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Is Your Child Highly Sensitive

by Erika Bardal, M.A., R.C.C.

Five-year-old Johnny is a quiet little boy who is hesitant about new experiences. He likes to observe activities before he joins in, and he spent his first few weeks of kindergarten hanging back and watching the other children play. At

home, he gets very absorbed in pretend play with his LEGO, and he tends to be easily startled when interrupted. He thinks things through before he acts, so his parents rarely have to worry about him climbing the furniture or getting too close to the stove. Johnny's feelings are hurt easily and he becomes very upset on the few occasions where he needs reprimanding. He cries when he sees other children injured or upset, and he doesn't like to read stories or watch movies where anyone is hurt or sad. He only eats familiar foods and refuses to wear clothing with labels, saying they are too "scratchy."

Does any of this sound familiar? If so, your child may be one of the 15-20% who are born highly sensitive. Elaine Aron, PhD, the author of *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them*, explains, "Highly sensitive individuals are those born with a tendency to notice more in their environment and deeply reflect on everything before acting."

There are many benefits to being more aware of your environment and thinking things through. Parents often describe their highly sensitive children (HSCs) as being "wise beyond their years." They are often kind and caring, empathize with others, and have a great sense of humour. They can have vivid imaginations and think deeply about things, frequently startling the adults around them with their insights. They feel emotions strongly and often excel in creative activities such as music, dance and art. And because they tend to think things through and anticipate consequences, they can be more conscientious and need less discipline than other children.

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You Gotta Do the Work

by Denis Boyd, M.A., R.Psych.

I woke up on a recent Saturday morning feeling tired and lethargic. I thought of my list of things-to-do and decided that the best course of action was to enjoy my coffee in my easy chair. This plan didn't require as much energy.

I waited to feel the motivation necessary to get on with the day. It didn't come. However, I knew that if I didn't force myself to get "up and at 'em", the hours would whittle away and the tasks would still be waiting for me to complete. (Plus I would probably feel guilty for my inaction!) I knew with certainty that the only way to feel like doing the work was to get on with doing the work!

I arose from my chair and before long I experienced the energy I had been missing, and it had nothing to do with caffeine. That morning my willpower won out over my mood and my mood was transformed in the process.

When you think about it, anything worthwhile takes some effort. It is the same with relationships and marriage in particular.

In the early stages of a relationship, finding time to be together is a top priority for a couple, even if life is chaotic and demanding. At this stage of a friendship, the connection is exciting and energizing. Part of the buzz can be the newness of the bond but mainly it is the realization that you are important to someone else and that spending time with you is more important for that person than any other commitment. You each make the effort to sustain and improve that special something that is being generated.

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There are challenges to being highly sensitive as well. Taking in and processing more information from your surroundings brings with it an increased potential for becoming over stimulated. Too much noise, strong scents, bright lights, and itchy clothing can all overwhelm a HSC, and they may feel pain more strongly than others. They often need time to think through decisions, and may become overwhelmed when asked to make a choice or perform a task under pressure.

Along with their potential to become overwhelmed, their very active imaginations can lead HSCs to think through very detailed “what if” scenarios, which can increase anxiety. Just as they feel positive emotions very strongly, HSCs may also experience negative feelings such as sadness, anger, and worry more deeply than other children.

What Can Parents Do?

Here are some tips to help parents support their highly sensitive children.

