



"High-Functioning" Anxiety: Why Doing Well Can Still Feel Awful

An explainer and self-check (non-diagnostic) · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- "High-functioning anxiety" isn't a diagnosis, but it describes a real and common experience.
- You can be successful, reliable, and admired, and still feel anxious most of the time.
- Achievement can hide distress. Your inner experience matters as much as your output.

Looking fine, feeling anything but

People with high-functioning anxiety often look like they have it all together. They're organized, punctual, and the first to volunteer. They hit deadlines and rarely say no. But underneath, worry, perfectionism, and fear of failing are doing much of the driving.

Because they keep functioning, their anxiety is easy to miss, sometimes even by themselves. Many people only seek help when they reach burnout or their body starts sending loud signals.

Why anxiety can look like success

Anxiety can be a powerful short-term motivator. Fear of failure pushes you to overprepare, and the success that follows reinforces the belief that worry "works." Over time, though, this pattern takes a toll on sleep, relationships, and health, and makes it hard to ever feel "enough."

What the research says

While not a diagnosis, high-functioning anxiety often overlaps with features of generalized anxiety disorder, such as excessive worry, restlessness, and trouble sleeping, which professionals can screen for using validated tools like the GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006).

A meta-analysis of over 40,000 young people found that perfectionism has increased significantly since the late 1980s, especially the belief that others expect perfection from us (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Tool: High-Functioning Anxiety Self-Check

This is a reflection, **not a diagnostic test**. Rate each statement for the past month: 0 = not like me, 1 = a little like me, 2 = a lot like me.

#	Statement	Score (0-2)
1	I appear calm and capable, but I feel tense or worried inside most days.	
2	I overprepare, overcheck, or redo things to make sure they're "right."	
3	I struggle to relax, even on days off.	
4	I say yes to more than I can handle because I don't want to disappoint anyone.	
5	My mind replays conversations or mistakes long after they happen.	
6	I feel my worth depends on being productive.	
7	I have trouble falling asleep because my mind won't switch off.	
8	I rely on busyness to avoid uncomfortable feelings.	
9	People are surprised when I say I'm struggling.	
10	Rest makes me feel guilty or anxious.	

Total: _____ / 20

- **0-6:** Some of these may show up during busy seasons. Keep noticing.
- **7-13:** Anxiety may be quietly shaping how you work, rest, and relate. It's worth paying attention.
- **14-20:** You may be carrying a lot beneath the surface. Talking with a professional can help you understand what's going on.

Gentle shifts to try

- **Define "good enough."** Before a task, decide what 80% looks like, and stop there once.
- **Schedule rest like a meeting.** Rest is not a reward for finishing everything. It's maintenance.
- **Practise a small "no."** Start with a low-stakes request and notice that the relationship survives.
- **Separate worth from output.** Ask, "Who am I when I'm not achieving?"
- **Let one person see behind the curtain.** Share honestly how you're really doing.

When to reach out for support

If anxiety drives most of your decisions, affects your sleep, or you can't remember the last time you truly relaxed, therapy can help. CBT and ACT are well-supported approaches for worry and perfectionism.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin*, 145(4), 410–429.

Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B. W., & Löwe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: The GAD-7. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 166(10), 1092–1097.

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