

Highly Sensitive Persons Toolkit for Navigating Life

Are you or someone you know a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), or maybe even an Empath? These days much of my work is dedicated to helping HSP/Empaths develop tools and techniques that help them navigate day-to-day life. You may not realize this, but you are surrounded by HSP/Empaths; they may be in your family, at work, or in your social circle. Today's newsletter is all about learning who HSP/Empaths are and to help you understand how their brains work to process life.

In 1907 Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology, defined 8 different Personality Types as part of his Personality Theory. You may be familiar with Myers-Briggs personality indicators often used in corporations to better understand employee work styles and strengths; these tests are based on the Personality Theory posed by Dr. Jung.

Fast forward to 1991 when Dr. Elaine Aron, a graduate of the Carl Jung institute, after much research identified a personality type that speaks not just to how a particular personality thinks, but also to how they respond to external stimuli; in so doing, she coined the phrase **Highly Sensitive Person (HSP)**.

It is important to note that this is not a disorder, HSP traits are considered normal. According to thousands of research studies, it is estimated that up to 20% of the population meets the definition of an HSP. However, while 20% of the population is quite a lot of people, they are still not a large enough number to be understood by the majority.

If we want to approach this from a Biologists perspective, we find even more research indicating that HSP traits are found in plenty of species, including birds, fish, dogs, cats, horses, and primates. Biologists believe there may be more than 100 species with these traits, they just have not been studied yet. The belief is that these traits reflect a certain type of survival strategy.

Whether you approach it from Biology or Psychology the conclusion is the same: the brains of highly sensitive people actually work a little differently than others.

In case you still don't know whether you or someone you know is an HSP/Empath, here is a list of some of the traits you can test yourself on:

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| You don't like crowds. | Strong or unusual smells bother you. |
| You are affected by other people's moods. | Bright lights and loud sounds bother you. |
| You dislike being rushed. | You tend to have performance anxiety when being micro-managed, observed, or judged. |
| You are deeply touched by beauty, art, music, and delicate things. | Being hungry makes you moody and shaky. |
| Your mind is always going, which often makes it difficult to fall asleep. | You hold yourself to high standards and tend to be very self-critical. |

The more of these statements that apply to you, the more HSP that you are.

Ok, so now we have a better understanding of what an HSP is. But what about Empaths? Let me start by saying that all Empaths are HSP but not all HSP are Empaths. There is only one character trait that differentiates an Empath from an HSP: the deep desire, almost compulsion, to help others. Empaths have a need to help and sometimes try to heal those in pain, even if they themselves are in pain.

HSP/Empaths are often in some kind of pain, moody, overwhelmed, and often have been diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression. HSPs and Empaths can pick-up how those around them are feeling (physically, emotionally, and mentally). This is why many HSP/Empaths are loners, or tend to be in a corner when there is a social event or meeting taking place. If they sit next to someone who has a headache, they walk out feeling that person's headache and everyone else's ailments, frustrations, confusions...all of it; simply too much to take in. This is why many HSP/Empaths feel burdened, cursed, sick, or see it as a weakness.

Let's put it in data terms. According to Dr. Joe Dispenza, **our brains process 400 Billion bits of information per second**. However, the speed at which our neurons fire only allows us to **consciously be aware of 2,000 bits of information per second**; which is not even 1% of the information we are constantly bombarded with. The non-HSP/Empath's brain is happy with only being consciously aware of 1% of the information input. However, the HSP/Empath brain tries to process everything: the coffee being poured by the waitress, the chewing sounds from the person sitting across from them, the smell of the type of oil their food was cooked with, the color of the overcooked vegetables, the sound of the game being played by the child a few tables away, the texture of the ripped material of the chair they are sitting on, the temperature that feels too hot or too cold, the bright sunlight streaming through the window of the restaurant, the sound of the fire engine siren from a couple of blocks away...and so on, a brain trying to process 400 Billion bits of information per second. It is no wonder that HSP/Empaths tend to be constantly overwhelmed. And remember, these are two out of every ten people you know, work with, play with, and live with.

Being an Empath myself, I have had to learn and even develop tools and techniques to be able to navigate life in a healthy, joyful, and successful manner. Yes, every one of the earlier statements describing HSP traits applies to me, but I have learned to use my toolkit. I do offer a class that helps HSP/Empaths create their own toolkits, but for the purpose of this newsletter, allow me to offer just a couple of what I call "pause & re-group" techniques that have helped me in both work and social environments.

When I find myself becoming overwhelmed by a situation, I will excuse myself and find a place to **mindfully** wash my hands. I focus on the temperature of the water, the smooth lather created by the gentle rubbing of soap on my hands, the patterns made by the water rinsing that lather off my hands. It takes all of one minute and I am back to center and ready to re-engage.

Another "pause & re-group" technique is the single breath. I will step away from a gathering with the excuse of getting a drink of water. But what I really do is just find a spot where I can stand still, inhale deeply, and then very, very slowly exhale. This type of breath allows my cortisol levels to go down and allows me to access both hemispheres of my brain equally. Now, breathing normally I can walk back to the meeting and re-engage.

And just one more for good measure. If I can't step to the side or find a place to wash my hands, I reach for the distraction technique. I simply look around the room and find something stationary and with

color or design that I can focus my attention on. Often this is a flower in the vase on the table, or a painting or picture on the wall, or even the pattern of the table cloth or carpet on the floor. Once I have selected my distraction item, I simply observe it. I look at the color, the design, the texture. Let's say I choose a flower. I will notice the shape and color of its petals, how the light reflects off its surface, notice whether it is alive or if it's starting to wilt, is there any scent coming from it, and finally I make a judgement of whether I find it pretty or not. All of this takes about 10 seconds (I have timed it several times). In the process of focusing my attention on one simple thing, I allow my brain to turn down the volume on all the other input; it gives me a chance to pause before I re-engage.

If you find these "pause & re-group" techniques helpful, please visit the "Free Resources" page on my website at marthasoriasears.com/free-resources. In this tab you will find meditations and other audio files, and a PDF titled "Empath's Toolkit" which has over a dozen techniques for HSP/Empaths.

Finally, if you found this brief helpful, please consider hosting my class "The HSP/Empath's Toolkit". It is offered in person in parts of Oregon and Washington, and also offered via webinar or teleconference.

To your joyous success,

Martha Soria Sears