

Other Ways of Knowing and the Gifts of Highly Sensitive People

By Jules De Vitto

There are nuances to the lived experience of being a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) that are not often described or spoken about in the literature. The research, to date, has primarily focussed on neurobiological explanations and is based on the reductionist paradigm of Newtonian science. This paradigm assumes we can understand something by studying its separate parts and as a result, most of the research on high sensitivity consists of clinical studies which explore, in isolation, genetic and brain structure functionality. This research has been instrumental in attempting to validate the trait of Sensory Processing Sensitivity (the official term for the Highly Sensitive Person) within the scientific community. However, we still have a long way to go in terms of understanding the lived experience of Highly Sensitive People - this includes recognising how HSP experience their inner and outer world, what provides them with purpose and meaning and identifying the struggles and gifts of HSP.

Research highlights how HSP process information more deeply, and their nervous systems are more receptive and reactive to environmental stimuli (Aron & Aron, 1997). HSP also have higher levels of empathy due to more activation in the mirror neuron system of the brain (Acevedo, 2020), are more impacted by the emotions and moods of others and appear to be more in tune with subtle changes in their nervous system. It is my experience that HSP are incredibly intuitive and able to connect with what exists beyond the conscious, rational and linear mind. HSP commonly report that they experience vivid, often numinous dreams and are sensitive to subtle energies, emotions and moods of others. Dr Elaine Aron has proposed that Highly Sensitive People are more in tune and able to connect with what exists within the collective unconscious. From my personal and professional work, I have also observed this to be the case and this may include connecting with images, information and emotions that pertain to the challenges and complexity of collective trauma and grief.

The collective unconscious consists of what Carl Jung referred to as "archetypal" knowledge - which includes symbolic images and patterns that are present in the psyches of all individuals regardless of culture or individual experience (Jung, 1980). These archetypes, such as the mother, the hero, or the trickster, are often conveyed via symbols and myths and are accessed through dreams, active imagination, and other forms of unconscious expression. Individuals can achieve greater individuation and wholeness by exploring and integrating the archetypes and symbolic images that arise from the collective unconscious. Dr Elaine Aron has also identified how HSP appear to have a thinner boundary between their conscious and unconscious mental processes. She states,

'For example, they have more vivid dreams, stronger intuition, and a better sense of what is going on in others (meaning they probably process unconsciously certain subtle cues). Therefore we individuate more easily than others, and also need to more if we are not going to be ruled by our unconscious.' (Aron, 2011)

Highly Sensitive People appear also to have an innate curiosity and a pull towards spirituality, which we can also understand as a desire to connect to something greater than one's individual ego - a connection to the sacred and meaningful. The Highly Sensitive Person's ability to connect with the numinous also links to one's purpose. Current research suggests that the expression of Sensory Processing Sensitivity is a result of both genetics and environmental factors; however, James Hillman, who was an archetypal Psychologist, shared the concept of the Acorn Theory (Hillman, 1997), which points towards there being something beyond this. James Hillman suggests that we carry a 'blueprint' which will determine our particular purpose and path in life, and it is up to each person to discover their innate purpose throughout their life. Unfortunately, modern society often expects Highly Sensitive People to ignore or suppress their gifts to conform to social and cultural expectations.

Highly Sensitive People have also been compared to the archetype of the priestly advisor. Elaine Aron identified two archetypes common in post-nomadic culture – the warrior king and the priestly advisor (Aron, 2011). The warrior kings are expected to be bold, whereas the priestly advisor provides insight and strategy – balancing action with reflection. Culture requires both of these instincts – thoughtfulness and an ability to fight for survival. The priestly advisor archetype symbolises the highly sensitive person who processes deeply and maintains a connection with the divine. It is believed that the warriors' fears of the priestly adviser's unknown powers create

the complex around high sensitivity. In addition to this archetypal connection, I propose an acknowledgment of the feminine, and I believe HSP are also resonant with the priestess. Throughout history, the archetypal priestess has endured persecution in societies worldwide due to their connection to the spiritual and Divine. It is this that has led them to be targeted by the authorities.

