Podcast 5 Highly Sensitive Traits/Sensory Processing Sensitivity.

Intro: You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I’m a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

Episode: Thanks very much Dr. Miller. Hi and thanks for listening today. My name is David Nathan, and I’m a licensed psychologist with Allina Health. I primary work with children, teens, and men on a wide range of issues. Everyone in my family except for me is a teacher. My parents are retired teachers who worked for St. Paul Public Schools and my twin sisters is currently a high school teacher at Johnson Highschool in St. Paul. Working in the education system is extremely demanding and essential work. Thank you for what you do every day. You are making our world a better place. I hope this is helpful to you.

Why is it some people just seem to bounce back from bad news, and other people are overwhelmed? How come some people pick up on details that other people completely miss? Why are some people so good at finding creative solutions to problems that are just baffling to the rest of the group? Well, science shows that some people are just made that way.

Today I am going to talk about as aspect of personality called Sensory Processing Sensitivity or Highly Sensitive People, depending on whose writing the article. There is a lot to cover so I’m going to spread this topic over a few podcasts. I’ll introduce the concept and discuss it’s background today.

One of the areas I find most fascinating in psychology is the concept of personality traits. Through decades of study and the use of a lot of statistics, it has been demonstrated that personality traits are not randomly assigned. Instead, various traits tend to cluster together. Based on these results, there are some experts who argue that there are exactly 24 archetypal personalities. There are other experts who argue that no, there are exactly 16 archetypal personalities. I don’t get into the debate but it is clear that in terms of the nature side of things, there are a set number of ways the mind tends to look at things, almost like we have 16 to 24 primary colors for personality. Mix those colors with all the different life experiences and environments we can grow up in, we get this really beautiful and intricate mosaic that makes up humanity.

One of those personality clusters was discovered by Dr. Elaine Aron in the late 80s and 90s. Dr. Elaine Aron, A, R, O, N, if you want to google her, is a really interesting person. She has a website that I really like at HSPerson.com. She has written a lot of very interesting and easy books for non-academics to understand about her research. She has a great story too. She graduated near the top of her class from University of California at Berkley in the late 70’s and she got a job at a research institution. She was very shy and at the time, there was very little scientific research about shyness in psychology. She decided she was going to be the world expert on the topic. After about 10 years, she got bored. She didn’t have any more questions about shyness. But through her research, she noticed that all shy people had certain personality characteristics, but not all people who had these characteristics were shy. She decided to change the direction of her research on these traits. She became not just the founder of this discipline of research, but one of its lead innovators and scholars.

So what has research by Dr. Aron found?

First of all, between 15 and 20% of the population meet criteria for being what is called “highly sensitive.” These people tend to have a majority of the following qualities: they tend to be highly intelligent, very creative, they have very intense emotions; their emotional state tends to be impacted by the emotional state of other people; they tend to automatically notice things about other people, or even animals, that people who are not highly sensitive don’t notice. They enjoy working very hard and can often solve problems faster than non-highly sensitive people, but they also can become exhausted when they are done with a project.

Sensory Processing Sensitivity is not considered to be a mental illness; it is seen as a way the mind is. Similar to people who are left-handed or right handed or introverted or extraverted.

There are two main names this concept goes by: originally people who studied the traits and people who called them called it Highly Sensitive People. Today, the more common academic term used to discuss the concept is Sensory Processing Sensitivity. This is not the same as sensory processing disorder, although people can have both. Sensory processing disorder is usually a distortion of sensory information or a difficulty on the mind interpreting information that comes in. Highly Sensitive People don’t seem to have distorted information coming in, as much as it is like the volume that the information comes in at is VERY LOUD.

It is typical for highly sensitive people to find it uncomfortable to wear socks with the seam on the inside or use metal eating utensils on ceramic plates. The feeling of the seams can be extremely irritating to their toes, and the sound of metal scraping over ceramic plates, which isn’t fun for more people, can be completely overwhelming to their ears. They also have tense emotions so people may find them overly emotional. Research shows that these are authentic real reactions, they aren't making it up. They actually do have this strong of a reaction to the situation.

They tend to be very good problem solvers, but they can have difficulties interacting with non-highly sensitive people. In one of her books, Dr. Aron discusses a case where she worked with a manager of a factory. He had been hired a few months before, and he was very frustrated. Evidently, there was a machine on the assembly line that, every few days to a few weeks, would shut down. When this happened, the entire assembly line needed to be turned off and all the bolts on the stopped machine needed to be tightened. This usually took most of the day. When this was finished, the machine and the assembly line could be turned on and everything would keep going until the next time the machine broke down. This had been going on for years.

The patient had proposed to his supervisors that the assembly line be taken down for a few days to try to figure out what was the cause of the problem. Was there a motor that was not correctly connected or some other source of vibration that was loosening the bolts? Was there something not connected correctly? If they could find the source of the problem, they could correct it and the assembly line could work without unplanned stops.

The patient’s supervisor did not see the problem. We already have a solution to the problem, he said. We turn off the assembly line and tighten the screws.

This was very frustrating to the factory manager.

Highly Sensitive people are perceived in different ways in different cultures. In our culture, it is generally much more permissible for women to be highly sensitive. It tends to be less so for males to be highly sensitive. This is rough, because highly sensitive traits do not seem to prefer one gender over the other. Even girls and women who have this trait after often told “don’t be so emotional.” For highly sensitive individuals, they aren’t usually trying to be emotional; They are actually trying to reduce their symptoms because they often get in trouble when they have them. For example, let’s say something happens that results in an negative or positive emotional response. This response for typically sensitive people might rate a one or two out of ten for them. It is possible, even likely, that if the same things happen to someone who is highly sensitive, they would have an emotional response of 5 or 6 out of 10. Especially with younger kids, they are often punished for this response.

When people with Sensory Processing Sensitivity experience this frequently over the course of their childhood and adolescense, they can end up at high risk for anxiety and low self-esteem.

As I said before, psychologists do not see Sensory Processing Sensitivity as a mental illness, but much like introversion or extraversion, there can be advantages and disadvantages to people in various society's to people who have these traits. Growing up being told that you are overly emotional when these emotions are your natural reaction is definitely a disadvantage.

People with Sensory Processing Sensitivity tend to go into the helping professions. They often become teachers and work in education. They can be especially good at these jobs because many parts of them that may be very difficult for non-sensitive people come to them naturally. That’s an advantage.

Highly sensitive people absorb almost everything going on in their environment, and they tend to work hard. Because of this, it is essential that highly sensitive people have opportunities for self-care. I’ve discussed self-care in other podcasts, but if you haven’t heard me discuss it then, let me summarize self-care is any activity where, when we are done, we feel better than we did when we started. For some people it's fishing. For other people it is spending time with a friend. The range of what constitutes self-care is different for everyone. It is very important for everyone to know what makes them feel better so they can do it when they are feeling down. It is also important for people to let themselves rest if they do not feel enough energy for their self-care activity.

This is especially true for people with sensory processing sensitivity, because their mood can become low quicker than typically sensitive people.

Today we discussed an introduction to highly sensitive people, Sensory Processing Sensitivity. Next time I’ll discuss how this can impact the workplace and the classroom. Thanks for listening. Take care.

Outro: On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!