



Understanding the HSP (Highly Sensitive Person) in the Workplace

by GAIL CARROLL

Happy New Year to all of you! May 2013 bring you an abundance of wonderful things including new learning and tools to add to your already wonderful knowledge base. To get you off to a start on new learning for 2013 we will explore the area of HSP or Highly Sensitive Person. This is a relatively new term used to describe people who appear very sensitive. What is high sensitivity? Is it a personality type? Is it a diagnosis? Do I have it? These are questions that are often asked when the topic of High Sensitivity arises. Highly Sensitive Person or HSP is a trait one is born with. It is a normal trait that indicates that you are more aware than others and can also indicate that you can become easily overwhelmed. It is not a personality type and it is not a diagnosis. This trait and its associated research was identified by Elaine Aron, PhD psychologist, author and expert on Highly Sensitive People and she describes HSPs as “individuals with a single innate temperament trait” which is expressed as a great awareness of subtleties in stimuli (i.e. temperature of a room, scents...) as well as the potential to be overwhelmed by too much stimuli (i.e. noise, strong scents, large groups of people). (www.hsperson.com)

According to Dr. Aron's research, about 15-20% of the general population have the HSP trait. There are no favors of gender. HSPs are usually highly intelligent people and/or individuals with a background of abuse or neglect. (www.hsperson.com)

HSP is not a clinical diagnosis nor is it to be confused with other mental health diagnoses. It is a personality trait.

Why is HSP of interest to us in the workplace?

Every day we all come to work with our personalities and interact with one another, our students and members of the public. We develop friendships, social and collegial relationships and what we all really would like from one another is not just to feel that sense of belonging, but to feel understood! Understanding personality and traits can help us build our own self-confidence and self-esteem. It can

also help us in understanding one another, communicating effectively and getting along.

As you can see by taking the quiz on the following page, HSPs show sensitivity in the following areas: Physical; Emotional; Senses; Values.

HSPs present as shy, quiet individuals. They are great friends and colleagues! Some things to note about HSPs:

- They were seen as shy and/or sensitive as a child.
- They are more aware of subtleties in the environment.
- They have high sensitivity to pain.
- Busy days can create more tiredness for them.
- They are very sensitive to caffeine and its effects.
- They are sensitive to bright lights, loud noises, scents.
- They have a rich inner complex life.
- They are deeply moved by beauty i.e. music and the arts.
- They are industrious and conscientious.
- They can be agitated when forced to do too much in too short a time frame.
- They are prone to perfectionism.
- They avoid violence i.e. movies and books.
- They arrange their lives to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.
- They have performance anxiety.
- Change can create chaos for them.
- They can be emotionally intense.
- They are attuned to detail and therefore note things sometimes before others do.
- They are good listeners, thoughtful co-workers and fair leaders.
- They are excellent at building morale and they are very concerned with doing the right thing.
- They can hold on to things and feelings.
- They need closure.
- Many times they can be misunderstood and can be seen as a troublemaker in the workplace.
- Conflict can be very overwhelming for them.
- The words “I'm sorry” can be very powerful and meaningful for them.

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Are You Highly Sensitive? Take the test...

A Self-Test *

Instructions: Answer each question according to the way you personally feel. Check the box if it is at least somewhat true for you; leave unchecked if it is not very true or not at all true for you.

<input type="checkbox"/> I am easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input.	<input type="checkbox"/> I am annoyed when people try to get me to do too many things at once.
<input type="checkbox"/> I seem to be aware of subtleties in my environment.	<input type="checkbox"/> I try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things.
<input type="checkbox"/> Other people's moods affect me.	<input type="checkbox"/> I make a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows.
<input type="checkbox"/> I tend to be very sensitive to pain.	<input type="checkbox"/> I become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around me.
<input type="checkbox"/> I find myself needing to withdraw during busy days, into bed or into a darkened room or any place where I can have some privacy and relief from stimulation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Being very hungry creates a strong reaction in me, disrupting my concentration or mood.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine.	<input type="checkbox"/> Changes in my life shake me up.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens close by.	<input type="checkbox"/> I notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, works of art.
<input type="checkbox"/> I have a rich, complex inner life.	<input type="checkbox"/> I find it unpleasant to have a lot going on at once.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am made uncomfortable by loud noises.	<input type="checkbox"/> I make it a high priority to arrange my life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am deeply moved by the arts or music.	<input type="checkbox"/> I am bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes.
<input type="checkbox"/> My nervous system sometimes feels so frazzled that I just have to go off by myself.	<input type="checkbox"/> When I must compete or be observed while performing a task, I become so nervous or shaky that I do much worse than I would otherwise.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am conscientious.	<input type="checkbox"/> When I was a child, my parents or teachers seemed to see me as sensitive or shy.
<input type="checkbox"/> I startle easily.	
<input type="checkbox"/> I get rattled when I have a lot to do in a short amount of time.	
<input type="checkbox"/> When people are uncomfortable in a physical environment I tend to know what needs to be done to make it more comfortable (like changing the lighting or the seating).	



Scoring: If you answered more than 14 of the questions as true of yourself, you are probably highly sensitive. But no psychological test is so accurate that an individual should base his or her life on it. We psychologists try to develop good questions, and then decide on the cut off based on the average response.

If fewer questions are true of you, but extremely true, that might also justify calling you highly sensitive.

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- Their personal boundaries can be weak (which lends to being taken advantage of, not being able to say no, overstepping boundaries ...)
- Their communication can be unclear.
- They are sensitive to others' energies and moods.
- They can be overwhelmed by too much stimulation and need to take breaks to recharge their batteries, i.e. they may not frequent the break room as they may use this time to have a quiet period to recharge their batteries. This can lead to being seen as anti-social.
- They seem to have a sixth sense; a knowingness about people, places and things.

When HSPs are overburdened with stress they can: shut down; be reactive; be hurt easily; get headaches; feel unwell.

When you are a teacher and an HSP, here are some things you can do to make your workspace a better experience: (These are also good tips for everyone!)

- Make your classroom space as calm as possible and clutter free. Beautiful posters, plants, etc....
- Open windows.
- Take a walk in the fresh air during a break.
- Allow yourself extra time to do things when possible.
- Show good listening and problem solving skills.

- Set good class rules. This will help you maintain a sense of calm and prevent the feeling that things may be running away from you.
- All of this will also help both you and your students enjoy a better classroom experience.

If you are friends and/or colleagues with an HSP here are some tips for support:

- Listen
- Be understanding
- Have patience
- Be clear in your communications
- Be kind

Remember, whether you are an HSP or not, it's not what you say but how you say it! Kindness, gentleness and understanding are always appreciated and help us build and keep collegial relationships, friendships and respectful work environments!

To continue to foster your learning and to see the research and resources about Highly Sensitive Persons please visit Elaine Aron's website: www.hsperson.com.

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