

## Understanding anxiety that hides behind high performance



When most people think of anxiety, they picture worry, panic, or avoidance. But for many, it looks different. **Instead of slowing down, some people speed up.** They take on more, push harder, and keep busy to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

**This type of anxiety often flies under the radar.** On the surface, everything looks fine: a busy diary, strong results at work, constant reliability with friends or family. Inside, though, the pressure can feel relentless. **The drive to perform becomes less about achievement and more about keeping anxious thoughts at bay.**

Understanding this pattern is important. It can help you recognise when high performance is a cover for stress, not a sign of balance.

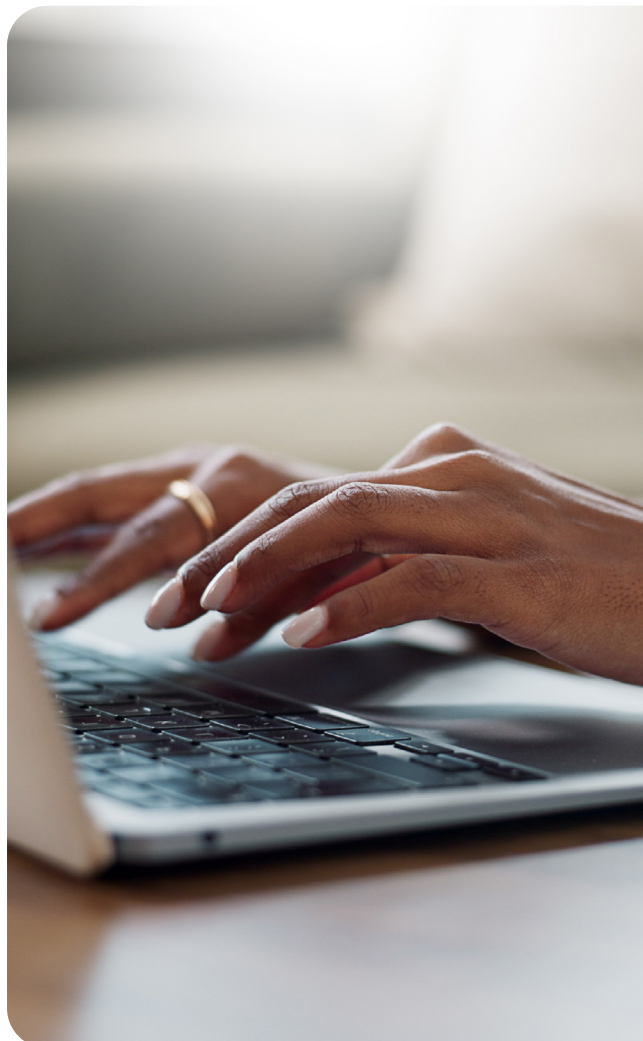
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## What anxiety behind high performance looks like

Everyone has different ways of coping with stress, but some patterns appear again and again in people with hidden anxiety:

- **Overworking** – staying late, checking emails at night, or filling every gap with tasks.
- **Perfectionism** – setting unrealistically high standards, then feeling anxious if they're not met.
- **People-pleasing** – saying yes to every request, even when already stretched thin.
- **Difficulty resting** – feeling restless or guilty when not being productive.
- **Needing to stay busy** – avoiding stillness because it lets anxious thoughts rise to the surface.

These behaviours are often praised by others, which makes them harder to recognise as signs of strain. The person may be seen as dependable, successful, or driven. Underneath, they may feel exhausted and on edge.



### Why it happens

Anxiety that hides behind high performance doesn't come out of nowhere. It's usually shaped by a mix of personality, upbringing, and environment.

- **Fear of failure** – believing that mistakes will lead to rejection or judgement.
- **Early experiences** – growing up where love or approval felt tied to achievement.
- **Work culture** – environments that reward long hours, constant availability, or over-delivery.
- **Control** – keeping busy can create the sense of being in charge, even when life feels unpredictable.

These drivers aren't "weaknesses." **They're coping strategies that worked at some point.** But over time, they can become exhausting and unsustainable.