- ⇒ *Respect your child's sensitivity.* The goal is not to “get rid” of this trait, but rather to help your child learn to manage it. Even if you are not sensitive yourself, and your child's view of the world seems foreign to you, try to understand it and respect it as his or her reality.
- ⇒ *Make home a safe haven.* You can shape your child's home environment to meet his or her needs by making it as calm and predictable as possible. If your child feels rejuvenated by being at home, he or she is better able to face the challenges of the world outside.
- ⇒ *Manage your own emotions.* HSCs are like sponges—they pick up on and absorb the emotions of those around them. So if you are feeling stressed or anxious, your child will too. Make sure that you have healthy ways of coping with these feelings yourself, and try to minimize conflict in the home as much as possible.
- ⇒ *Educate and advocate.* As a parent, you know best what your HSC needs, and you may need to educate others. This might mean letting your child's teacher know that he or she needs a quiet place to retreat during the school day, or simply responding to unsolicited parenting advice by saying, “This is how we do things in our family.” It is empowering for your child to have you stand up for their needs.
- ⇒ *Talk to your child about sensitivity.* Your HSC will have noticed that he or she experiences things differently from other children. Talk with them about this in an age-appropriate way to help them to understand there is nothing “wrong” with them, and make sure they understand their sensitivity comes with some unique and wonderful strengths.
- ⇒ *Get help.* If you have concerns about your sensitive child's self-esteem or ability to manage emotions, make an appointment to see a family counsellor. A therapist can also help you manage the challenges associated with parenting your sensitive child.

Workshops

Parenting the Anxious Child, by Don Lasell (Sept. 2016)

Boy's Issues, by Chris Boyd (Oct. 2016)

Girl's Issues, by Brooke Lewis (Nov. 2016)

Please call the office at 604-931-7211 to register.

When couples marry, life can become very hectic with raising children and stabilizing careers. Time is already limited and becomes stretched; as a result, we become distracted and fatigued and the marital bond is “taken for granted.”

Marriage doesn't operate on “automatic pilot.” Like any other friendship it takes time and effort to keep it strong and healthy.

We know that couples can stay connected by making time to talk and listen to each other a few minutes every day. I call the strategy “T-Time” or “Talk Time.” During this crucial one-on-one time, explore the feelings of the moment, the feelings of the day and then discuss necessary family business. It can take as little as fifteen minutes to do this effectively.

When couples don't make the time and effort to stay connected, they drift apart and over time begin to resent many of the qualities they used to admire in each other. Bob Dylan once wrote “we're either busy being born, or busy dying.” Marriages and friendships are like that. There is no middle ground.

Marriage doesn't operate on “automatic pilot”.

A past client shared a conversation that unfolded between two of her friends. One friend mentioned that she was struggling with marital issues. The other friend responded with a suggestion that she go to our practice for marriage

counselling, but said that there was something she needed to know first. “You gotta do the work!”

Some may bristle at the thought of *working* on their marriage or *working* on resolving their grief over a loss. Peace and happiness should just unfold naturally or magically. Right?

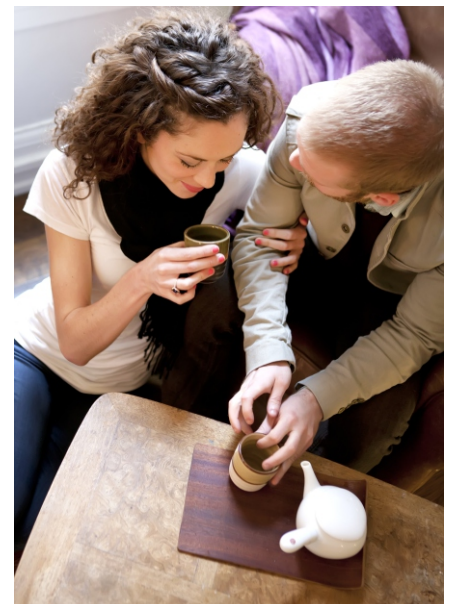
Unfortunately not. Nothing just happens in relationships, whether it be with a friend, a spouse or a child.

Let me share an experience from long ago. My son was sixteen and becoming very independent. He would be watching a TV show and I would sit down to join him; he would then leave the room! One Sunday afternoon I was doing some chores and it occurred to me to invite my son to shoot some hoops with me. I was busy and didn't really have time to play but I invited him just the same in order to spend time with him. We had an enjoyable hour together. Lots of laughs.

Later that day, I asked this same son to help me with some heavy lifting and instead of responding with a grunt or a promise to do it later, he said yes and got it done right away.

It occurred to me that I was receiving an unintentional return on the investment I made that Sunday afternoon when I found the time to do something my son wanted to do.

