

High "Functioning" Anxiety

- What is high "functioning" anxiety?
- Where does high "functioning" anxiety come from?
- How do we begin to heal?

Disclaimer

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Let Me Introduce Myself



Hi There! Welcome. My name is Dr. Kelly Vincent, and I am a Licensed Psychologist practicing in Encinitas, CA. I am the founder of Nourished Wellness Group, a holistic group mental health practice. Good for you in supporting your well-being. It takes energy and effort, so give yourself a lot of credit! Let's dive in!

Whenever I post about High "Functioning" Anxiety, I get a lot of, "yes, this is so me!" I think so many of us can relate for a variety of reasons. In this guide, I want to give you the basics of what HFA is, where it may come from and how to start healing. This is just a START to your journey! Think of it as you invitation to release, restore, and recalibrate.



What is High "Functioning" Anxiety?

Sara Linberg from Headspace described it perfectly,

“ Busy and in control. **High-achieving** and **perfectionistic**. Driven by details and order in a desperate attempt to calm racing thoughts, worry, and the fear that invade every ounce of the mind and body. An over-thinker with a tendency to perseverate, dwell, and stew on everything. ”

Sound familiar?

First and foremost, it is important to know that High “Functioning” Anxiety is **NOT** a formal DSM-V (the therapist bible, if you will) diagnosis. Currently, there is very little (if any) empirical research out there to glean bigger insights and understanding when it comes to high “functioning” anxiety.

Instead, I’d invite you to think of high “functioning” anxiety as a term that is used to describe an anxious experience or a “type” of anxiety.

High “functioning” anxiety typically refers to someone who experiences anxiety while still managing daily life quite well (from the outside that is). Generally, a person with high-functioning anxiety may appear put together and well- accomplished on the outside, yet experience worry, stress or have obsessive thoughts on the inside. Even those who know you the best may not realize that you struggle as much as you do.

What is High "Functioning" Anxiety?

The medical community knows that anxiety disorders exist **on a spectrum** and affect people differently. While some people may experience moderate or severe symptoms, others may experience mild distress or impairment. This can be true when it comes to high “functioning” anxiety. It may show up and/or manifest differently depending on the individual, their background, the systems they are part of and the current situation.

Without enough research, medical professionals cannot say how high “functioning” anxiety presents and how it affects people who experience it. Anecdotal reports suggest that people with high-functioning anxiety may have fewer obvious symptoms that affect their ability to function. While they may have many of the classic anxiety symptoms, these may occur on the milder end of the spectrum.

Possible general signs and symptoms may include:

- Worry, fear, and anxiety
- Irritability & frustration
- An inability to relax
- A need for perfectionism
- Fear of judgement or failure
- Desire to keep busy all the time
- Overthinking and overanalyzing
- Avoid stillness

- Anticipatory anxiety (anxiety before events)
- Elevated heart rate and faster breathing
- Sleep problems
- Changes in appetite
- Digestive issues
- Sense of unsettledness in their mind and body

What is High "Functioning" Anxiety?

Something important to highlight:

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Perfectionism, imposter syndrome, overachieving, people pleasing, and generalized anxiety **can be very much intertwined** with the high “functioning” anxiety experience. *They may play off each other or be rooted in one another.*

For example, say you were raised in an environment where things needed to be perfect in order to be seen and/or loved. Thus, you spent tons of time making sure everything you did was perfect or the way you looked was acceptable. This created a pattern in your nervous system where you were constantly on alert for potential threats to the perception of you being perfect. The anxiety would get extremely loud when something wasn't perfect (e.g. your outfit, a grade, etc).

This stress response or living more in the **sympathetic nervous system** state (fight/flight) begins to become your norm. However, you find ways to cope and continue to “keep up the facade.” But that conditioned belief that you need to be perfect in order to be loved or seen continues to grow and solidify in your mind and body. As you move into adulthood, the same patterns are enacted and compounded with other life experiences. Cue high “functioning” anxiety. **Talk about exhaustion.**

This can be such a lonely experience, as most of us struggle in silence. Or we may minimize our experience and blame ourselves for the “way we are.” When in fact, it is often something rooted in our past that was developed so long ago. **We did the best we could by engaging in coping skills that allowed us to navigate or “survive.”** The HFA tendencies at one time were coping skills and they were necessary. However, you are beginning to recognize that this is not a sustainable way of being. And something must change!

