

The Highly Sensitive Person: Going Beyond the Current Paradigm

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a construct which proposes there is an underlying temperament found in around 20% of the population that results in depth of processing, increased emotional reactivity, ease of overstimulation and awareness of environmental subtleties (Aron, 2010). The Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) scale, which is used to identify and assess for sensitivity, was created from a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with 39 adults who self-identified as highly sensitive, introverted, or easily overwhelmed by stimuli (Aron and Aron, 1997). The HSP scale has been validated and was tested on a broader sample including 604 undergraduate psychology students and 301 individuals (Aron and Aron, 1997). However, the scale needs to be further validated, and as further research surrounding high sensitivity comes to light, I propose the scale needs to be expanded - some of the traits of sensitivity, such as pausing to check in novel situations or taking time to make decisions, are not sufficiently included in the HSP scale.

Environmental Sensitivity

A large amount of research on SPS supports the fact that there are neurobiological foundations underpinning SPS, and recent findings suggest that it is moderately heritable (Assary et al., 2019). SPS falls under the umbrella of Environmental Sensitivity, which refers to the degree to which we are responsive to environmental stimuli (Pluess, 2015). In the context of the highly sensitive person, environmental stimuli refers to physical environments such as food and caffeine intake; social environments such as childhood experiences and the moods of other people; how one responds to auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory input and internal stimuli such as thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

SPS exists on a continuum of sensitivity rather than a distinct category, and sensitive people fall into three sensitivity groups along this continuum: 31% high sensitive, 40% medium, and 29% low sensitive (Lionetti et al., 2018). Although sensitivity has previously been viewed as a vulnerability, we are now able to discern that SPS means one will experience more substantial effects and responsiveness to both negative and positive environmental stimuli, known as differential susceptibility (Pluess and Belsky, 2009). Differential susceptibility proposes there is a genetic cause behind SPS, and from an evolutionary perspective, this is linked to the need for diversity and survival in species; it enables species to be aware of both potential threats and



opportunities for growth. Biological sensitivity to context has a similar hypothesis (Ellis & Boyce, 2011), but it relates more to the physiological responses one has to the environment and the expression of high sensitivity is understood to be a combination of both nature and nurture.

What are the Myths, and what is Missing from the Research?

I propose that the research so far on Sensory processing sensitivity is reductionistic, based on a Newtonian paradigm and negates the importance of the psycho-spiritual potential and transpersonal dimensions of our human experience. SPS isn't simply a neurobiological adaptation that has evolved for the survival of species, but it has a purpose in terms of the evolution of consciousness, our psycho-spiritual transformation and our ability to self-actualise on an individual and collective level. Research has yet to discuss the psycho-spiritual significance of the temperament and the transpersonal experiences that commonly occur in highly sensitive people.

A common myth is that SPS is synonymous with anxiety, vulnerability or fragility. However, sensory processing sensitivity is not a disorder and there is also not a direct correlation between SPS and mental health struggles such as anxiety or depression. Research shows that highly sensitive people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences may have a higher risk of developing psychopathologies in adulthood (Aron et al., 2005). Research also highlights that highly sensitive children who experience nourishment, nurture and secure attachment in childhood will go on to excel or thrive later in life (more so than non-sensitive children) because of vantage sensitivity (Pluess & Belsky, 2015). One study that focused on adolescent girls taking part in a cognitive behavioural programme to reduce depression found that girls high (versus low) in SPS responded better to the school-based intervention (Pluess & Boniwell, 2015). However, the research is limited as the vantage sensitivity shown in the adolescent girls was in response to short-term cognitive behaviour interventions and did not describe whether the reduction in depression was maintained over a period of time. The research doesn't investigate the adolescent girls' ability to find greater meaning, clarity of values or a purposeful direction in life, which are argued as being some of the more critical factors which contribute towards the long-term well-being and psycho-spiritual transformation of Highly Sensitive People (De Vitto, 2021)



