

Understanding and living as a highly sensitive person (hsp)

As a child I remember playing in the fields behind the village where I grew up, all the local kids played there. One day some older boys started bullying a boy from my class (we were about 5 at the time) and I waded in to defend him. For years after that I could never work out what possessed me to do that at such a young age, was I born with a sense of fighting for injustice? I now know it was because I am what they label a highly sensitive person, I pick up other people's emotions really easily and when I felt that boy's fear I had to step in and stop it – as much to help myself as him. In later years I coped by learning how to detach myself from my emotions so as not to become overwhelmed. These are common characteristics of a HSP – either feel overwhelmed by emotions or shut off from them. A lot of hsp's then become overwhelmed by the fear of being overwhelmed, and get stressed about any potential danger before it happens.

HSPs have also been proven to be physically more sensitive than average – it's like everything is magnified. Being around bright lights or noise for too long becomes unbearable, changes in temperature or a lack of food can make you ill – the list goes on. It's like we are calibrated more finely, and as such it becomes like trying to measure a mile in millimetres while everyone else is using yards. Of course this would be great and those skills are excellent for some things, the problem is that our society is geared towards the less sensitive souls – the people who can easily keep working at a fast pace for a long time, who can work in bright noisy offices and don't notice the negative emotions flying round. Sadly anyone not like this is often told there is something wrong with them – they are too sensitive/ shy/ weak/ unable to cope. I like to think it's like asking a racehorse to pull a plough and then berating it for not doing it as well as a carthorse. The down side is that hsp's in the wrong circumstances are prone to stress, and easily become very ill with it. Most people I meet who are stressed are hsp's.

The other main characteristic of hsp's is that they naturally think of things from all angles so they can decide the best way forward and be prepared for everything. In ancient times we were the advisors who's tribe depended on our decision, and now we sometimes still can feel like the world will end if we make the wrong choice. This is huge source of stress, and a lot of the time it is getting stuck here that overwhelms hsp's. Learn how to stop your thoughts before they get in too much of a spin (see my article on how to stop worrying). Often just reassuring yourself the world won't end if you get it wrong is enough.

But enough of the good stuff - one of my favourite phrases is 'the world is how it is but who are you in it?', and this is never more true than for a hsp. This is the world we live in and sadly we are in a minority, so finding a way to cope and be the best you can be is very important. It is also very easy once you know how, this article will help you find out how.

The first step is realizing it is actually a gift being a hsp, and all the quirks attached to it are part and parcel of it. Our natural tendency is to take in all information and process it very quickly to find the best way forward so you are great at analyzing situations and offering advice. Similarly you will notice problems before anyone else as you will spot small changes in a system before others. You will also notice changes in other people's emotions so can tell if someone is telling the truth, or if they are hiding distress. Having empathy helps

others to trust you and talk to you. In the right conditions a hsp can literally do magic, and then when stressed or bored go downhill very quickly, and sometimes become disruptive. Hsp's are your deep thinkers, your inventors, artists and carers. They also are motivated to make the world a better place. Not a bad person to be really! And yet...unfortunately most hsp's are in the stressed mode and are just angry, withdrawn or disruptive. Because we can get so overwhelmed we try to protect ourselves from more bombardment from the world, and lash out or withdraw from it. This is because no-one has taught us how to dump the overload and prevent it from rebuilding again.

The second step is learning how to be confident and proud of who you are – and accept that it is fine being this way. So many famous and great people are hsp – the ones who are gifted yet shun the limelight, in fact many world leaders were hsp (sadly the warrior type are being voted in these days). Work on your self-esteem and be you, not who you think you should be, or who others tell you you should be. Hsp's tend to love learning and reading books – get some of the many books that help you boost your confidence (I will put a list at the end).

The third step is learning the best ways for you to relax and let go of all the negative emotions you soak up. A lot of the time you feel bad you are more likely to be feeling other people's bad emotions that you have soaked up and held onto. Hsp's tend to recharge their batteries when alone, if you feel like you need to get away when things get too much you are probably hsp. The most powerful tool is silence in a darkened room, total absence of stimulation, but we don't often get chance to do that unless we are forced to by a migraine!

As a simplified way to explain this step - say you work best with stress levels under 5 out of 10, then starting the day off at 0 gives you more to play with before overload than starting at 3, and likewise if you start reducing your stress levels when they reach 3 then you are less likely to get over 5. Being in control and able to notice when your stress levels rise is an important part of being comfortable in this world. I highly recommend you research relaxation techniques and find what works best for you, but here are some things I have found useful:

- Meditate in a morning, it starts you off at 0 and once you get good at it you can meditate and reduce your stress anywhere. By meditation I mean finding time alone to be silent, and do something you love at the start of the day. Just as hsp's can get overloaded by other's emotions, they can also easily fill themselves with great emotions.
- Take time out alone regularly throughout the day – at work go to the bathroom for 5 mins just to reduce the amount of stimulation around you. Similarly if possible find a room you can work in alone, eg go into a meeting room to avoid distractions (it's easier to say to people you want to concentrate than you are feeling overloaded!).
- Make sure you take proper breaks at lunch time and work on reducing your stress – walk or read something inspiring.
- Use flower remedies. I have no idea how they work but they do – Bach flowers Rescue Remedy helps you relax.
- Get some Fox Mountain Flower Essence in Safe boundaries – again I'm not sure how it works but it cleanses you of other people's emotions and helps protect you from soaking up more. ([click here to buy](#))
- Do 10 slow, deep breathes

- Write – somehow it helps release emotions to write and work through it.
- Carry an MP3 player with music that soothes you, and a guided meditation to listen to if needed (I have a 7 min one that works a treat)
- If you are feeling bombarded by other people’s emotions remember something that makes you feel good, or imagine a white light filling you up and pushing out other people’s emotions.
- Repeat a positive statement like I am calm, or I am strong.
- Daydream a time you felt relaxed or happy – if you make it life-size, colour, moving and as if you are actually there it will be stronger.
- I have found carrying quotes with me help – for me it was ‘the world is how it is but who am I in it’ that worked best. Alternatively find an inspiring book to read.
- Remind yourself it is OK to feel how you do and is the other side to your gift.
- When you get caught in a negative spin, and trying to cover all angles, remind yourself the world won’t end if you just go with the flow. Choose to relax instead. Let it go.
- Learn how to control your thoughts so you can stop stressing yourself out.
- You also need to remember that the majority of people will just not get how you are, and it can be unfair to be annoyed at them for not being considerate. You are really being fearful of them adding to your overwhelmed-ness, which is overwhelming in itself!
- Rather than bending to fit everyone else – find where you fit perfectly being you – you deserve that.
- Keep examples of people who are like you – even if they are authors of books or people you haven’t met – they are still real and remind you you are not alone. There are lots of hsp’s you just haven’t met yet.
- Have a ‘tool kit of relaxation’ with you – the flower essences, pictures, books, a notebook, an mp3 player with music and a guided meditation, aromatherapy balms – anything that relaxes you, and also add in painkillers – when you get overloaded a headache can be hard to shift. Likewise add a health bar as going without food for too long can stress you out. Sometimes just knowing it is there helps you cope better.

Once you find a niche where being yourself is applauded then it really is great being a hsp, and you really can do even more magic than you already are. I hope you get there.

Recommended reading:

All the HSP books by Elaine Aaron (www.hsperson.com)
 The Survival guide for Highly Sensitive People by Ted Zeff
 Making work work for the highly sensitive person by Barrie Jaeger
 The Sensitive Person’s Survival guide by Kyra Mesich
 Solitude by Anthony Storr

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