

The Empath And The Highly Sensitive Person

Empathy is a word we're taught in grade school. It means to identify with what somebody else is most likely feeling. We're taught that this is a skill to be honed and developed. Most of us do, to varying degrees. Some of us, without even realizing it (and usually for a very good reason), hone this skill to a much greater extent.

Based on what I've observed, these highly skilled people tend to go through a series of empathy growth spurts. The first growth spurt can happen in early childhood, or it can happen in the pre-teen years.

Highly Sensitive People (HSPs)

In my experience, Highly Sensitive People tend to have emotional reactions to strong scents. Overwhelming smells can cause feelings of anger, impatience, or frustration. This of course includes perfumes. It also includes essential oils (particularly blends), body odours, and cleaning supplies. Intermittent sounds can also be a source of aggravation, and normally it's the kind of sound that tends to go unnoticed, even to the HSP. Fast moving bright colours can also be a trigger. A movie theatre can be a very stimulating and possibly a stressful place.

Empathic People

There's a big difference between being empathic and being empathetic. To put it simply, one is a noun and one is a verb. Being empathetic is something we do. Being empathic is something we are.

We're all empaths to some degree, it comes with having five senses. For the skilled empath, how other people are feeling can become a source of overwhelm and confusion. They don't always recognize that some emotions they're feeling aren't actually theirs. They're charged with the unique task of sorting out which is which.

Once the skill of empathy is developed, the skill of managing it must be developed. In an ideal world, all empathic people would have access to a person who understands their experiences and can teach the essential management skills.

For some people whose empathic skills are new to them, they've been told that they have a gift. But let me tell you, it doesn't feel like much of a gift at this stage of life. It feels more like a hinderance.

Unfortunately, there's no shutting it down. Dissociation works for a little while, but at a high cost to the wellbeing of the mind and body.

It's understandable why empathy would be seen by others as a gift. It comes with a strong ability to be successful in life and be very helpful to people. What most fail to communicate is that this will only happen once empathy management skills are developed.

Access to a mentor is key, even if that mentor is an author or speaker that they've never actually met. Another key piece is whether or not he/she actually *wants* to achieve great things or help people in big ways. This assumption is often imposed onto a budding empath, as if they have no say in the matter. Using any skill to help another is a personal choice, this one's no different.

In the meantime, if you're a highly sensitive person or an empathic person and you're looking for some guidance, come in and talk to me. I get it, and I'm happy to help in any way I can.

-Dr. Angela, ND