Introduction

To someone with high functioning anxiety and depression, every day can be as tiring and dangerous as walking through a battlefield. On the surface, they are well adjusted, successful people who are often leaders in their fields and bright stars in their social communities. Internally, it is a fight for them to hold themselves together enough to make it out of their house or keep tears in at a board meeting. They are often emotionally isolated and tend to respond less successfully to conventional psychological treatment. Approaching this condition with a holistic and phytotherapeutic lens gives a portrait of care that can effortlessly run alongside or in addition to traditional allopathic psychological protocols, with the potential for great success in restoring happiness to their lives and an end to the constant invisible battle.

Defining ‘High Functioning’

The definition of ‘high functioning’ when applied to depression, anxiety, insomnia, and bipolarism is somewhat nebulous and therefore difficult to parse out, much like other aspects of mental illness. It isn’t a condition officially or canonically defined by the American Psychiatric Association, but it is a concept that is not new to the many individuals struggling with it on a day to day basis. Most recently, it has been gaining more and more attention in the public eye due to personal accounts of living with high functioning mental disorders being written about on high profile blogs, social media magazines, and editorial columns of prominent online news websites.

High functioning depression and anxiety, when looked at with a more clinical eye, is signified by general compensation and coping, coupled with controlled periods of decompensation. These periods of decompensation often occur in private locations, from the home to the bathroom of the subject’s office, and often include emotional outbursts, suicidal thoughts, somatic expression (such as headaches, dizziness, gastrointestinal upset, panic attacks, hives), controlled substance abuse, hypersensitivity, rigid structuring of social and work activities, and instability or inconsistency in socializing. High functioning individuals are often bright, successful, driven people who excel at their work and personal lives, externally.

Often, periods of decompensation will still look more or less ‘normal’ on the surface, as it is presented to the world. Deadlines will still be met, work will still be acceptable, appearances at events and participation in activities will occur. The truth behind this is another matter entirely. Sleepless nights, large amounts of compounded stress, emotional breakdowns, and periods of
hopelessness or panic attacks increase, fraying the individual psychologically and making it more and more difficult to put themselves back together.

The danger with this type of expression is that high functioning individuals often reach a point of critical mass and enter into a psychological crisis without ever alerting their community support networks or feeling that they can reach out for help. The pressure of knowing that everyone sees them in a powerfully juxtaposed way to what their internal truth is can be crippling and make them less likely to get care that could save their lives.

Perspective on Definition/Energetic Viewpoints

From a more western herbal medicine lens, the average person that would be deemed ‘high functioning’ tends toward the adrenal-excess constitutional type as defined by Michael Moore. The secondary symptoms following decompensation are also consistent with secondary conditions that go hand in hand with this constitutional type, specifically headaches, fatigue, and gastrointestinal deficiency.

Though it varies by practitioner, the most common phytotherapeutic treatment strategy for depression and anxiety is the administration of plants with nervine and adaptogenic actions, with a recent emphasis on adaptogens. This can have a wide range of physiological and psychological effects, including improved overall mood, dramatic reduction in symptoms, and even the structural repair of the myelin sheaths that coat nerves.

Energetically, people who suffer from high functioning depression and anxiety would be considered to have an excess in Wind or Air. This is often visualized as the mind being in a cage of its own making, surrounded by illusions and false or baseless emotion. Calming this element is often accomplished by working with fragrant oils such as the essential oil of lavender, which has been clinically proven to reduce stress and anxiety, grounding and meditation along with boundary management through plants like yarrow or skullcap, and working with roots like chicory or burdock, which can help anchor the mind to the world and disperse the air clouding it.

Response to Traditional Psych Meds/Treatment Schedules

Often, the goal of many forms of cognitive and behavioral therapies is to help the patient develop coping mechanisms and supportive, self analytical thinking in order to bring a measure of control and stability back to that person’s life. These therapies, while very effective in many chronic major depressive and anxiety disorders, can often fall flat when being applied to someone who would be considered ‘high functioning’. These individuals have already developed elaborate coping mechanisms that allow them to remain mostly present in general society, and though they would benefit from learning more healthy and less self destructive
methodologies, the process isn't as specifically addressing their personal struggle as much as it would be with a more conventional depressed or anxious person.

