Podcast 6: HSP in the classroom and the work place.

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: Thank you Dr. Miller. Hello and thanks for listening. My name is David Nathan. I’m a licensed psychologist and I work for Allina Health. I work primary with children, teens and their families on a wide range of issues. In addition to my psychology training, I consider myself fluent in Minecraft, MOBAs, creepy pasta, neurto, attack on titan, and blockchain. I am conversant in k-pop.

I am a huge fan of teachers. Both of my parents were teachers in St. Paul and my twin sister is a high school teacher at Johnson Highschool in St. Paul today. There are few jobs that are more important to our society than education. Thank you for what you do. I hope this is helpful.

In my last podcast, I discussed the concept of highly sensitive people, also known as people with Sensory Processing Sensitivity. I use both terms interchangeably. If you haven’t listened to that podcast, I would check that one out first before you listen to this one. We can wait.

Today I want to discuss how highly sensitive people experience the world and how important it is for them to use coping skills.

Well, as I said in the previous podcast, people with highly sensitive traits tend to be over represented in helping professions, such as education, mental health, medicine, criminal justice, social work, and human services. Research indicates that between 15 -20% of the population meets criteria for having Sensory Processing Sensitivity. Research indicates that far more, perhaps even the majority of those in the helping professions are highly sensitive. If you work in education in the United States, there is a good chance you are highly sensitive.

How are people with sensory processing sensitivities different from people who don’t have these qualities? Highly sensitive people tend to have the 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 typically sensitive people, but they also can become exhausted when they are done with a project.

This cluster of personality characteristics that we today call sensory processing sensitivity was first identified by Dr. Elaine Aron in the late 80s and early 90s. Since then, this has become a well-studied area of personality. I’m personally interested in the dynamic because many of my patients have it. If you are interested to see if you have it, Dr. Aron has a free, validated screener survey on her website, hsperson.com. If you go to the website, go to the line “self-test” near the top of the page, and click on “Am I highly sensitive.” There is a 27-item test of yes/no questions. There is another test for children which is good for kids up to the age of 11 or 12. I have checked, and there does not seem to be a good test for teenagers yet; no test seems to be able to accurately discriminate between highly sensitive teens and typically sensitive teens. I have worked with parents of teenagers and we have used the child survey based on their experience with their teen when they were younger and that has been helpful.

If you or someone you are close to is highly sensitive, it is important to understand how your or their mind works. No one with Sensory Processing Sensitivity has all the highly sensitive traits. There is a saying within the Autism Spectrum Community that when you have met one person on the Autism Spectrum, you have met one person on the Autism Spectrum. That is true for highly sensitive people as well.

When I work with highly sensitive people, one of the metaphors I use is that for the things they are especially sensitive to, they see in color where other people see in blacks, whites and greys. It can be extremely frustrating for someone who is highly sensitive to explain their insight to people don’t understand what they are seeing.

For this reason, people who are highly sensitive often flock together. This can be an important coping skill for people with sensory processing sensitivity. Teachers can help students who they suspect are highly sensitive by grouping them together with people who are also highly sensitive or people who in general are going to get along well with highly sensitive people.

Being highly sensitive is not a choice. It is how someone’s mind works. If their contributions or suggestions or emotional reactions are repeatedly criticized, they are going to suffer and the classroom and work place is not going to get the benefits of their skill set. We may not always agree with their ideas, but they tend to be helpful. I have worked with dozens of highly sensitive children and teenagers and one of the most common stories they tell me is about someone who came to them and said “how did you come up with that solution?” because their way of solving a problem demonstrated serious outside the box thinking. They tell me they don’t know how they did it; they didn’t have a process. It’s just how their mind works. I haven’t see data on highly sensitive people working in advertising or silcon valley, but I suspect with Sensory Processing Sensitivity could make a lot of money in those fields. Highly sensitive people can be fantastic contributors in the classroom and in the workplace. They tend to be very hard workers and they enjoy solving problems. Giving them responsibility is generally going to be to the classroom’s and the workplace’s benefit.

Because it isn’t a choice, punishing highly sensitive people for strong emotional responses is unlikely to be effective. Teaching helpful ways to deal with responses, such as taking a break or going to get a drink of water, or keeping tabs on their mood and giving them a break before they get overwhelmed and giving them an opportunity to use those responses is much more effective.

Having a secluded corner of an elementary classroom where students can go to relax and be away from noise can be helpful. Elementary, middle and high schools can have cool down rooms. Letting a student pull out a book or another quiet activity at their desk while the rest of the class participates in a lesson or activity can be useful. Teachers and school staff can be creative in how they address these issues.

When some people first learn about sensory processing sensitivity, they sometimes think it is the same as being introverted. It isn’t. People can be highly sensitive and enjoy high stimulation situations.

It’s important for adults around highly sensitive children and teens help keep them safe, because if they are isolated, they can be targets for bullies.

Researches have developed guidance for parents on finding schools and teachers who understand sensitive students. They recommend keeping kids with sensory processing sensitivity out of classrooms or other school environments whey they could be picked on.

In one of her books, Dr. Aron discusses one way to look at people who are not highly sensitive as having armor that blocks most of the things that happen in life from them. Highly sensitive people do not have that armor; everything impacts them. This means it is really important that they get rest, especially when times are difficult. Both downtime and adequate sleep at night. In scientific tests on how highly sensitive traits impact rate and quality of work, people with highly sensitive traits tend to complete tasks faster and more successfully than people who do not have these traits. These studies have also found that when people with these traits are done, they are exhausted.

We live in a culture that has the story of the tortoise and the hair, and in that story, the hair, which works fast and then falls asleep, is portrayed as the bad guy. This is an example of one of the many ways people with sensory processing sensitivity can get the feeling that there is something wrong with them. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with them per say, this is a personality trait. . It isn’t a mental illness. On the other hand, it is clear in our society it is easier to be extraverted than it is to be introverted. In general, it is easier to be typically sensitive than it is to be highly sensitive.

Self-care is critical for people with sensory processing sensitivity. . I define self-care as any activity, that, when we are done doing it, we feel better than we did when we started. It is critical for people who are highly sensitive to know several things they can do that will help improve their mood, because their mood can turn dark quickly. It is also important to have time to relax. Some highly sensitive people are really going to benefit from having breaks when they get home from work or school before they launch into the next thing. Having those break times when they can do less intense activities helps them recharge and be more capable for what comes next.

Taking steps to accommodate ourselves, our coworkers and our students with sensory processing sensitivity is going to benefit everyone involved. That doesn’t mean that people with highly sensitive traits are always right. But they are going to be able to contribute to their communities, classrooms and workplaces in ways other people simply will not be able to. Their differences should be respected and cultivated.

Thanks very much for listening today. Have a good one. Goodbye.

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!