## The hidden impact on daily life

High performance anxiety can feel productive in the short term. Deadlines get met, goals are achieved, and others are impressed. But behind the scenes, it takes a toll:

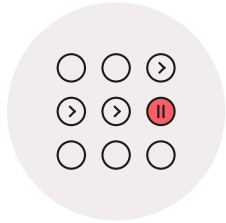
- **Physical health** – ongoing stress raises blood pressure, disrupts sleep, and increases the risk of burnout.
- **Mental health** – anxiety may intensify, feeding into low mood or even depression.
- **Relationships** – constantly prioritising work or pleasing others leaves little space for connection.
- **Self-image** – achievements stop feeling satisfying, because the motivation is fear, not joy.

The cycle is hard to break. Success brings only temporary relief before the next target sets off fresh anxiety.

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## Small steps that can help

You don't have to overhaul your life to begin easing this kind of anxiety. Small, steady changes often make the biggest difference.



### Make space to pause

Start by carving out short moments in the day with no agenda. A ten-minute walk, a few minutes with a book, or simply sitting without your phone can feel uncomfortable at first, but it's a step toward letting your mind settle. With practice, stillness becomes less threatening and more restorative.



### Set kinder boundaries

Many people with performance-driven anxiety say yes to everything. Over time, that leads to exhaustion. Try instead:

- Learning to say no without long explanations.
- Blocking time in your calendar for rest as you would for a meeting.
- Switching off notifications at certain times of day.

These aren't indulgences. They're protective measures that create breathing room.



### Challenge perfectionism

Ask yourself: is this good enough to serve its purpose? Often, striving for flawless results adds stress without changing the outcome. Catching yourself in these moments can reduce the urge to over-deliver.



### Reframe success

Shift from measuring worth only by constant output to noticing other values: being present with family, making time for health, or enjoying moments of calm. These forms of success carry as much weight as productivity.



## Practical coping strategies

Alongside boundary-setting, certain techniques can help calm the body and reduce the cycle of constant activity:

- **Breathing exercises** – slow, deep breathing signals safety to the nervous system.
- **Mindfulness or meditation** – even five minutes a day can reduce racing thoughts.
- **Exercise** – physical activity channels stress hormones, boosts mood, and supports sleep.
- **Journaling** – writing thoughts down makes them easier to organise and less overwhelming.
- **Digital limits** – switching off emails and work apps outside office hours reduces pressure.

Used consistently, these practices help break the link between busyness and safety, showing the body that rest is not a threat.

## The role of workplace culture

High performance anxiety doesn't exist in a vacuum. Many workplaces encourage it, even if unintentionally. Long hours, constant availability, and reward systems that celebrate **“going above and beyond”** can push people into unhealthy patterns.

**If this resonates, it may help to reflect on your environment:**

- Does your workplace expect instant replies to emails or messages?
- Are you praised more for working late than for taking leave?
- Do you feel judged if you set boundaries?

