Signs a Client May Have High-Functioning Anxiety

Recognizing the Hidden Signs of High-Functioning Anxiety in Therapy

Many clients walk into a session appearing composed, accomplished, and in control. They hold down demanding jobs, maintain active social lives, and meet their obligations on time. Yet beneath that polished surface, a constant hum of worry and self-criticism may be running. High-functioning anxiety is not a formal diagnosis in the DSM, but it is a pattern that many therapists encounter regularly. Unlike someone who presents with obvious panic or avoidance, the high-functioning client often masks their distress so well that even they may not recognize it as anxiety. For clinicians, knowing what to look for is essential. This checklist helps you identify the key signs and respond with the right clinical tools.

The Checklist: What to Assess

1. Perfectionism as a Coping Strategy

The client may describe a relentless drive to do everything flawlessly. They might say they are "just detail-oriented" or that they have high standards. But when you press a little, you see that the perfectionism is driven by fear: fear of criticism, fear of failure, fear of being seen as inadequate. Their inner critic is harsh, and they rarely feel that their work is good enough. This perfectionism often extends into areas like appearance, home organization, and even how they present their emotions in session. It is a coping strategy that helps them feel in control, but it comes at a high cost in energy and self-worth.

2. Overthinking and Rumination

Listen for language that loops. The client might replay conversations, worry about what they should have said, or imagine worst-case scenarios for future events. They may describe trouble sleeping because their mind will not shut off. This mental chatter is exhausting, and it often goes unnoticed by others because the client still functions well. They meet deadlines, show up on time, and appear engaged. But inside, they are running a constant internal commentary of doubt and worry. Open questions can help here. Ask them what happens in their mind during a quiet moment, or what they think about when they lie down to sleep. Their answer may reveal the rumination they have been normalizing.

3. Safety Behaviors and Control Tactics

Safety behaviors are small actions a person takes to reduce anxiety in the moment. For someone with high-functioning anxiety, these behaviors can be subtle. They might overprepare for meetings, arrive absurdly early to appointments, check their phone repeatedly for

messages, or rehearse conversations in advance. They may avoid delegating tasks because they do not trust others to do them correctly. These behaviors give a temporary sense of relief but reinforce the underlying belief that danger is imminent without them. As you build the therapeutic alliance, you can gently point out these patterns and explore what the client fears would happen if they let go of one of these behaviors.

4. Difficulty with Rest and Relaxation

When a client tells you they feel guilty when they are not being productive, pay attention. High-functioning anxiety often makes stillness feel unsafe. The client may fill their calendar to the brim, take on extra projects, or volunteer for things they do not have time for. They may describe feeling restless or irritable on vacation. Some even say they prefer being busy because it keeps the anxious thoughts at bay. This avoidance of downtime is a red flag. It suggests that when the external structure falls away, the internal worry rushes in. Validation is important here. Acknowledge that their drive has helped them achieve a lot, and then gently explore what happens when they slow down.

5. Physical Symptoms That Go Unspoken

High-functioning anxiety shows up in the body too. Clients may report tension headaches, jaw clenching, neck and shoulder pain, digestive issues, or fatigue. They may attribute these to a busy lifestyle or poor sleep, but the root cause is chronic activation of the nervous system. Because they push through their days, they often ignore these signals until they become persistent. Asking about physical sensations in session can open a door. You might say, "When you talk about that situation, what do you notice in your body?" This invites them to connect their mental experience with their physical experience, which can be a powerful step in treatment.

How to Respond in Session

Build Trust Before Challenging Patterns

Clients with high-functioning anxiety often fear being seen as weak or broken. They may be hesitant to disclose the full extent of their worry because they pride themselves on being capable. The therapeutic alliance needs to feel safe and nonjudgmental. Use validation early and often. Let them know that their coping strategies have helped them survive and succeed. Once they trust that you see their strengths, they will be more open to exploring the costs of those strategies.

Use Open Questions to Uncover the Inner World

Closed questions can miss the depth of high-functioning anxiety. Instead, ask questions that invite reflection. "What does a good day look like for you?" or "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" These kinds of questions can reveal the gap between the client's external life and their internal experience. They may also reveal the treatment goals that matter most to them, such as learning to rest without guilt or reducing the need for constant reassurance.

Explore the Function of Safety Behaviors

Once you have identified a safety behavior, explore it with curiosity. Ask the client what they think would happen if they did not do it. What is the feared outcome? How likely is that outcome? This kind of cognitive restructuring can help them see that the behavior is not protecting them as much as they believe. Over time, you can work on gradually reducing these behaviors while building tolerance for uncertainty.

Teach Coping Strategies That Address the Root

Standard relaxation techniques may not work well for someone with high-functioning anxiety. They might find deep breathing frustrating or feel more anxious when told to "just relax." Instead, focus on coping strategies that acknowledge their drive. For example, help them reframe rest as a skill to practice rather than a failure to produce. Introduce the idea of scheduled worry time, where they allow themselves to worry only during a set period each day. This contains the rumination without trying to eliminate it entirely. Resources like those available through therapytrainings.com can offer additional frameworks for working with this population in a structured, evidence-informed way.

When to Refer or Seek Consultation

High-functioning anxiety can coexist with other conditions, such as generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive traits. If the client's symptoms do not respond to outpatient therapy, or if you notice signs of depression, substance use, or significant impairment, consider a referral for a more comprehensive clinical assessment. Supervision or consultation with a colleague can also help you refine your approach. The field of online therapy training continues to evolve, and staying current with new research and techniques is part of providing good care. For therapists looking to deepen their skills, the training programs at therapytrainings.com provide accredited continuing education that addresses these exact clinical challenges.

The goal is not to pathologize high-functioning anxiety, but to help clients see that they do not have to carry the weight alone. With careful assessment and a strong therapeutic relationship, you can guide them toward a life that feels as good on the inside as it looks on the outside.