



Gault's Therapy

Overview of the
Highly Sensitive

Personality

(HSP)

By providing an overview of this personality trait and sharing some techniques and skills, we aim to help support, manage and empower highly sensitive people and identify the challenges faced by those caring for a highly sensitive child. This information is collected from research, literature and our many years of experience in counselling highly sensitive people and through our own personal experiences.

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Experiences of the HSP

"When I look back on my childhood, I realise I've always felt 'uncomfortable in my own skin'. I mean this in a physical sense. It wasn't only that my clothes touched or scratched. I felt discomfort in almost every environment. I didn't like the rain, wind, snow or sun on my face. My shoes always felt hot and tight. The sensual pleasure most of my friends and family got from being barefoot on the sand, grass or paddling in cool water on a summer's day baffled me. My physical presence on earth, for me, had to be endured."

Kim - 56 years

"My girlfriend loves parties, birthday parties, Christmas parties or any kind of party! I do too, to a point. I find it exhausting. I always want to leave earlier than her. It's not that I don't enjoy socializing; I do, but I often feel that it's all too much sometimes. My girlfriend and I have been together long enough now for her to know that I prefer small groups and quiet music. I can handle that. I guess relationships are all about compromise."

Cameron - 34 years

"What really bugs me is when my boss wanders around behind me when I'm trying to get on with work. It makes me nervous and self-conscious. At times, I have felt so uncomfortable and distracted that I've had to leave the office for a while just to get myself together. I asked for a meeting with her to explain how I felt, and she seemed to understand. I spent ages trying to think of how to put it without sounding rude."

Sara - 24 years

"School was more difficult for me than it was for my brothers. I was clever enough, but my teachers described me as oversensitive, and I think they were right. If I close my eyes now, I can smell the chalky wood smell of my first classroom. I can also smell the overcooked potato smell of the dinner hall. It sounds strange but I was actually afraid of certain smells if they were particularly strong. I felt overwhelmed by them. I would cry and refuse to enter the dinner hall. As I also wanted to please my teachers and make my parents happy, I found myself distraught at times."

Matthew - 43 years

Who we are?

We are Jackie Adler and Christine Gault both independent psychotherapists endorsed as Highly Sensitive Aware Practitioner's, listed on Dr Elaine Aron's Website.

We have developed a therapeutic package, the CARE approach, to support the HSP. This approach is based on four basic principles:

Confirmation

Acceptance

Reorganise

Empowerment

It is vital to understand that each person is unique, with individual life experience, patterns of behaviour, mental health, culture and social-economic environments. Traits are prominent at higher and lower levels; problems can differ and strategies that work for some may not work for others. We have selected what we consider to be the main issues attributed to the Highly Sensitive Person and strategies we have found most helpful.

Distinguishing

Characteristics of HSP

HSPs are extremely creative, passionate, empathic, emotional and intuitive people with a broader range of social behaviours than those without the trait.

- Often prefer to watch and observe before entering a new situation.
- Notice small changes such as chairs being placed in a slightly different angle in a room.
- Find it difficult or are slower at making decisions as we consider all options and outcomes.
- Are very aware of other people's moods.
- Often conscientious
- Concerned about social justice and taking care of the environment.
- Easily overstimulated, sometimes leading to poorer performance.
- Highly creative and enjoy the arts.
- Have a strong sense or interest in spirituality.
- React more emotionally than others.
- Find change or transition unduly difficult.
- Experience vivid dreams.
- Shy or tried to be invisible as a child.
- Find artificial environments difficult e.g., fluorescent lights
- Stimulated by physical sensitivities such as noise, smell, crowds, allergies and pain.
- Tend to make suggestion rather than be direct in conflict.
- Experience nature as healing.