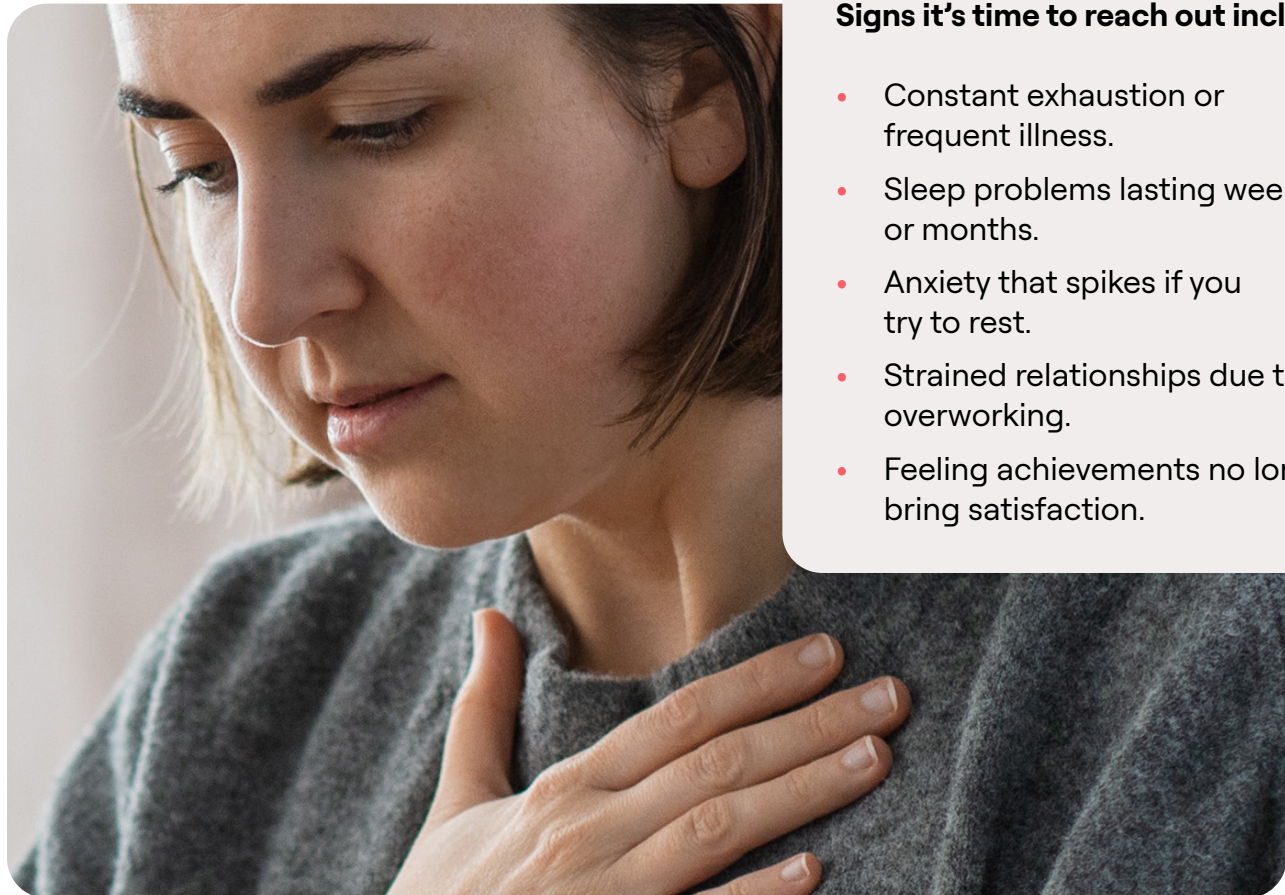
Cultural pressures don't erase personal responsibility but recognising them helps reduce self-blame. **Sometimes the most powerful step is acknowledging that the system, not just the individual, needs adjusting.** Where possible, seeking supportive managers, flexible working, or peer networks can ease the pressure.

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## When to seek professional support

It's normal to feel anxious at times. But if high performance anxiety is affecting daily life, professional support can help you regain balance.