During counselling sessions, couples receive tools to assist them in making changes in their interactions with each other. However, the real key to success is heeding the advice of a sage friend: “You gotta do the work.”





Secrets to Replenishing Sleep

How many sheep can you count?

by Brooke Lewis, M.A., R.C.C.

The Question: 'How are you?'. The Answer: 'Tired'. The Problem: All too common. Whether it's walking through a crowd or sitting in a coffee shop, I hear too many conversations starting just that way. People are sleep deprived! Makes me wonder if Mr. Sandman is on vacation...so how does one start to improve sleep?

Tip 1: Avoid caffeine 4-6 hours before bedtime

Caffeine is a tricky thing. Some associate caffeine only with coffee or energy drinks. It's also in soda, tea, and chocolate. When we suggest 'no caffeine for 4-6 hours' it means all of the above items. Now for why...the effects of caffeine (the alertness) peak 2 hours after consumption and then start declining after that. To be safe, stay clear of caffeine well before bed; perhaps try substituting your post-dinner java with an herbal tea or warm milk.

Tip 2: Avoid alcohol at least 2 hours before bedtime

I know some of you are thinking, 'But that glass of wine helps me fall asleep'. It may help you get to sleep, but once you are there it tampers with your quality of sleep. During sleep we go through different sleep phases. Alcohol disrupts the phase process and keeps us out of the area that would leave us waking up feeling replenished and alert. No wonder people are sleepy after a night of partying!

Tip 3: Avoid smoking at least 2 hours before bedtime

Believe it or not, nicotine (the active ingredient in cigarettes) is a stimulant. This means nicotine activates your system and prevents you from feeling tired. As a substitute, try practicing some breathing exercises or stepping outside for some fresh air.

Tip 4: Keep exercise to more than 2 hours before bedtime

Working out and exercising gets the blood pulsing through your body. Engaging in these activities within 2 hours of bedtime may not give enough time for the body to cool down before lights out. If you can, keep exercise to earlier in the day.

Tip 5: Follow the same routine

We are creatures of habit. If we do the same routine enough times, our body will pick up signals and follow along. A night time routine may look like the following: 2 hours before bed stop any highly mentally engaging activity such as studying or working, turn lights down so everything is dim, have a light snack if hungry, prep things for the next day (such as lunch, outfit, to-do list, etc.). One hour before bed, wash face and brush teeth (random fact: brushing teeth can increase energy levels by 30%!), put on some PJ's, settle in for a light hearted book or show. Other things to keep note of include keeping your room cool and dark. Try to hit the feathers around the same time every night and get up around the same time every morning. Doing so will help re-set your body clock. Keep in mind, these things take time. Repetition is key when trying to form new habits and routines.

Tip 6: Avoid taking naps

Napping is dangerous when you have night time sleeping problems. Of course you are going to be tired during the day if you have had a poor night's sleep. Fight through! By bedtime you will be super sleepy and on a fast track to Slumberland.

Tip 7: Avoid being hungry or eating heavily before going to bed

Creature comforts. If we are not comfortable, or our physical needs are not being met, it becomes very difficult to do anything else until they are met. If we are hungry, our tummies will send signals to our brains yelling 'Pay attention to me! Pay attention to me!'. On the flip side, if we eat a large amount, our brain is pre-occupied with over-seeing digestion and ignores sleeping signals. If you are hungry, have a light snack. Save the full-meal-deal for breakfast.

Tip 8: Get up if you do not fall asleep within half an hour

No point in lying there wishing you were sleeping and counting down the minutes until you need to be up. Get up and get out of the bed. Go into a separate room and do something relaxing with dim light. Perhaps this means flipping through a magazine or a paper. Try to stay clear of highly engaging activities such as social networking, video games, studying, work tasks, etc. Once you feel your head bobbing and your eyes long-blinking, get back in bed.

Tip 9: Make your bed comfortable and only use for sleeping

Back to the creatures of habit statement, we will pair activities and behaviors with environments. If we use our beds for work, studying, games, social networking, etc. our brains will be ready for that when we are in that environment. If we only use beds for sleeping, our brain will know it's time for sleep and we will fall asleep faster.