The 4 Facets of HSP

Depth of Processing

- Processing emotional situations very deeply
- Giving careful and thorough analysis to decisions/tasks/situations sometimes to the point of being unable to make or take action.
- Considering the big picture
- Over-thinking to an excessive level
- Being extremely conscientious
- May be considered insightful, seek spirituality to understand life on a deeper level

Over Arousal

- Life feels out of balance. May suffer from anxiety, stress, headaches and migraines
- Have a low tolerance for high-level sensory input
- Can be easily fatigued yet have trouble sleeping
- Will seriously avoid conflict and take criticism to heart

Emotional Intensity

- Have strong emotional responses, are highly empathic and intuitive, very reactive to an emotional environment
- Can find negativity overwhelming
- Can have a keen imagination
- May have low self-esteem and can cry easily
- May have low emotional boundaries
- Will require meaningful work and relationships

Sensory Sensitivity

- Will react to physical environmental conditions, notice details and subtle changes.
- Are sensitive to a range of stimuli food/fabric/comfort

Extraversion and Sensation Seeking

30% of HSP are extroverts. HSPs are similar to other extroverts, yet unlike most, we may get overwhelmed by stimulation and need to withdraw and recharge. This may lead others to believe they are neurotic or fragile in spite of their sociability.

Elaine Aron believes that we are not born being introverted or extraverted it is something that we learn or adopt according to our social/family experience. Whereas, she believes sensation seekers have that trait at birth. Therefore, sensation seekers can be extravert or introvert. Both will be very careful to ensure safety is a priority.

Highly sensation seekers (HSS)

Sensation seeking in the HSP can be described as 'one foot on the brake, and the other on the gas' This aspect of HSP was established by Marvin Zuckerman (1994) who defined it as:

"Seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience."

These include:

Physical adventure: a desire to engage in risky activities such as sports or other physical activities that provide unusual sensations of speed or defiance of gravity, such as parachuting, scuba diving, or skiing.

Experience adventure: seeking of novel sensations and experiences through the mind and senses, as in arousing music, art, and travel, and through social nonconformity, as in association with groups on the fringes of conventional society.

Disinhibiting: sensation-seeking through social activities like parties, social drinking, and sex.

Boredom intolerance: repetitive experience of any kind, including routine work, unstimulating conversation.

There is a conflict in HSP as they are constrained by the need to plan and assess consequences yet have a desire to seek out sensation. The main issue may arise with the 'risk-taking and impulsivity' aspects.

It is therefore important that HSP with HSS have a high level of understanding of this trait and self-awareness.

For those with the drive to explore, create, and experience new and novel stimulation the rewards may be a discovery of new technologies, new ideas, and new processes.

HSP and Environment

With heightened emotions, sensory sensitivity and deep inner processing, it is easy to become emotionally and physically overwhelmed.

In fact, on a sensory level, the HSP feels more intensely and more deeply than others. Many HSPs, particularly children, easily react to changes in air pressure and environmental pollution. For example, they may experience an aching body or headache before a thunderstorm or find themselves sleeping deeply. Indeed temperature, space and ventilation are the main prerequisites for the HSP. Though smell and noise such as perfume, food smells, background music or dripping taps can also invade the environment and (in extreme cases) can cause the HSP pain.

Clothes can be an issue particularly in childhood where the child will take shoes and socks off and complain they are too tight or uncomfortable. Tags and labels from clothes particularly from the back of the neck will cause irritation and distress.

HSPs tend to be extra sensitive to medication but tend to respond well to alternative therapies and a holistic approach to their ailments. When an HSP teenager embarks on the decision to indulge in alcohol or drug abuse their depth of processing with regards to the decision especially the risk involved often holds them back.

By the time the child becomes an adult, they will have developed their own strategies for dealing with being overwhelmed physically and emotionally. Their strategies may be healthy such as meditation, yoga and giving themselves space (timeout). However, without any guidance, they may develop unhealthy habits such as social withdrawal, medication (including alcohol) and destructive patterns of behaviour.

It is well documented that many HSP go onto suffer stress or idiopathic illness such as Migraines, Chronic Fatigue and Fibromyalgia.

Communication

For the HSP, especially as a child there is a fine line between excitement and anxiety. For instance, they may be very excited about being invited to a birthday party. This excitement can then be overwhelming to the point they become ill beforehand and have to cancel.

Alternatively, they find the 'entertainer' frightening, or they try and hide from the noise and party chaos. It is possible to be unaware that the child is overwhelmed with emotion as they may not know how to express themselves and may appear quiet and withdrawn, resulting in feelings of disappointment and isolation. It is difficult at a young age to maintain a divide between external and internal influences resulting in becoming overstimulated.