### Signs it's time to reach out include:

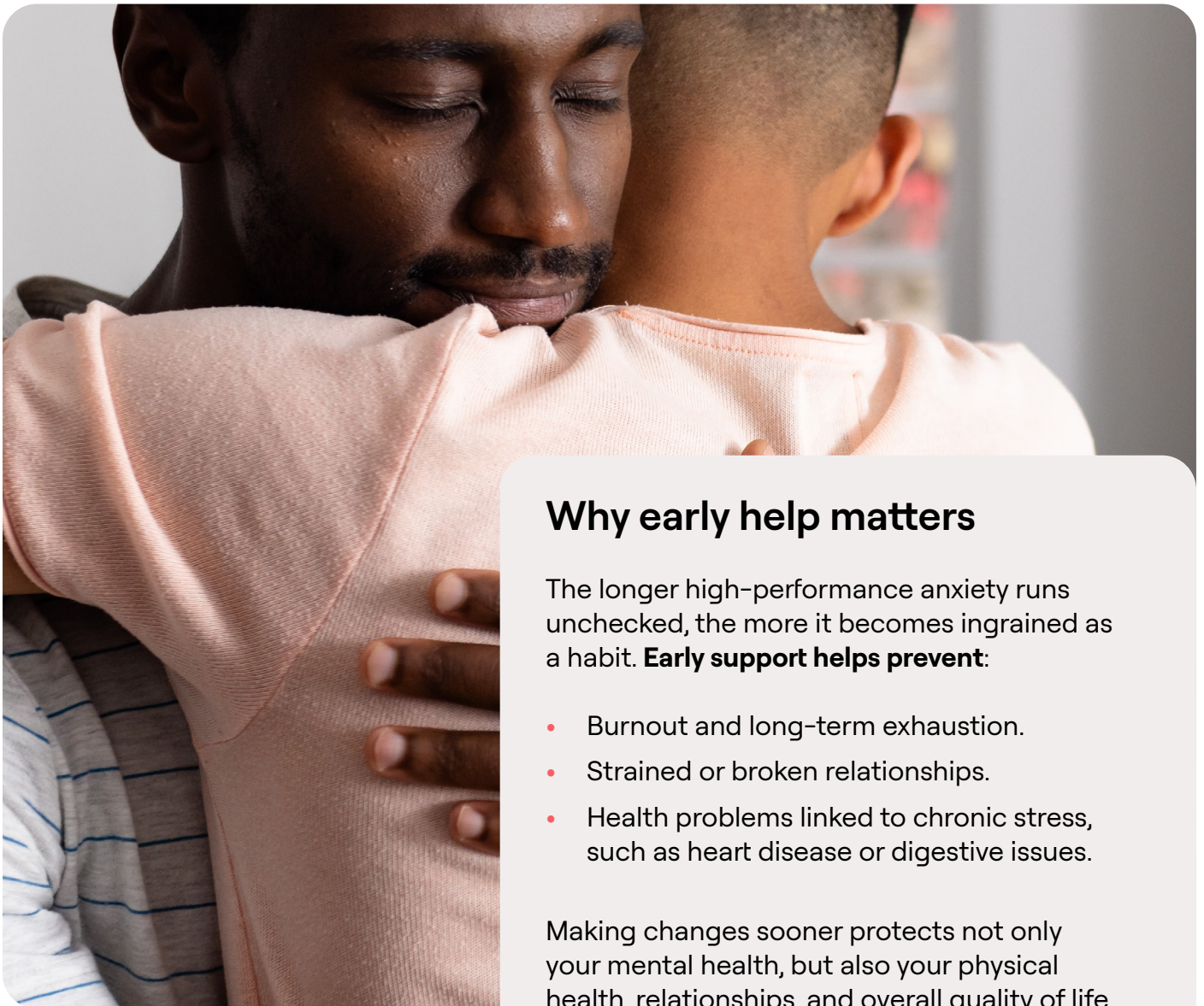
- Constant exhaustion or frequent illness.
- Sleep problems lasting weeks or months.
- Anxiety that spikes if you try to rest.
- Strained relationships due to overworking.
- Feeling achievements no longer bring satisfaction.

### What support might involve:

- **Talking therapies** – cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is effective for anxiety, helping to challenge unhelpful thought patterns. Other approaches, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), can help reduce perfectionism.
- **Medication** – for some, short- or long-term medication can reduce symptoms so other strategies are easier to use.
- **GP checks** – doctors can also rule out physical contributors, such as thyroid issues or sleep disorders, that may worsen anxiety.
- **Occupational health support** – some employers provide access to counselling, wellbeing programmes, or flexible adjustments.

Seeking help doesn't mean stopping what makes you successful. It means finding healthier ways to sustain performance without sacrificing your health.

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## Why early help matters

The longer high-performance anxiety runs unchecked, the more it becomes ingrained as a habit. **Early support helps prevent:**

- Burnout and long-term exhaustion.
- Strained or broken relationships.
- Health problems linked to chronic stress, such as heart disease or digestive issues.

Making changes sooner protects not only your mental health, but also your physical health, relationships, and overall quality of life.

## How HealthHero can help

With **HealthHero**, you can book an online GP consultation quickly and confidentially. A doctor can:

- Listen to your concerns and explore what may be driving them.
- Rule out physical issues adding to fatigue or stress.
- Refer you for talking therapy or other mental health support if helpful.

You don't need to wait until you're burnt out to ask for help. Having guidance early can make change feel more manageable.