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Quiet Cracking.

The workplace trend nobody is talking about loudly enough — and the psychology of why it spreads in silence.

Esther Charalambous

Psychology | Human Behaviour Decoder

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By Esther Charalambous

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It does not announce itself. It does not send a resignation letter. It does not storm out of a meeting or cc the whole company on an email it will regret. It just — gradually, quietly, almost imperceptibly — stops.

It is September in an open-plan office somewhere in central London. Summer is over. The all-staff email about returning to three days in-person arrived on a Thursday afternoon, the week before the bank holiday, when most people were too tired to respond and too uncertain to push back.

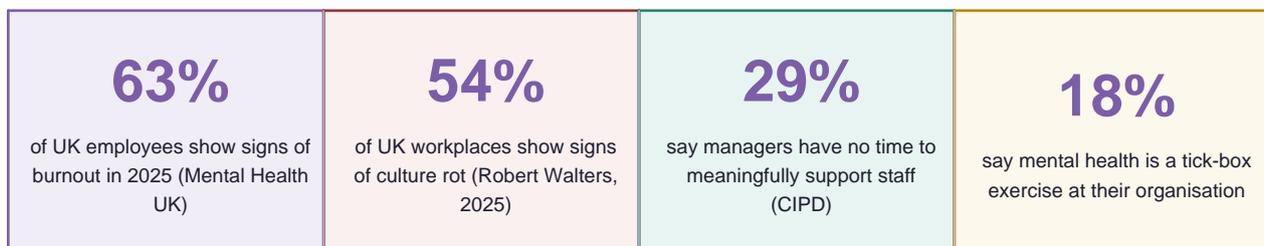
By Monday, the desks are fuller. The coffee queue is longer. The calendar is packed with meetings that could, and probably should, still be emails. And somewhere in the room — maybe at the standing desk by the window, maybe in the corner seat nobody particularly wanted — someone is cracking.

You would not know it to look at them. They are there. They are present. They are attending the meetings, hitting the deadlines, answering the messages. They are doing everything right. They have simply stopped believing any of it matters.

Quiet cracking is what happens when an organisation mistakes the absence of noise for the presence of wellbeing.

The term — quiet cracking — entered workplace vocabulary in 2025, the year after quiet quitting had already alarmed enough HR directors to generate a small industry of think-pieces and intervention programmes. Where quiet quitting described the deliberate choice to do the minimum, quiet cracking describes something less strategic and more distressing: the slow, involuntary deterioration of motivation and engagement under sustained pressure, poor management and the grinding friction of feeling unseen.

Search interest in the term peaked in late August 2025 — not coincidentally, the precise moment when post-summer return-to-office mandates began landing in inboxes across the country. The timing was not accidental. The psychology was not complicated. When people who have been managing their stress through autonomy, flexibility and space are suddenly required to perform normality in a room full of other people performing normality, something gives.



The psychology of quiet cracking is not mysterious. It is, in fact, remarkably well-documented — which makes the widespread organisational failure to recognise and respond to it all the more striking.

Burnout, as Maslach and Leiter (1997) established, does not arrive as a single catastrophic event. It is a process — a progressive erosion of energy, then cynicism, then efficacy — that unfolds over months and sometimes years. The person experiencing it rarely presents dramatically. They present quietly. They become slightly less engaged in team meetings. Their emails get a little shorter. They stop volunteering for things they previously enjoyed. They smile at the right moments. They answer when spoken to. They are, by every surface measure, fine.

They are not fine.

The cracking happens in private. The organisation only finds out when the person has already gone — in spirit, if not yet in body.

What distinguishes quiet cracking from its predecessor quiet quitting is the element of involuntariness. Quiet quitting was, in its original framing, a choice — a boundary-setting response to overwork and exploitation that carried a certain Gen Z defiance. Quiet cracking is not a choice. It is what happens to people who wanted to give more, tried to give more, and found that the

environment made sustained engagement psychologically untenable.