Most children go through a period of asking 'why' such as, 'why do I need to brush my teeth?', 'why is the moon in the sky?' or 'what happens when you die?'. With the HS child it is the depth of their question that is surprising. The difference is that the HS child thinks deeply about the world, life, death and spirituality. Later at school age they may be told they 'read too much into things' or "are too intense" or "need to stop asking questions".

HSP adults seek deep and long-lasting friendships with one or two people. They may have many friends, but the level of connection will often be more superficial. The HSP will work hard at friendships and be an empathic, loyal friend to others. However, they may be disappointed at the level of trust and loyalty they are given in return. Indeed, the HSP has a high benchmark on friendships or those that they let into their inner circle.

Eating and Drinking

Often a highly sensitive child is considered a fussy eater. Though on investigation it is often the smell or texture of different foods that they find difficult rather than the taste. It is also worth mentioning that the smell of the school dining room or the noise can be off-putting especially if the dining hall doubles as a Gym hall.

As adults, we are able to discern foods, which we eat or avoid. However, it is perhaps useful to try foods in different environments before we expel them from our diet entirely. Indeed, ethical or moral aspects may impact an HSPs diet as we often care and have an infinity with the environment, which may influence food choices.

Working and Playing

It is often difficult to differentiate between the emotions a young child will experience. A difficult transition such as a new school will impact the highly sensitive child as they have a highly tuned sensory system with strong empathic abilities so will notice everything in the environment. This severe degree of change can be overwhelming for the child.

HS children often feel responsibility to care for other children and become sad if another child is sad. When they see a child behave badly or breaking boundaries they can get upset, confused and worry about them being in trouble or punished. Indeed, school is not a peaceful place. Even when they grow older, they will often benefit from sitting near the back of the class so they can focus and will avoid the front so to being in sight of the teacher who could ask them questions in front of the class. In particular, they may be criticised for "not putting their hand up in class".

However, they will enjoy learning and routine. Especially 'carpet or golden' time when the teacher reads them a story.

An essential component of any school curriculum is sport, which is beneficial for the HS child, particularly outdoor activities. Swimming lessons at school often prove difficult mostly due to the splashing and chlorine. The adult HSP tends to enjoy swimming in lakes or the sea. It is difficult for the child to find a competitive situation enjoyable as it involves high emotions such as tension and anticipation, which can lead to stress. For the HS child the desire to win is secondary to

the need to endure or cope with the competitive situation. In sports, the child may go to great lengths in order not to participate.

Issues they have are usually in two areas:

1. Changing clothes: Noise, smells, lack of space and feeling self-conscious.
2. Competitive team sports or physical group activity: They feel huge pressure not to let the team down and not like being watched by a loud chanting crowd.

Due to their deep processing and imagination, they can derive great pleasure from music, various art form and nature. When the HS child is encouraged to participate in the flow of the changing seasons, becoming involved in growing plants (even on a small scale) the child can find it soothing and calming.

Working with coloured shapes, tones and textures can feed the child's need to express creativity whilst keeping sensory input contained. Drawing and writing can facilitate the child's need to express feelings; they may also find rhythm of using a pencil soothing.

Generally, the child will not respond well to apps or computer games becoming restless and stressed with the noise and visual stimulation. High-pitched noise, flashing lights can cause headaches, tiredness and dizziness. Building Lego or creative games such as cutting and pasting tend to be more calming. However, they are more drawn to playing either alone or with one other partner rather than a group.

Often the HS child becomes stressed under supervision or scrutiny. Under these circumstances, they find it difficult to 'perform' or 'do a good job'. Therefore, the prospect of taking part in public speaking, dramas or school assemblies can create high-level anxiety. As participation in some of these events is sometimes mandatory in schools, the child may feel continually overwhelmed and isolated from friends who find these experiences exciting or pleasurable. This may lead them to believe they are weaker, different or odd in comparison to their peers. Even if the child is a talented actor, singer or sportsperson, the pressure may overwhelm their ability.

Troubled Childhood

It is well documented that the HSP with difficult childhoods are prone to anxiety, depression and other emotional problems in adult life. One of the issues we have found in our practice is that HSP doesn't want to discuss hardships in childhood. Perhaps they are looking at their childhood through the lens of a child or as a child, they 'shut down' or disconnected emotionally. Sometimes they find it overwhelming to think about or that they are being disloyal by talking about family or friends.

