

Are You Dealing with High-Functioning Anxiety?

Anxiety affects thousands of people each year, often leading to challenges in everyday life. Yet, while it can be debilitating for many, others remain highly productive, indicating they may be experiencing what is known as high-functioning anxiety.



What Is High-Functioning Anxiety?

Officially, high-functioning anxiety is not recognized as a diagnosis within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the handbook used by mental health professionals to diagnose such clinical conditions or disorders.

Yet, high-functioning anxiety is a condition in which an individual experiences anxiety symptoms, though they continue to function and maintain responsibilities within their public life, including work, school, or social settings.

More commonly than not, sufferers will appear very “put together” on the outer surface. Their peers may describe them as driven, successful, extremely productive, but someone who remains calm in times of stress. Inside, however, they experience turmoil, including worry and fear.



Symptoms of High-Functioning Anxiety

While symptoms may be like other forms of anxiety, those with high-functioning anxiety may not exhibit these in the same manner, frequency, or intensity.

Common emotional and physical symptoms include:

- Excessive worry
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Memory and concentration difficulties
- Fatigue
- Trouble falling or staying sleeping
- Muscle tension
- Heart rate changes
- Increasing sweatiness
- Gastrointestinal distress



While people with high-functioning anxiety may not display any recognizable outward symptoms, others may notice the following:

- Strong determination to complete projects
- Perfectionism
- Seeking control over decisions or situations
- Inattentive or distracted when speaking with others
- Constantly looking engaged or busy
- Forgoing vacation or flexible time off



High-Functioning Anxiety vs. Other Forms of Anxiety/Depression

While not an official mental health diagnosis, high-functioning anxiety shares qualities with other forms of anxiety and depression. These qualities may include feelings of inferiority and fear. The most significant difference is the degree of debilitation.

Positive characteristics often include:

- Organized
- Punctual
- Detail-oriented
- Passionate
- Proactive
- High achieving
- Helpful
- Loyal

Negative characteristics may include:

- Becoming a people-pleaser
- Inability to say no
- Prone to overthinking
- Alternating between procrastination and intensity
- Avoiding eye contact
- Physical and mental fatigue
- May rely on alcohol or substances to cope



Challenges

Challenges associated with high-functioning anxiety may include:

- Presenting oneself in a false light and not sharing true feelings but instead bottling them up inside
- Overachieving appearance yet failing to acknowledge the internal struggle to reach a higher level of success
- Being treated like everyone else, with the exact expectations, without others being aware of the internal struggles
- Allowing anxiety instead of enjoyment to dictate actions



Reducing Stigma

The public stigma surrounding anxiety and mental health disorders contributes to why diagnosis and treatment are often delayed.

To reduce this stigma, it helps to look at it positively, not just negatively. Instead of always viewing anxiety as a weakness, today's society can highlight the achievements of those dealing with anxiety, showing they can live full, productive lives.



Diagnosis

While high functioning anxiety is not an official clinical diagnosis, determining that an individual has it relies on knowing that an optimal level of anxiety can fuel performance.

Per the Yerkes-Dodson Law, this optimal level of anxiety propels them onward instead of leaving them frozen or giving in to their fears.

Those with mild to moderate anxiety are likely candidates for functioning at this higher level versus those with severe anxiety.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy can be an effective treatment. The individual may meet with a therapist to assess their condition, followed by learning coping mechanisms and strategies to help reduce or better manage symptoms. The sessions may occur one-on-one or in a group or family setting.

Treatment

A mental health professional facilitates treatment for managing any form of anxiety.

Examples of the treatments available include:

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)
- Specialized medications, such as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors)
- Alternative treatments, such as mindfulness training
- Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), blending CBT and mindfulness techniques of change and acceptance
- Combination of treatments

While high-functioning anxiety may not be life-threatening, living with it can be exhausting. Taking time to find out more and learning to cope will be beneficial in their wellness journey.

High-functioning anxiety is one of the few stressors often associated with the workplace. Employers can always help their workforce by offering them access to mental health first-aid care and support. Make a difference in the lives of your employees by making behavioral health a priority! Axiom Medical's proprietary, behavioral-science-based TEMPO LIVE health technology is a game-changer for the workplace! What makes us different? We're not just an app – we support employee and employer behavioral health needs with the support of licensed occupational health medical professionals. Let's build a resilient workforce together!