Research on vantage sensitivity does support the fact that how SPS is expressed behaviourally in an individual depends on environmental conditions, particularly the environment of one's childhood. The HSP's responsivity to both threats and opportunities means highly sensitive people are more likely to be impacted by adverse childhood experiences and other forms of individual and collective traumas. Rather than adverse childhood experiences being deemed as detrimental to an individual, resulting in the increased potential for developing psychopathology later in life, I propose reframing how we label the behavioural expression and symptoms of highly sensitive people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. Rather than pathologising such symptoms, we can consider them to be psycho-spiritual crises with the potential for positive psycho-spiritual transformation to occur. For a crisis to become a positively transformative experience, we need to consider a number of factors, including: one's innate soul blueprint, the ability to connect with the will of Self and the availability of appropriate guidance, where the HSP is able to apply meaning to one's experiences. The reframing of pathology into a spiritual crisis is not to negate the importance of the mainstream medical model or to discourage an individual from seeking therapeutic support when necessary, but this reframing is offered as an additional perspective which includes other potentialities that can enable HSP to be positively guided and supported on their healing journey. This appropriate holding, support and guidance can occur in the context of trauma-informed transpersonal and integrative coaching for highly sensitive people.

Trauma and Psycho-Spiritual Transformation

It is well documented in the field of transpersonal psychology that traumatic experiences are often catalysts for spiritual emergencies, with the potential for more permanent psycho-spiritual transformation. Spiritual emergence can be defined as a gradual transformation of the psyche (Grof and Grof, 1989) and a spiritual emergency may be "an intense and dramatic experience that disturbs the normal stable structure of the mind" (Grof, 2000). Kasproff and Scotton (1999) identified that the outcome of a spiritual emergency can be positively transformative or destructive depending on the ego's readiness for such experiences and how meaning is applied. According to Christina and Stanislav Grof,

'many of the conditions, which are currently diagnosed as psychotic and indiscriminately treated by suppressive medication, are actually difficult stages of a radical personality transformation and of spiritual opening. If they are correctly understood and supported, these psycho-spiritual



crises can result in emotional and psychosomatic healing, remarkable psychological transformation, and consciousness evolution.'

The direct link between SPS and its relationship to spiritual emergence and psycho-spiritual transformation has not yet been researched. HSP commonly report feeling very connected to the world around them, and my professional work has led me to conclude that there is a correlation between SPS and a vulnerability to spiritual emergence and spiritual awakening experiences (De Vitto, 2021). Research tells us that SPS not only means increased responsivity to one's internal and external environment, but highly sensitive people also experience a thinner boundary between their conscious awareness, the unconscious and the collective unconscious (Aron, 2011). This thinner boundary enables HSP to enter expansive states of consciousness and experience spiritual emergencies/awakening experiences, including mystical experiences, numinous or lucid dreams, peak experiences, and psychic openings (Lukoff, Lu, and Turner, 1992). I propose this thinner threshold is necessary for our individual and collective psycho-spiritual evolution and our ability to individuate; it enables a union between the conscious and unconscious material, bringing us closer to our authentic self and awareness of our connection to a great whole. I have also experienced that a highly sensitive person is more prone to the breaking open of their ego, which might be diagnosed or labelled as a vulnerability to psychopathologies, however transpersonal coaching psychology can provide a supportive non-pathologising framework for HSP who are experiencing such spiritual emergence/emergencies.

A Transpersonal Coaching Framework for Supporting Highly Sensitive People

Transpersonal Coaching considers the holistic, interdependent system of mind, body or spirit, including the "trans" personal potential of human nature (Dängeli, 2020). A transpersonal coach helps a person to interpret experiences in meaningful ways and provides a supportive framework that recognises the transformative potential of challenging experiences as opposed to treating them as something to repress or pathologise. When HSP are guided to cultivate resources and embody states of open awareness, they can connect with their core self and innate gifts to live in alignment and give expression to their soul's purpose.

One way this is achieved is through the active engagement of open awareness, which involves the coach and client entering into a liminal space encompassing introspective, extrospective



and somatic awareness. It gives the highly sensitive client the potential to reframe one's current experience as well as cultivate a mindful mode of perception (Dängeli & Geldenhuys, 2018). In such a resourceful state, HSP can regulate their nervous system and enter into what has been referred to as the window of tolerance (Siegel, 2010). This is critical for highly sensitive people who are often overstimulated and struggling to find clarity on their next steps because they are experiencing nervous system dysregulation, hyperarousal or hypoarousal (Aron, 2011). When the HSP is in their window of tolerance, and are open and receptive to their wider field of awareness, they are able to tap into other ways of knowing, and allow for unconscious material to emerge through bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and imagery, and integrate material in a transformative and resourceful way (De Vitto, 2023).

