



Highly Sensitive People

Consultation report



NATURE THERAPY CIC

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Background

Statistics show that around one in five people have experience of mental illness. Interestingly, global data suggests that around one in five people (20%) are Highly Sensitive. However, being a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) is not an illness or disorder. It has been clinically and scientifically proven that being HSP is a trait we are born with. It is characterized by certain ways of being that differentiates us from the major part of the population. It is more commonly thought of as being just too sensitive to what others say to us and how we feel about things. The solution being we simply need to 'man up'. In reality it can be clearly evidenced that sensory input is processed at a much deeper level in the brain for those that are HSP, so no amount of manning up could or would make a difference.

However, despite HSP being recognised academically in the USA for nearly thirty years, knowledge of HSP in the UK is very limited. Out of 210 known HSP support groups across the world, only two small groups exist in the UK. Some cultures embrace those who are HSP, like Japan, whilst the UK history of 'stiff upper lip' denigrates this way of being. Many HSP's in the past have been forced to toughen up by beatings and being made to do things against their very nature. For an HSP child this approach can be destructive and create a negative impact on the rest of their lives.

Outside of paying for counselling there are no formal support structures in the UK designed specifically to help those who are HSP celebrate their uniqueness and learn to manage their special gift. In fact, if you ask someone who is HSP what it is like being this way, they would most likely say they have been cursed with being so sensitive because it is emotionally painful and distressing. This especially applies to men who are HSP because we live in a culture where male sensitivity is often perceived as being weak. Many try to mask their sensitivity which can be exhausting.

Our culture rewards dominance, aggression, wars, risk aversion, environmental destruction, and go getting styles of management. However, the person who is HSP can help balance this, especially if they have learned to recognise and value their sensitivities from an early age.

If their way of being is not acknowledged and they grow in a harsh environment that does not meet their specific needs, then they are more likely to experience mental illness, addiction, abusive relationships, suicide and extreme isolation as adults.

As a small not for profit that provides sensory based projects we at Nature Therapy CIC were becoming increasingly aware of the challenges faced by those who are HSP

One programme we deliver, Wolf Medicine, is a programme for people in recovery from addictions and/or mental illness. In this programme we were finding an extremely high proportion of those with addictions and/or mental illnesses such as extreme anxiety or Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome were also Highly Sensitive People. Not only were they on the scale of HSP, but actually scored quite high on that scale.

Instead of the expected 15 – 20% of the global population, we were finding that around 90% of participants tested positive for HSP. Global research is in the early stages but is starting to back up these startling findings. Our research, whilst limited, appears to bear out current knowledge. This clearly shows if a child is HSP and exposed to a harsh environment in their early years they are far more likely to go on to develop mental illness including severe anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. They are also most likely to retreat from the world into extreme social isolation, possibly through alcohol and drugs.

One further finding in our limited research was that those who are HSP have a somewhat higher incidence of entering into abusive relationships with narcissists feeling a need to 'heal' the partner. When this does not happen the fall out is devastating to the person concerned.

Concerns were also raised on another of our programmes by carers about older people who are HSP and living in residential and care homes, or hospital. There, the environments they are in can be overwhelming and distressing. We have not yet conducted an investigation into this as the majority of older people we work alongside have dementia. This makes testing for HSP a challenge. Enough to state concerns have been raised at this point in time.

Consultation

The consultation process was made possible by forward thinking and a grant from the Isle of Wight Community Learning Centre.

Nature Therapy CIC ran three consultation workshops over a period of several months during the latter part of 2016.

The workshops were advertised widely via local social media using Eventbrite for people to book their free place. Each event was 'sold out' within 24 hours of marketing.

The workshops took place at different venues around the Isle of Wight and attracted a total of 56 people. Sixty places were made available but 4 people dropped out prior to the event. Participants were able to test their responses to a reliable and valid HSP scale on line prior to coming to the consultation events.

Each workshop lasted a full day and the format included providing information and scientific knowledge to demonstrate that the existence of HSP is strongly evidenced in neurobiology, neuropsychology and by using brain scans.

