

Sensitive souls need not suffer

Publication: Calgary Herald; Date:2006 Apr 06; Section:Neighbours; Page Number: N10

Counselling helps develop hidden capabilities

DONNA GRAY

Extraordinary sensitivity to noise and chaos. An aversion to particular fragrances and foods. A **strong sense of what others are feeling**, and an immediate dislike or attraction to certain people without even knowing why.

If these traits seem familiar, you might be what is known as a "[highly sensitive person](#)" or HSP.

"Highly sensitive people often experience a sense of being uncomfortable in a physical environment," says [Dr. Michael Haggstrom](#), a certified counsellor and psychotherapist in Calgary. "They're sensing everything going on around them. They can tell when a boss, teacher or friend is in a good or bad mood. They even notice the slightest weird odour around them."

Up to 20 per cent of the population displays the traits and abilities of HSPs, all of whom seem to have one trait in common: a highly-tuned central nervous system, says Haggstrom.

"Highly sensitive children and adults can look very different, but they have the same internal functioning," he says.

"They can appear very shy or reserved or easily emotional; they can be very thoughtful and at times a bit slow, not intellectually, but they just take a longer time to process stuff. They are very often [perfectionists](#) too, which makes their world very frustrating," he says.

"Peter" knows the challenges that come with being a highly sensitive person. Explaining that his personality is simply a genetic disposition and not a disorder, he remembers his family always referred to him as distant or a "dreamer."

"I was introverted, artistic, and highly intuitive. I enjoyed a deep, rich inner fantasy world and I also despised conflict and violence. **I got easily overwhelmed** if things moved too quickly or there was too much action going on around me. Parties and public activities left me completely drained afterwards," he says.

After doing some research, Peter approached Haggstrom in the hopes of receiving tools and trigger marks to help him adapt to a world where "cowboy up" is a consistent mantra.

"This attitude is prevalent in our society. (Highly sensitive) men are especially misunderstood. I've **spent a lot of energy over the years trying to change myself** and change society, but it can be a futile task. I haven't discovered the secret to 'playing the game.' In fact, that's a lot of what I'm dealing with in therapy right now, but the answer may lie in accepting yourself. After that's in place, I think it will become clearer how to function in our aggressive, rugged, fast-paced and driven society," he says.

The difficulty in identifying a person with HSP is the **fear of being pegged as "weak" or inferior**. Society's lack of tolerance, understanding and empathy means many HSPs will go unappreciated, ignored, or intentionally avoided, says Haggstrom.

"Many people will develop symptoms of stress related to this type of personality. **Headaches, shoulder and neck tension, stomach aches**, irritable bowel syndrome and even obsessive compulsive disorders can develop," he says.

"HSPs adapt in a lot of different ways. Some will put a lid on their potential and live a small life. Even though they might have a bachelor's degree, they might work at a job with not a lot of responsibility, because they're continually **living in fear**. They don't always use the best of their ability. I help them identify their strengths and give them tools to make their personality work with others," he says.

Today, Peter **feels more confident in presenting himself to the world**. He admits he still gets overwhelmed by stimuli, as well as the lack of understanding that comes from society, but he is adapting.

"I prefer life in the 'slow-lane' and tend to become overwhelmed when life gets too hectic," he says.

For more information on Highly Sensitive People (HSPs), contact [Dr. Michael Haggstrom](#) at **403-220-1101** or visit www.dr-michael.ca.



Personality traits of the highly sensitive :

- **Instantly affected** by moods and body language of other people
- Uncomfortable with schedule changes and social situations
- Can't handle bright lights, loud sounds, over-stimulation
- Strong desire for quiet and time alone
- Difficulty maintaining long-term relationships
- Meticulous and/or perfectionist tendencies
- Difficulty relating to others or forgetting painful experiences
- Highly creative, artistic and intuitive
- Show an interest in spiritual consciousness
- Demonstrate great compassion and empathy
- Will dwell on past [trauma](#) and/or slightly revise the details
- Can be over-sensitive, emotional and over-analyze
- Possess a tendency to overcommit to others
- Hardworking and effective employee, but often overlooked

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