The distinction matters enormously — because the organisational response to a choice is fundamentally different from the organisational response to a structural failure. You cannot performance-manage someone out of quiet cracking. You can only create conditions in which it does not need to happen.

Nearly one in three employees say their organisation raises awareness about mental health but their manager has no time, training or resources to provide meaningful support. Almost one in five say mental health is treated as a tick-box exercise. The gap between the poster on the wall and the reality at the desk is precisely where quiet cracking lives.

When wellbeing is discussed but not reflected in how work is actually organised, employees notice the gap immediately. And over time, that gap does not just erode engagement. It erodes trust — which is considerably harder to rebuild.

The return-to-office moment has become a particular flashpoint for this dynamic. Not because hybrid working is a universal good or office attendance a universal harm — the evidence is more nuanced than either side of that culture war typically acknowledges. But because the manner in which return mandates have been implemented in many organisations has been a masterclass in how not to communicate with people whose trust you need.

A policy that arrives by email, on a Thursday afternoon, two days before a bank holiday, without prior consultation and without acknowledgement of the individual circumstances it will affect — that policy is not really about office attendance. It is a signal about the nature of the relationship between the organisation and the people inside it. And people read signals with extraordinary precision, even when — especially when — they say nothing.

The loudest things in any organisation are the decisions nobody explains and the questions nobody answers.

There is a concept in psychology called learned helplessness — the state produced when an individual experiences repeated situations in which their actions have no effect on outcomes. Seligman's original research (1967) showed that animals subjected to uncontrollable adverse events stopped trying to escape even when escape became possible. The parallel in organisational life is not exact, but it is not entirely metaphorical either.

When employees repeatedly experience that their feedback produces no change, their concerns are absorbed without response, their boundaries are ignored and their professional preferences are overridden without explanation — they stop trying. Not dramatically. Quietly. They learn that effort in certain directions is futile, and they redirect it elsewhere, or they redirect it nowhere at all.

That is quiet cracking. Not a rebellion. Not a statement. Just a person, at a desk, who has learned that it is safer not to care.

What to Watch For — The Behavioural Signals

→ The contribution that stopped	A previously engaged person who has become consistently quieter in meetings, stopped volunteering ideas and begun giving shorter answers to open questions.
→ The email that changed register	A subtle shift from engaged, warm written communication to brief, functional, affectless responses. Not rude — just no longer present.
→ The enthusiasm that became compliance	The person who used to bring energy to a project and now simply completes it. Technically. Without error. Without investment.
→ The physical withdrawal	Changes in where and how a person occupies shared space — eating alone, arriving and leaving exactly on time, choosing remote days more frequently.
→ The careful agreement	Someone who has stopped disagreeing — not because they have changed their mind, but because they no longer believe that disagreement leads anywhere useful.

Back in the open-plan office in September, the week after the return-to-office email, something has shifted in the air. Not dramatically. The coffee queue is moving. The meetings are happening. The work is getting done.

But somewhere in the room — at the standing desk, in the corner seat, behind the laptop screen that nobody thought to look past — a person who gave this organisation something real has quietly decided to stop.

They will not say anything. They will not need to. The organisation will find out in the attrition data next quarter, in the engagement scores that nobody will entirely understand, in the slow, expensive mystery of where all the good people went.

Quiet cracking is not a trend. It is a feedback loop — and the organisation is always the last to hear it.

Read Something You Recognised in This?

Quiet cracking does not fix itself. It does not respond to a wellbeing app, a mental health awareness month or a carefully worded all-staff email. It responds to environments that are designed — structurally, behaviourally, at the leadership level — to make sustained engagement feel worth the risk.

I work with organisations to identify the behavioural patterns behind disengagement, decode what their people are communicating in the gaps — and build the psychological infrastructure that makes the difference between a workforce that is present and a workforce that is actually here.

The signals are already in your organisation. The question is who is trained to read them.

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