Unfortunately, the gifts of Highly Sensitive People often get dismissed, suppressed, ignored and in extreme cases, their ability to tap into the collective unconscious and experience a connection with the numinous - vivid dreams, visions and intuitive knowledge get's pathologised. Michael Harner, the late American anthropologist, suggested that our understanding of the psyche in industrial civilisation is biased in two ways: it is ethnocentric and cognicentric. It is ethnocentric in that it has been formulated and promoted by Western materialistic scientists, who consider their perspective superior to that of any other human group at any time of history (Harner, 1980). As a result, the Western industrialised society that dominates so many parts of the world has caused us to believe that the Newtonian paradigm is objective truth, and anything that falls outside of this must be disregarded. Unfortunately, what's been lost and squeezed out of our culture, and what many Highly Sensitive People have learnt to suppress, is the ability to know deeply, and the multiple intelligences and ways of knowing that exist within us and between us and the natural world.

As mentioned, the Newtonian paradigm that is at the core of the mind, heart split, has led to the disconnect that so many people experience - the belief that we are separate from and not part of a larger whole. This inability to see the relationship and interconnectivity within ourselves, between each other and the world, is causing so much of the individual and collective pain and trauma we are currently experiencing. HSP struggle to ignore this pain or accept this disconnect because they feel intuitively and know deeply that this is the root of so much individual and collective pain. This deep knowing is often communicated to them through dreams, visions or a gut-churning intuition, and it cannot always be explained through the scientific paradigm. The inability of many Highly Sensitive People to articulate or express this deep sense of knowing can cause many HSP to feel isolated, alone, and concerned that there is 'something wrong with them'. Highly Sensitive People can end up feeling great despair or overwhelmed by the pain and trauma that is suppressed, denied and pushed into the collective shadow.

Unfortunately, the experiences of Highly Sensitive People, which are often numinous in nature, involve the collective unconscious or archetypal figures and realms are labelled by the mainstream medicine model as pathological products of the brain. Modern mainstream psychiatrists and psychologists tend to pathologise experiences that go beyond the explanation of normal states of consciousness and reduce such experiences down to mental disorders. As a result, many Highly Sensitive People will keep experiences that can't be explained by the mainstream medical model hidden or attempt to suppress or disconnect from them in order to 'fit in' or feel 'normal'. This is not always a conscious decision. For some HSP these experiences, which arise from a sensitivity to the collective unconscious or subtle energies and archetypal energies, can start at a young age. These experiences can be confusing, overwhelming, and too much for a child or adult to handle.

HSP can develop specific protective mechanisms or defenses which prevent them from experiencing and connecting with these subtle realms, insights, visions or other ways of knowing. Some HSP become so dominated by their rational mind that it can often cause them to disconnect or dissociate from the body and their intuition altogether - going to the other extreme. This is usually because the felt sense has become too much for them and so it feels safer to exist within the constraints of the mind and thought.

We must provide a space for Highly Sensitive People to explore, connect, and cultivate these other ways of knowing. It is also vital that we listen from a space of non-judgemental awareness and acceptance rather than attempting to pathologise, judge or ignore the experiences of Highly Sensitive People. We need to approach sensitivity from a more transpersonal paradigm in which we acknowledge the connection to the sacred, other ways of knowing, and recognise that sensitivity relates to the process of individuation and one's psycho-spiritual journey towards greater wholeness. This is so important as many HSP are being pathologised or their experiences are suppressed because they do not fit into the 'norm'. Allowing HSP space to connect and cultivate their intuitive awareness is necessary for transformation of self, others and the world; many HSP appear to have a purpose related to the healing and transformation of individual and collective trauma.

References

Aron, E., Aron, A. (1997). "Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 345-368.

Acevedo, B. (2020). "The Basics of Sensory Processing Sensitivity." In B. Acevedo (Ed.), *The Highly Sensitive Brain* (pp. 1–15). Academic Press.

Harner, M. (1980). *The Way of the Shaman*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Hillman, J. (1997). *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*.

Jung, C. G. (1980). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.