The important aspect to clarify is that's it's not about blame or individual family members, it's about their individual experience and how they dealt with issues or conflict as a child. As a child you would not be aware of experiencing sensations on a deeper level so you would just assume you are not behaving like your peers. As these patterns were developed as a child and carried into adult life, it is important to understand and explore this issue.

There can be some long-lasting effects on the child who was not emotionally supported or had a secure attachment in childhood, these include:

- Low self-esteem or worth - although we may know that we are loved we may not feel it.
- Being unsupported and unable to trust someone can support us when we are emotionally vulnerable
- Sensing we are different from others, not belonging or feeling valued.

- Adopting a sense that we need 'more,' not in a greedy but fearing we won't have enough
- Resorting to addictive behaviours e.g., alcohol, porn or drugs, to medicate feelings or emotions
- Generally fearful, not feeling connected in body or lacking in self-care.
- Lack of resilience.

Low Self-Esteem

At school and often the home we are expected to achieve a certain norm. However, if you are born with individual traits that don't fit the norm then such traits may be ignored or disrespected. This may be sensed rather than stated or both.

Not feeling 'valued' as an individual. Although loved and cared for 'not meeting the expectations of 'norm' may result in loss of self-esteem.

In order to rectify the situation of not 'fitting' to the social norm, changing behaviour results in huge stress or anxiety. Alternately, withdraw and sit on the side-line of groups.

How to increase self-esteem:

Working with an appropriate therapist is often very helpful, as it will enable you to discover aspects of yourself that may have been dishonoured, especially aspects of empathy, intuition and creativity. Often clients will remember incidents when they "saved the day" or "solved a difficult problem" through having creative abilities.

Self-Management

Coping Strategies

Emotional Regulation

Emotional highs and lows can be so intense that they are painful and exhausting. Brindle et al research demonstrated that HSPs experience more lows such as anxiety, depression and stress than non-HSPs. It is therefore important to have some strategies to manage emotions. By understanding your triggers, undergoing self-talk and changing behaviours it is possible to work towards a level of control determining which emotions we have when we have them, and how we experience and express them.

Distraction

When you are faced with a situation that is overwhelming rather than fight it, take a step back (physically take a step back), name it or imagine it is a small part of a bigger picture, then take another step back and look at the full picture and then decide what action is required. Or to distract yourself, change your focus onto an object or someone else.

The approach that tends to work most successfully is to change your position. Either go for walk even if it's just to the bathroom. If you need to remain in the situation: stand up, sit down or change your position in your chair.

If unable to remove yourself from the situation, Breathe in for the count of 4 saying to yourself 'I'm breathing in' then breathe out slowly to the count of 6 saying to yourself 'I am breathing out'. Becoming mindful of yourself, focus on breathing. Or focus on someone within eyesight, really think about how it feels to be he or she, or how he or she may be perceiving the situation.

Resilience

As HSPs are highly conscientious, people pleasers with a strong moral compass, they have a sense that they should do everything to help, even at the expense of themselves. For example, stay at the party even if the noise, people and stimulation are overwhelming. Watch the football match with everyone even though we are finding the environment overstimulating. But it's ok to leave!

As an HSP you will have a good relationship with your mind and body. Do a simple body scan to identify tension, pain or discomfort then take appropriate actions such as going outside, or into another room and do a few breathing exercises. Pace yourself and take care of yourself.

Engage in Pleasurable Activities

Identify activities you enjoy, these can range from mopping the floor, making tea to skydiving and horse riding. The HSP brain responds best to purposeful and meaningful activities.

To identify these activities, keep a record in your diary or journal of activities you enjoy, you may want to measure them on a score of 1-10. Keep this list for reference.

Sooth Yourself

Use your five senses of touch, taste, hearing, smell and sight:

Touch – Soak your feet in warm water with essential oils. Give yourself a hand massage. Do some stretching exercises.

Taste – Drink warm herbal tea or eat your favourite healthy food.

Hearing – HSP's need to carry earplugs, noise can become confusing and menacing, especially when too many different sounds at once. Earplugs can block sound, restful music, an audible book or a white noise app.

Smell – Often smells that other people enjoy such as perfumes, aftershave, foods or scented candles can be overpowering. It may be helpful to carry the smells (such as essential oil) that you enjoy with you; sometimes a small fan can be helpful.