Tip 10: Keep worries out of bed

Feeling stressed about tomorrow's tasks? A conversation that went sour earlier? Is Negative Nancy bombarding you while you are lying in bed? Time to sit up, potentially get out of bed, and write down everything you are thinking about. Your brain will know it's somewhere safe and you will not have to worry about it until the next day. Keep a note book bedside so when Nancy visits, you are ready.

There you are folks! 10 tips to help you get better sleep. Sleep Tight. 3





The Gift of Failure

by Alivia Maric, M.A., R.Psych.

I recently watched a wonderful documentary, *The Barkley Marathons*, about an ultra endurance trail race that takes place in the Tennessee mountains. Only 40 runners are accepted into

the race each year. Covering the entire distance of 160 kilometres (100 miles) or more also requires climbing and descending the equivalent of Mount Everest - twice. To be successful, runners must complete the course in 60 hours. In most years, none of the racers finish the race. In some years, only one or two people complete the distance within the time limit. In the film, the race director muses about the runners who undertake this incredible challenge, knowing there is a high likelihood they will fail. These runners may be successful in other areas of their life, they may be successful in running other races, but they will learn something about themselves by challenging and testing their limits of physical and mental endurance, and failing. According to the race director, "people are better for having done the race. They're not made of better stuff, but they're better for having done it".

This approach goes against a common attitude toward failure – that failure should be avoided, sometimes at all cost and that to feel good about ourselves we need to succeed. The assumption is that we learn and benefit from success but not failure.

From this perspective, failure is often seen as humiliating which leads to feelings of deep shame and negative beliefs such as "I'm a failure", "I'm a loser", "I'm nothing", "I'll never get it right". Procrastination and avoidance may ensue, in an effort to stave off such painful feelings and negative beliefs about oneself. Later, fear of failure may develop to the extent that risk analysis is employed, posing questions such as "Why bother trying.", "What are the chances I'll be able to do it?", "Will I be any good at that?" and may occur without taking the opportunity to actually try, or learn the skill. The implicit belief now is "I can't do it" – without having tried. Opportunities are lost due to fear of failure.

"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Thomas Edison

In my practice, I see many people experiencing a sense of failure with its attendant negative beliefs. They experience failure, not just from activities, but from loss as well. Loss can take many forms: loss of control of one's body during pregnancy, labour and birth, athletic pursuits or physical careers such as dance, loss of physical capacity due to chronic debilitating illness or traumatic injuries, loss of financial security whether from choices made or unforeseen circumstances. There may be losses associated with aging (for example, loss of physical or mental capacity, loss of purpose when work life ends or children grow up and leave home), loss of relationships due to divorce or death, These experiences can lead to shame and thoughts such as "I am a failure" and "now I am nothing". There is a loss of sense of self, a loss of self-worth. Dr. Gordon Neufeld, a world renowned Vancouver development psychologist draws very good distinctions

between achievement and self-esteem. In his workshop, which I attended years ago, Dr. Neufeld made it clear that achieving something feels good and positive, but it doesn't make you a good person, just as failure doesn't make you a bad person. Our self-worth is immutable, unchanged whether we succeed or not.

Loss is not "less than". Failure doesn't make a value statement. Failure and its attendant frustration and disappointment is to be acknowledged. Loss is to be mourned. With failure we can learn that changes and loss can be met, acknowledged, experienced, LIVED and lived through. Challenges can be faced – the challenge of getting up and trying again, of adapting, growing, and accepting (accepting our limits, of accepting help). This is the territory of humility, of being humble and using the experience to move beyond.

Failure, approached with humility and curiosity leads to learning, growth, openness, connecting. As Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work". Failure experienced as humiliation, leads to a sense of being 'less than', to emotional shut down, avoidance, retraction, disconnection from self and others.

Consider the words of J.K.Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books in her convocation address to Harvard graduates: "...some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default....The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift..."

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