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A Checklist for Clinicians Working with High-Functioning Clients Who May Be Hiding Substance Use

Use this tool to identify hidden patterns of addiction masked by achievement, perfectionism, or productivity—and support clients in exploring distress beneath the performance.

WHEN PERFORMANCE MASKS ADDICTION

USE THIS TOOL TO HELP IDENTIFY CLIENTS WHOSE SUBSTANCE USE IS HIDDEN BEHIND HIGH ACHIEVEMENT, PRODUCTIVITY, OR EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION.

PRESENTING CLUES

CONSIDER WHETHER THE CLIENT:

- ☐ MAINTAINS HIGH PRODUCTIVITY DESPITE REPORTED SLEEP OR HEALTH ISSUES
- ☐ DESCRIBES A RELENTLESS WORK ETHIC WITH NO TIME FOR REST OR HOBBIES
- ☐ REPORTS ANXIETY OR IRRITABILITY WHEN NOT PERFORMING OR ACHIEVING
- ☐ HAS A HISTORY OF PERFECTIONISM OR OVERFUNCTIONING IN FAMILY ROLES
- ☐ PRESENTS AS EMOTIONALLY FLAT, OVERLY POLISHED, OR TIGHTLY SELF-CONTROLLED

WHAT YOU MIGHT HEAR

LISTEN FOR STATEMENTS LIKE:

- ☐ "I ONLY USE TO UNWIND—EVERYONE NEEDS SOMETHING."
- ☐ "I'VE NEVER MISSED WORK. I'M IN CONTROL."
- ☐ "AS LONG AS I'M PERFORMING, IT DOESN'T MATTER."
- ☐ "PEOPLE RELY ON ME. I DON'T HAVE THE LUXURY OF BREAKING DOWN."

WHAT TO EXPLORE FURTHER

USE THESE PROMPTS TO DEEPEN ASSESSMENT:

- ☐ HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU'RE NOT BUSY OR WORKING?
- ☐ WHAT DOES "RELAXATION" OR "SELF-CARE" LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?
- ☐ WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF OTHERS SAW YOU STRUGGLING?
- ☐ ARE THERE TIMES WHEN YOU'VE USED SUBSTANCES TO STAY PRODUCTIVE?

SUBTLE SIGNS OF FUNCTIONAL IMPAIRMENT

EVEN IF CLIENTS DENY CONSEQUENCES, ASSESS FOR:

- ☐ BURNOUT OR PHYSICAL FATIGUE
- ☐ USE OF SUBSTANCES TO INITIATE OR SUSTAIN FOCUS
- ☐ EMOTIONAL DISCONNECTION FROM RELATIONSHIPS
- ☐ INCREASED TOLERANCE OR USING "JUST TO FEEL NORMAL"

TIP FOR CLINICIANS: HIGH-FUNCTIONING CLIENTS OFTEN NEED HELP SEPARATING THEIR WORTH FROM THEIR OUTPUT. VALIDATING THEIR STRENGTHS WHILE GENTLY EXPLORING HIDDEN DISTRESS IS KEY.

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