

# High-Functioning Anxiety: The Hidden Struggle Behind the Smile by Sharon Sihlali

When you think of anxiety, you might picture someone visibly nervous — fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, or struggling to speak. But anxiety doesn't always look like that. For some people, it hides behind an image of competence, success, and composure. This is what many refer to as **high-functioning anxiety** — a term used to describe individuals who experience anxiety symptoms but still manage to meet life's demands effectively.

## What Is High-Functioning Anxiety?

High-functioning anxiety is not an official diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), but it's a widely recognised experience among mental health professionals (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). People with high-functioning anxiety often appear confident, organised, and productive — yet internally, they may be battling persistent worry, self-doubt, and fear of failure.

Unlike more overt anxiety disorders, high-functioning anxiety can be harder to detect because those experiencing it tend to overcompensate. Their anxiety often drives them to excel, but the constant pressure can lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion (Hendriksen, 2018).

## Signs and Symptoms

While everyone's experience is different, common indicators include:

- **Overthinking and perfectionism** – constantly analysing situations and striving for flawless results
- **People-pleasing** – saying “yes” to avoid letting others down
- **Procrastination masked by productivity** – delaying tasks but appearing busy with less urgent work
- **Fear of disappointing others** – excessive worry about others' opinions
- **Difficulty relaxing** – feeling guilty when resting or taking breaks

These behaviours might look like dedication or ambition from the outside, but inside, they can be driven by relentless self-criticism and fear of not being good enough (Smith, 2021).

## **The Double-Edged Sword**

The “high-functioning” part of high-functioning anxiety means that anxiety can sometimes fuel achievement. You meet deadlines, exceed expectations, and maintain strong relationships — but the cost is often mental and physical health. Chronic anxiety can lead to insomnia, muscle tension, headaches, and a weakened immune system (Harvard Health Publishing, 2020).

## **Managing High-Functioning Anxiety**

The good news is that high-functioning anxiety can be managed with practical strategies and professional support.

### **1. Recognise the Patterns**

Awareness is the first step. Journaling thoughts and feelings can help identify triggers and patterns (APA, 2022).

### **2. Set Boundaries**

Learning to say “no” without guilt protects mental energy and prevents overcommitment (Hendriksen, 2018).

### **3. Practice Mindfulness**

Mindfulness meditation helps reduce overthinking by grounding you in the present moment. Just 10 minutes a day can improve emotional regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

### **4. Challenge Perfectionism**

Replace “I must be perfect” with “I can do my best and that’s enough.” Self-compassion reduces the pressure to constantly perform (Neff, 2011).

### **5. Seek Professional Support**

Therapy, especially cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), can help reframe unhelpful thought patterns and manage anxiety symptoms (Hofmann et al., 2012).

## **Final Thoughts**

High-functioning anxiety is often overlooked because, on the surface, everything appears “fine.” But success should never come at the expense of well-being. By recognising the signs and taking proactive steps, it’s possible to achieve balance — not just productivity. True success is feeling as good on the inside as you appear on the outside.

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