The western psychological approach to chronic mental illness is also one that promotes adaptation and not true healing. The chemical imbalances of depression and anxiety are seen as unchanging, something to be dealt with as best as possible. They are managed with medication and therapy so that the person can return to functioning society and experience adjustment. This can be off the mark for someone who is high functioning, because they are already in a fugue state where they have a foot in the pool of normal life and the other foot in the well of deep depression.

Often, psychiatric pharmaceuticals also bring the mind up to a plateau state, giving breathing room but not assisting with an elevation of mood beyond that. The plateau of the norm is the desired result of a medication protocol, and the elevation of joy or happiness seems to be somewhat secondary.

**Harm Reduction**

The psychological state that surrounds individuals with high functioning depression and anxiety is generally quite fragile, and often they are either currently seeking treatment or have managed to work out coping mechanisms on their own. Large structural shifts and change can be dangerous, tipping them from the precarious balance that they survive by. Therefore, harm reduction may be the pace and path to take in treatment, given the tremulous nature of their psyche.

Working with plants such as lemon balm, skullcap, albizia, kava, chamomile, and CA poppy can assist and aid common psych meds without causing potentially dangerous contraindications. Phytotherapy in general, when used as complementary medicine, can bring safe, non addictive, gentle elevation in mood and reduction of anxiety, while simultaneously reducing side effect symptoms from many common psychiatric pharmaceuticals.

Additional complementary practices can also have a profound effect in supporting someone with high functioning anxiety and depression through their daily struggles. These people are, by default, creatures of ritual and structure, and should therefore be more inclined to incorporate more healthy ritual and structure into their daily lives. Some examples would be alternative practices to help mitigate their times of decompensation such as prayer or meditation, small but preventative self care which can include keeping a favorite herbal tea they enjoy on hand or a soothing scent, and setting aside time normally spent in decompensation in a cleansing space such as a bath.
Holistic Approach

As a counterbalance to the normalcy and plateau-like emphasis of allopathic treatment, a more holistic plan of care should embrace the ability to treat both acute periods of decompensation and more low priority periods of compensation, all the while addressing many of the common somatic expressions of high functioning depression and anxiety.

One of the most profound and important concepts to focus on when you are working with these individuals is the ability to offer relief or reprieve from their ongoing struggle. Soothing secondary symptoms or even those small moments of happiness from something as simple as pleasant smells or favorite teas can have a very beneficial effect. They are fighting a constant internal war with their own minds and hearts, any lull in the battle can mean more to them than can be easily communicated. This is why a specific nervine formula with Mimosa (*Albizia julibrissin*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa o.*), and Kava (*Piper methysticum*) administered as an acute drop dose formula can become a vital tool to help guide the patient to wellness, putting positive control and healing into their own hands during the times when it seems their light might go out. All three of these plants were shown in clinical trials to have quick, efficient positive action on patients with both mild to moderate clinical depression and anxiety. Energetically, mimosa and lemon balm are plants high in volatile oils, while kava is considered a grounding root, treating the excess of Air as well as the more physiological aspects of decompensation cycles.

A more tonic formula would include St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), Mimosa (*Albizia julibrissin*), Rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*), and California Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*). These plants have been shown in clinical trials to significantly improve mood and adjustment for those suffering from mild to moderate depression, even with as little as two weeks of moderate dosing in some cases and to lasting effect.

As a cold infusion, chamomile (*Matricaria*), tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), rose (*Rosa*), marshmallow (*Althea officinalis*), and cinnamon (*Cinnamomum cassia*) can be helpful in settling the somatic stress responses of the gastrointestinal system, allow for more efficient hydration, and provide extra nervine support throughout the day. It is easily prepared and can be made in a normal water bottle.

It is key to provide tools that give the normalcy of control and ability to function to the patient while soothing and uplifting their harried nervous systems, endocrine systems, and gastrointestinal systems.
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