The Highly Sensitive Human Integrative Model

The Highly Sensitive Human Integrative Model is a transpersonal and integrative framework for working with Highly Sensitive People. It augments the foundational principles of transpersonal coaching psychology, which is an integrative and holistic approach encompassing all levels of one's experience, including both conscious and unconscious phenomena (De Vitto, 2023). The Highly Sensitive Human Model has been developed and adapted through data collected from coaching those who are highly sensitive. The data has highlighted key themes which highlight the common struggles of HSP and the reasons why they may seek out coaching. Some of these reasons for seeking out coaching include the fact that HSP find it difficult to discern between their emotions and the emotions of others because of activation in the mirror neuron system of the brain, leading to high levels of empathy (Van Overwalle and Baetens, 2009); therefore, learning how to discern and create healthy boundaries is necessary. Highly Sensitive People process the world around them deeply, this can lead to over-analysis, rumination, self-critical or judgemental thinking. A sensitive person tends to form limiting core beliefs about themselves from a young age, often suffering from low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Providing a safe and contained environment in which HSP can process and make sense of emotional and sensory material, reframe beliefs and integrate unconscious aspects of themselves is particularly important for HSP (De Vitto, 2023).

The HSH model is an overarching framework and can be used as an integrative assessment for formulating ways to meet a client's needs over a series of coaching sessions. The processes which are used for coaching within each session are integrative and holistic and informed by the



paradigm of transpersonal coaching psychology (Dangeli, 2023), depth psychology (Jung, 1980), psychosynthesis (Firman & Gila, 2002) and internal family systems (Schwartz, 2021). All approaches are trauma-informed. More specific resources and tools for supporting highly sensitive clients are extracted from non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 2003), mindfulness and compassion-based interventions (Neff, 2003), and acceptance and commitment interventions (Harris, 2009).

The HSH Integrative model is not a diagnostic tool that aims to diagnose or categorise a client. Rather, the assessment directs and informs a proposed path forward for the client in the transpersonal and integrative coaching sessions and allows the coach to discern which tools may be beneficial and supportive for the highly sensitive client to feel more empowered, resourced and able to navigate their sensitivity to achieve greater wholeness, integration and individuation. The model integrates a transpersonal coaching psychology lens and aspects of the transpersonal coaching model (Dangeli, 2023), which draws on the awareness that an individual's well-being and ultimate healing and transformation is inclusive of the level of soul, personality (emotions, beliefs, behaviours), interpersonal, whereby embodied transformation is dependent on one's relationship with self, others and the world; our interaction and responsiveness to the wider environment. The model also integrates awareness that there is a transpersonal dimension at play - the fact we are on a psycho-spiritual journey of transformation working towards individuation, wholeness and greater unity. Finally, the model integrates awareness of the shadow - there are aspects of self which we are not conscious of, and our work is to bring what exists in the shadow (the unconscious) into conscious awareness - for the purpose of individuation and wholeness. The significance of working with the shadow or making sense of aspects of the unconscious and collective unconscious is particularly pertinent in our work with highly sensitive people, and research highlights that transpersonal coaching is beneficial for highly sensitive people to explore unconscious material and other ways of knowing within a 'safe container' that is contained yet spacious and manageable to work with (De Vitto, 2023).

There is still a need to expand and progress the research surrounding SPS to include and not negate the transpersonal domain and to integrate the awareness that we are on a psycho-spiritual journey of individuation. This research is essential for HSP who tend to experience a great degree of spiritual phenomena and access to the unconscious and collective unconscious because these experiences can often be confusing or overwhelming, and there is a need to integrate spiritual emergence and spiritual awakening experiences for HSP. A



transpersonal coaching approach has been shown to be effective for highly sensitive clients to experience greater trust in their process; connect with something more 'sacred'; cultivate interoceptive awareness; attend to other ways of knowing and engage with the emergence of unconscious material within a held container (De Vitto, 2023). More research needs to be carried out into how we can further support HSP with these experiences from a holistic and integrative perspective.

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