Now we have a better sense of what it actually is,
let's explore where it may be rooted in.

Where does it come from?

While experts do not fully understand the causes of anxiety disorders, they most likely occur due to a combination of factors
([National Institute of Mental Health](#)).

When it comes to anxiety in general, some of these factors may include:

Genetics:

People with a family history of anxiety disorders or other mental health conditions are more likely than others to develop anxiety.

Personality:

Childhood traits of shyness or nervousness in new situations, for example, increase the risk of having an anxiety disorder.

Exposure to stress:

Experiencing stress or trauma at any point can trigger anxiety.

Other health issues

Underlying physical health concerns, such as a thyroid disorder or heart problems can trigger or worsen anxiety symptoms. Having another mental health disorder is also a risk factor for an anxiety disorder.

Drug and alcohol use

Misuse of drugs or alcohol can trigger anxiety, as can withdrawal from these substances.

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In addition to these factors, there are a **few other hypotheses** as to why high “functioning” anxiety may be part of your experience.

These may include:

Habituation to Stress:

Habituation to stress may be rooted in your childhood. You may have been raised in a chaotic environment, thus “conditioning” you to operate in a hyper-aroused (fight/flight) state. This habituation may have become so normal that the absence of stress feels odd/boring/unease. Essentially, you may have become addicted to stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. The tendency to “do” and feel stress around that “doing” has been programmed into you.

Modeling:

Your caregivers could have modeled this type of behavior to you either directly or indirectly. Your mom may have experienced high levels of anxiety or your father may have been high-driving or the achieving type. The idea of “doing” may have been modeled versus just “being.” These behaviors may have been praised or valued.

Environmental

You may have gone to a rigorous academic institution or you were in an environment that produced an increase in your stress response. The pressure of doing well or being “successful” was exhibited as the highest priority. You may have internalized that you must “do all the things to be seen/loved/heard/accepted.” This can be the same for BIPOC individuals. For example, due to the color of your skin, or your culture, you may have learned that you **must do** more, be more, and achieve more, just to be seen as an equal due to racism/systematic racism and racial injustices.

Where does it come from?

Emotional trauma

Before I go into this one, I have to say that parents do the best they can with the skills they have **AT THE TIME**. However, our parents may have provided more critical feedback or emotional neglect as we navigated our younger years. If you experienced your feelings/needs being dismissed, minimized, or not as important you may have felt that in order to get what you need you needed to be happy/put together/successful/good/pleasing.

Societal/Cultural:

There can be the massive societal impact on the way we move through the world. We get fed messages about who we should be and how we should act and look pretty much at all times. Culturally depending on how we were raised or our cultural upbringing, there may be some inherent messages that tell us we must “do all the things” and do it well without showing vulnerability (as an example).

Nonetheless, high “functioning” anxiety can be rooted in many, many things. Most often, these experiences lead to a deregulated nervous system. Your nervous system may be “stuck on” or in flight/flight mode. When we begin to understand our physiology and **work with our nervous system**, we can create small shifts that lead to big change (see my Mind Body Practices guide for more info on the nervous system + guided practices).

Each of our experiences is vastly different, considering we come from so many different places and families. Getting really intimate with your personal experience of anxiety can be really eye opening. This awareness then leads to change!

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How do we heal ?



1 Build Awareness + Insight

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Grab a cup of tea, a journal and a pen, get cozy, and let's explore your experience...

-  How would I describe my personal experience with high “functioning” anxiety? (e.g. It is as if I am always on or can never truly take a break)
-  What do I notice in my mind and body? (e.g., I noticed I couldn't catch my breath or I am constantly flooded with worry and fear)
-  What need am I potentially trying to meet? (e.g. need to be seen, heard, loved, validated)
-  What tends to trigger this experience? (e.g. usually it is work-related, feeling like I can't keep up)
-  If I stop functioning in this way, what fears come up or what am I afraid will happen? (e.g. I won't be valued)

How do we heal?

