbed. I told her: it's okay to be not okay. You should never shame yourself.

What You Can Do Today:

Look up from your phone. See who's in front of you.

Ask the question. All they can say is no.

Call the person back. Instead of saying I wish I had known.

Be the light in the dark. The world needs more of it.

Crisis Line: 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) | NAMI Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI

What We Know to Be True

01

The correlation is real.

Professional pressure and personal mental health are not separate systems. What happens at work lives in the body.

02

The mask is expensive.

High-functioning anxiety produces impressive results — until it produces a crisis. The cost compounds silently.

03

Achievement is not immunity.

Awards, titles, and accomplishments do not protect leaders from mental health struggles — they often make the stigma worse.

04

Stigma is a choice we can reverse.

Every leader who speaks openly about their struggle makes it safer for the next one. This is how culture shifts.

05

Hope is the point.

My story is not uncommon, but finding hope on the other side and learning to reidentify yourself is.

06

You have more power than you think.

The person sitting behind you in church, waiting next to you at the airport — they may just need someone to notice.

LEAVE DIFFERENTLY THAN YOU ARRIVED.

**The question isn't whether
someone near you is struggling.**

The question is whether you'll notice.

Dr. Julie Basler

Leadership Coach · Author · National Speaker on Mental Health Wellness
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"I hope after hearing my story, people realize I'm just a gal from a town of 5,000 people who puts her pants on the same way everybody else does."