Sight – Photographs and keepsakes can have a calming effect. Pick an object near to you such as a vase, book or a leaf from a tree to focus on in a soothing manner.

Visualise a situation or a place to calm yourself, practice relaxation. Relaxation can also be found in active or nonactive behaviours.

Commit to What is Valued

Identify areas of your life that are most important to you, these may be your family, friends, spiritual belief, job or health. It may be several areas. Commit the time and effort you need to attend to these. Be realistic. Engage with your higher power.

Learn an affirmation or prayer that resonates such as,

“All will be well; all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

or

“This too will pass”

Is “High Sensitivity” a Disorder?

There is no specific “disorder” that is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. There is also a range of symptoms across some mental disorders that point to or relate to characteristics similar to high sensitivity.

It is important to understand that the highly sensitive trait can occur alongside a mental health issue.

Essentially, it will be helpful to discuss challenges with being HSP in specialised counselling. Being an HSP does not excuse you from mental health issues such as anxiety, shame, depression and relationship issues.

The CARE Approach

At Gault's Therapy, we offer a CARE approach:

Confirmation: Initially we consider if you fit the profile of an HSP. There are so many different aspects to consider such as sensory processing, emotional elements, and depth of processing and past history. Essentially this is a complex assessment. If we don't consider you as HSP we will use our skills, knowledge and experience to work with you to identify issues that are causing you to seek help and work with you through these.

Acceptance: This stage is often a cathartic experience. Having felt different, separate or isolated from others all your life you recognise 20% of the population with very similar characteristics. It's a time to learn and explore from research, literature and most of all from the experience of other HSP about this gift. For many, it is a release, exciting and empowering.

Reorganise: Now you understand you can make changes. Together we identify aspects or issues of your daily life that you are struggling with or experiences in the past that we can now better understand. We have a host of strategies that we can share and together we develop your own unique management strategy.

Empowerment: Discovering that your sensitivity, intuition, creativity can be utilised to enhance your life rather than it being your secret or a problem is empowering. Allowing yourself to be authentic and celebrate it, wholeheartedly accepting the gifts you have is awe-inspiring.

Recommended Reading

There are many books and resources for HSP or Empathy. Listed below are the books we would recommend. However, the first three are the books we consider the best if you are new to the HSP world.

The Highly Sensitive Person

20 Apr 2017

by Elaine N. Aron

Elaine's latest book. In our opinion if buy one book this would be the best investment. It gives an overview of HSP but also considers many of the issues surrounding life with HSP such as:

- Close Relationships
- Thriving at Work
- Medication

Practical Mindfulness: A step-by-step guide

1 Sep 2015

by DK (Author), Psy.D Ken A. Verni

This book has lots of illustrations that are always good for the HSP! It covers techniques for daily living.

Our clients have always found it useful. Have it on your coffee table its lovely to browse.

Walking Your Blues Away: Practical Bilateral Therapies for Healing the Mind and Optimising Emotional Well-being

by Thom Hartmann

Over arousal can benefit from resting and/or activity so mindful walking does both relaxes the mind and exercises the body.

HSP tend to love being outside in the country this very slim book might empower you get walking!

Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World

by Ilse Sand and Elisabeth Svanholmer

The Highly Sensitive Person in Love: Understanding and Managing Relationships When the World Overwhelms You

by Elaine N. Aron

The Highly Sensitive Person's Workbook: A Comprehensive Collection of Pre-tested Exercises Developed to Enhance the Lives of HSP's

by Elaine N. Aron

Highly Intuitive People: 7 Right-Brain Traits to Change the Lives of Intuitive-Sensitive People

2 Mar 2015

by Heidi Sawyer

The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them

by Elaine N. Aron

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking

by Susan Cain

Mastering Your Mean Girl: The No-BS Guide to Silencing Your Inner Critic and Becoming Wildly Wealthy, Fabulously Healthy, and Bursting with Love

by Melissa Ambrosini

Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents: How to Heal from Distant, Rejecting

by Gibson, Lindsay C.

The Emotionally Absent Mother

by Jasmin Lee Cori

A Woman in Your Own Right: Assertiveness and You

by Anne Dickson

Thrill: The High Sensation Seeking Highly Sensitive Person

by Tracy Coope