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The Highly Sensitive Person

Do you often feel "too sensitive", anxious or exhausted?
Would you consider yourself highly emotional, intuitive or easily overwhelmed?
Perhaps you are introverted or need lots of alone time?

If so, you may be a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), a genetic trait found in 15-20% of the population. Being Highly Sensitive creates an advantage of being able to live, love and feel deeply, but can often lead to feeling over-stimulated and misunderstood.

What is the HSP Trait?

According to research by Elaine Aron (hsperson.com), High Sensitivity, or Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), is an innate trait equally dispersed among all gender identities. It is a variation that allows the nervous system and brain to process subtleties and details that most miss. This once lifesaving evolutionary tool has become an over-stimulating burden in the modern world where there are high amounts of stimuli to process at all times.

How do I know if I am a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP)?

High Sensitivity can manifest in many ways, but generally shows up as the following four characteristics (D.O.E.S) that are present across the lifespan:

D - Depth of Processing

The Highly Sensitive brain has a more active insula, the part of the brain that helps enhance perception and increase self-awareness. HSPs are also wired to pause and reflect before engaging. Therefore, HSPs are always taking in a lot of information around them and thinking deeply about it. This may result in slower decision making and more transition time between tasks.

O - Overstimulation

Since HSPs notice more subtle details in their environments and are more emotionally impacted by social stimulation, it makes sense that they are more likely to get overstimulated and exhausted by high levels of input.

E - Emotional Responsiveness/Empathy

Brain scans have shown that HSPs have more active mirror neurons which are responsible for feelings of empathy for others and more activity in areas that are involved with emotional responses. HSPs feel both positive and negative emotions more intensely than non-HSPs.

S - Sensitive to Subtleties/Sensory Stimuli

HSPs notice subtle details that others miss such as non-verbal cues and small changes in their environment. They are also more impacted by strong sensory input such as bright lights, loud noises, strong smells or rough textures.

Common HSP Challenges

Many of the struggles of being Highly Sensitive are due to being overstimulated and emotionally exhausted. These challenges are easily remedied with more downtime and access to regulation tools.

- **Easily Overwhelmed**

You feel easily flustered or overwhelmed in many areas of your life. This could show up as general anxiety, chronic digestive issues, exhaustion, poor concentration or lowered immune functioning. Even pleasant experiences can be stressful such as transitioning into a new relationship or living situation.

- **Anxiety and Depression**

Symptoms of Anxiety and depression are common, especially when there is a lack of secure attachment during childhood and meaningful adult relationships.

- **Emotional Intensity**

HSPs feel more emotional in response to both positive and negative events, as well as pick up on the emotions of others.

- **Shyness and Social Anxiety**

Shyness or social anxiety, mostly due to the intensity of large gatherings, can be a problem. HSPs typically enjoy one-on-one interactions and prefer meaningful connections.

- **Guilt and Difficulty with Boundaries**

Setting boundaries and dealing with conflict is often uncomfortable. Due to a high capacity for empathy, HSPs often feel guilt for saying "no" and are worried about hurting others.

- **Struggle with Transitions and Decisions**

Since the HSP brain is wired to inhibit action, there is a struggle with transitions and difficulty making quick decisions. There needs to be time to reflect before taking action. Even positive transitions such as getting a promotion or starting a new relationship can be difficult to integrate.

- **Dislike Small Talk and Bored Easily in Relationships**

Small talk is dissatisfying and perhaps boring to you. Relationships are very important, so you dive in quickly and feel more connected with someone only when they get vulnerable or emotional. However, boredom or disappointment in relationships can surface when connections are superficial or intimate partners are slower to reciprocate emotional attachment.

- **Low Self-Esteem and Feeling Misunderstood**

Loneliness can also be a big struggle for Sensitive types. A common experience is feeling misunderstood or different from family and peers which can lead to low self-esteem.

- **Delayed Milestones**

Feeling behind or slower to hit milestones is often seen in Highly Sensitive People. It is not uncommon for HSPs to go through several career changes or get married later in life.

- **Work Stress and Challenges**

Feeling unfulfilled, over-stimulated or burned out at work is a huge challenge for HSPs and can contribute to multiple career changes.

- **Failure to Prioritize Self**

Tendency to self-sacrifice and difficulty identifying needs leads to feelings of anger, resentment and frustration for the HSP.

- **Sensory Sensitivity**

Certain types of external stimuli bother you. This could include bright lights, loud noises, social stimulation, crowded buses, quickly flashing movie screens, strong smells and/or rough textures. You cover your ears when an ambulance or fire engine passes by, often cut the tags out of your clothing, and/or feel hyped from consuming caffeine or dark chocolate.

Sensitive Strengths

When Highly Sensitive People are living a lifestyle suitable for their temperament, which includes adequate downtime, meaningful connections and time to integrate experiences, they are able to access many of the gifts that their highly perceptive brains and heightened emotional capacity afford.

- **Notice Subtleties**

You notice little details that others may miss, such as subtle body language or small changes to an environment. You are the first to notice if your friend gets a new haircut or if someone is upset.

- **Progress Quickly**

Due to vantage sensitivity, HSPs respond more to positive interventions and will progress quickly in therapy.

- **Feel Everything Deeply**

Even the little moments can bring HSPs great joy, as they feel everything deeply and are easily moved. Compared to others, you tend to feel events more deeply and for longer periods of time. Perhaps you are the first to cry during a movie or have vivid dreams that will linger with you for days.

- **Love Nature and Animals**

Sensitive people are often deeply spiritual and feel connected to nature and animals.

- **Conscientious and Thoughtful**

Having a tendency to be conscientious and honest leads to a commitment to doing things the right way.

- **Empathetic and Caring**

HSPs are very caring, empathetic and emotionally responsive towards the needs of others.

- **Intuitive and Perceptive**

Heightened perception, insight and intuition allow the Highly Sensitive Person to notice nonverbal cues and pick up subtle nuances.

- **Creative and Imaginative**

Being creative and introspective with a tendency to have vivid dreams creates a rich inner world for HSPs.

Common Misperceptions about HSPs

High Sensitivity is the Same as Introversion

- **Truth:** Approximately 30% of HSPs are extroverts while some are also High Sensation Seekers (HSS) who need higher levels of novelty to feel satisfied.

Only Women are HSPs

- **Truth:** This trait exists equally among all gender identities.

Sensitivity is a Disorder

Truth: Sensory Processing Sensitivity is a normal temperament variation.

HSPs are Inherently Anxious, Shy and Neurotic

- **Truth:** Due to vantage sensitivity, when HSPs are in the right environment and getting their needs met, they tend to thrive and exhibit many valuable traits such as enhanced perception, empathy, creativity and detail-orientation.

High Sensitivity is a Result of Adverse Childhood Experiences

- **Truth:** Although difficult childhood experiences such as misattunement, neglect or abuse do not cause a person to be highly sensitive, HSPs are more prone to depression or anxiety, shyness and neuroticism when these conditions exist due to their differential susceptibility.