2 Nervous System Education + Regulation

Understanding your physiology is so **KEY** when it comes to shifting away from these tendencies, patterns and habits. At the end of the day, it is our dysregulated nervous system that is the root of the struggle. We are essentially “turned on” or stuck in a hyper-aroused state (fight/flight mode) and this is not a fun place to be, especially long term!

When we begin to understand how our nervous system functions, what the different states are and how they feel, we can begin to intervene to help shift us back to regulation. We become aware of when we are activated and then work to build coping strategies to help move us into a more ventral vagal (regulated) state.

We work to make our nervous system flexible and resilient to stressors. Because let's be honest, there will ALWAYS be stressors. High “functioning” anxiety is truly a dysregulation issue more than anything else. Obviously dysregulation is rooted in many, many things (as we discussed above).



How do we heal?

Mapping Your Nervous System

Deb Dana, LCSW created the concept of mapping your nervous system through the lens of Polyvagal Theory. I won't go into all the details of Polyvagal Theory (save it for another time), but I want to introduce you to this idea, as it can be so helpful.

Think of your nervous system as a ladder. At the top of the ladder is when you are experiencing your **Social Engagement System**. This is where you feel grounded, easeful, connected, and joyful.

The next rung down the ladder is your **Sympathetic Nervous System State**. This is where you are in fight/flight mode. You are prepared and ready to fight the "threat" or flee the "threat." You are focused on survival.

The bottom of the ladder is your **Dorsal Vagal State**. This is "shut down" mode. You experience depression, immobilized, not present, disconnected or freeze mode.

On the next page, let's map your states. This will give you an idea of what it is like for you in each.



How do we heal?

Mapping Your Nervous System

Next to each state, write down what you notice in your mind and body when you are in these states.

Collapsed	Immobilized	Dorsal Vagal	Fight - Flight	Mobilized	Sympathetic	Social	Safe	Ventral Vagal

The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation (Norton, 2018)

How do we heal?

Nervous System Regulation Practices

Once you understand your nervous system states, you can then recognize which regulation practices might fit you best. I'd encourage you to experiment with all kinds of practices and take notice of the shifts in your nervous system by cueing into your mind and bodies response.

Regulation Practices to Explore:

Gentle Yoga
Restorative Yoga
Breathwork
Cold Plunging
Connecting to Love Ones/Pets
Laughing
Somatic release



*If you don't already have my free Mind-Body Practices Guide, head to drkellyvincent.com/instagram and download it. It has a ton of guided practices for your explore if you don't know where to start.

How do we heal?

3 Explore the feeling of discomfort

Now this will be a hard one! I repeat, this will be a hard one. Like we discussed before, we are often habituated to stress and addicted to our stress hormones, so stepping INTO the discomfort will create a big reaction within the mind and body.

You may be wondering, well how do I step into the discomfort?

The answer is to get **still**.

Stillness and a practice of stillness begin to help reshape the nervous system pattern from being “on/alert/going/doing” to “just being/ease/grounded.” This will feel awful at first. And I say that because I know. When I first started stillness practices, it was truly the most uncomfortable experience ever. My heart was beating out of my chest, I felt the worst anxiety ever, and I thought this was terrible and questioned how the heck it could even help. However, if you **stick with it** (and with me), you will begin to reprogram yourself and your nervous system.

So, how do you get still?

Well, there are oodles of options out there. Truly it is about finding one that somewhat fits you (none will at first) and then practicing, practicing, and more practicing! The more we can retrain our nerves to feel safe in stillness, the more we develop the capacity to tolerate external stressors. Essentially, the capacity we have to be flexible when stressors arise.

Examples of stillness practices may include:

- Gentle Yoga
- Yin Yoga
- Breathwork
- Meditation (guided or self)
- Self-compassion practices
- Sitting in nature
- Mindfulness
- Biohacking