The format then involved participation in a Knowledge Café where those attending were asked to identify some of the challenges for children, adults and older people living in a society where HSP's are a minority. They were also asked to identify solutions to some of these challenges and what could practically and realistically be achieved if we were to have funding.

In the Knowledge Café format it was stressed that everyone's ideas and experiences were equally relevant so each person recorded their thoughts on the café tablecloth. This is an important move away from one person scribing or leading each group.

Participants moved from café table to café table to address specific issues such as older people who are HSP living in residential homes or adults in the workplace. The majority of conversation and recording was centred on children.

A consultation document was then prepared as part of the consultation process and sent out to participants to make changes as they saw fit. This was to provide an opportunity to validate statements, make changes, check individual views and perceptions against the overall consultation and to ensure there was agreement on the model of delivery put forward.

Key Messages

CHILDREN

Challenges

- Judgmental approach in our culture i.e. boys should not cry
- Underestimating the ability of HSP to create a new way of being human
- Getting it right - getting it wrong could be devastating for children who are HSP
- Recognising damaging coping mechanisms
- Social condemning
- Sensory barbarism

Solutions

- Parent classes on how to support their Highly Sensitive Child
- Safe Place for children to retreat to
- More use of outdoor environments
- Promoting and teaching deep listening to parents/schools
- Framing the world in context to help children navigate life
- Create a HSP Centre – week long HSP retreats
- Use of creative art to help children express themselves
- Raise children's awareness that it ok to be HSP – that it can be a gift if used right
- Raise teacher awareness of how to identify children that are HSP and what to do
- Study the heart rather than the mind
- Get children to create their own 'HSP survival kits'
- Raise public awareness of HSP
- Awareness of alternative sources of help i.e. gong baths, reiki, meditation and mindfulness
- Talks at assemblies in schools to raise awareness
- Address and challenge use of language i.e. use of the word Shy or Introverted

- Address the use of harsh parenting – develop a HS child parenting programme
- Give 'permission' to boys to express their feeling

ADULTS

Challenges

- To lessen stigma
- To help those who are HSP achieve their full potential
- To help others recognise the potential of HSP i.e. employers

Solutions

- HSP First Aid kit
- Support group and phone line
- Meet ups for those struggling with 'drudgery' work
- Provide time to jump off and recharge
- Corporation funded research – target good social employers i.e. Apple, Hitachi
- Participate in research and create research
- Employer training
- Flexibility in the workplace
- Sharing experiences with other HSPs
- Ability to celebrate successes for those who are HSP
- Focus on work environment i.e. natural light, reducing sensory overload (clear desk policies)
- Education of Health Care staff
- How management style of those with HSP differs from non HSP
- HSP Mentoring or Buddying scheme
- HSP Ambassadors
- Help those who are HSP manage their own sensitivities better
- Create a Centre of Excellence for advice, support, education and information
- Work environments to have safe places to retreat to (home working)
- Promote Deep Listening
- Digital balance

OLDER PEOPLE

Challenges

- Reframing of past experiences and traumas
- Creating a suitable environment that includes personal safe spaces
- Recognizing and managing sensitivities in long term care and end of life care
- Improving awareness of HSP in older people and reducing stigma
- Enabling independence whilst maintaining safety

Solutions

- Intergenerational projects outdoors with nature
- Sensory support workers
- Create a nature based indoor environment
- Sharing experiences across generations
- Guidance for carers and relatives
- Trips out in nature

Way forward

The purpose of the consultation was to take a wide approach to understanding the challenges faced by those who are HSP and explore together, as a distinct minority group, potential solutions to those challenges.

A framework of delivery was created from these consultations which were then given back to the original participants to check accuracy of vision and statements.

This was adapted according to further feedback to co-create the following model of delivery:

Vision:

To create a Centre of Excellence for Highly Sensitive People run by those who are HSP.

Model of Delivery for Year 1:

- Create an open face book page - Centre for Highly Sensitive People
- Bi- monthly Support group meetings – minimum of six
- Deliver ten HSP Knowledge Cafes across the Isle of Wight and collate ongoing information
- Create a system of at least ten volunteer HSP Ambassadors to raise awareness of HSP in the workplace, schools and residential homes.
- Aim for at least two media coverages of HSP human stories to raise public awareness
- Aim for at least two presentations at conferences
- Ten children aged 10 – 12 years of age identified as HSP to take part in a write and draw exercise to record their perceptions of being HSP

The programme for the HSP Knowledge Cafes will include:

1. Scientific evidence that HSP is real
2. Finding Your Calling
3. How to create a safe/sacred space
4. Creating your own HSP First Aid Kit
5. Parenting a child with HSP

6. Teaching children who are HSP
7. How to get the best out of your staff who are HSP
8. HSP and Addiction
9. Team building
10. HSP and Domestic Abuse

It is imperative that data is collected through out delivery to inform the growing evidence base of knowledge on HSP, especially in regards to how HSP is perceived in British culture. All the current research emanates from the United States of America so we have no knowledge of how HSP is culturally perceived in the UK

A Logic Model of Evaluation will be established for this purpose but will include the following monitoring process.



Monitoring and Evaluation Process

Each participant will be asked to participate in ongoing monitoring and data collection to help inform the growth and development of the HSP Centre of Excellence.

Target – Year 1	Method	Resources required
Minimum of 200 people with HSP will benefit from sharing knowledge and survival strategies via digital medium	Create an open face book page - Centre for Highly Sensitive People	Face book page statistics Analysis of postings and content using a discourse analysis approach
Minimum of 200 people with HSP will state they feel less socially isolated through being part of a HSP Support Group	Social inclusion measurement tool for all adults to complete pre and post participation in support group sessions	Social inclusion tool
Quality of life for children and young people who identify as HSP will better understood.	Child HSP scoring tool to identify the on the HSP scale HSP Write and Draw evaluation tool to be completed by a minimum of 10 children Wishing tree to capture qualitative data by children about the Write and Draw process	HSP Child Scale HSP Write and Draw tool Wishing tree
Ten volunteers who are HSP will be trained as HSP Ambassadors in the work place, schools and residential homes	Feedback on training programme Data on the support required for those who are HSP to fulfil this role and where Follow up via email or telephone on how the	Semi structured Focus groups and personal interviews. Photographic diaries Ongoing support via support group, skype and mentoring

	training has been applied	Further follow up three months later by telephone/email survey
Create 10 Knowledge Cafes across the Isle of Wight	Feedback on perceptions and knowledge for each HSP Knowledge Café session and what the participant might do differently as a result of attending the HSP Knowledge Café	Evaluation format to be provided on knowledge pre and post session with further follow up by Survey Monkey to determine what has been done differently
Aim for at least two media coverages of HSP human stories to raise public awareness and at least two presentations at conferences	Video, photographs, conference presentation details,	To be included in final evaluation report.



Summary

Interestingly, outside of the expert by experience knowledge the participants provided, the consultation process itself was beneficial as feedback from participants demonstrates:

- Totally Ace
- Winner 😊
- Eye opening
- Enlightening
- Not alone – there are many others about
- Inspiring
- Will look at ‘sky’ people differently now
- A relief
- Totally inspiring
- Very helpful – thank you x
- Like coming home – thanks.

The majority of the participants described a relief at finding a brother/sisterhood of other HSP’s and more importantly a scientific and credible explanation of their own way of being.

They were relieved to find they were not odd, weak, shy, introverted, different, mentally ill, or just too sensitive for this world. They had a powerful gift which they now understood a bit more but needed to know how to manage it. They were no longer going to continually apologize for their way of being but carry their sensitivity as a gift into the future.

Participants wanted to be involved in making the world a more HSP friendly place for children to grow up. They did not want future generations to suffer in the same way they had through their own childhood.

The shared vision across all was to be part of co-creating a Centre of Excellence for Highly Sensitive People. They wanted the Isle of Wight to be a HSP friendly centre for those that live here and those that visit.

This central space did not necessarily involve concrete buildings. It was a non-judgmental space centrally available to all humans, whatever their sensitivity level, for understanding that not everyone experiences the world in the same way – and all experiences are equally valid.