

# **The Happy Highly Sensitive Life Podcast**

*How to Cope with Your Feelings as a Highly Sensitive Person*

Podcast Transcript

Episode 4

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As HSPs, we are big-hearted people. For many of us, our parents, family, teachers and coaches didn't know what to make of our strong feeling nature.

And so I know that I learned, and perhaps you did too, to push down or bypass my emotions.

That worked until I entered a more complicated phase of life and had roommates and roommate disagreements, serious relationships and a full-time job.

I was often a big jumble of emotions, not sure how I felt. And when I knew what I felt, I didn't know if I had a right to say it. I worried I would seem needy or high maintenance. I'd pull away until my feelings just blew over and I got over it. But the problems kept festering under the surface without any real resolution, so they'd keep coming up over and over again for me.

Looking back, the first thing I needed was a way to make sense of my feelings. And no matter how much progress I think I've made with learning to be with my feelings, it still happens from time to time that I'm not sure what's happening with me emotionally.

In this episode, I talk about how to make sense of your emotions. And I hope that you'll walk away with a new appreciation for your feelings and some specific strategies you can use to make peace with your emotions.

To start, I want to talk about why emotions have been mislabeled a liability by our culture. Then I'll cover how emotions can give you an advantage. Why it can be hard to know what you're feeling. 7 ways to cope with big feelings. And one practice that will give you an edge for coping with feelings.

This is one of those episodes that you're going to want to save to go back to later, when you're feeling emotionally overloaded and need some relief.

# Why emotions have been mislabeled a liability by our culture

Let's talk about why emotions have been mislabeled a liability by our culture.

As I was thinking about this question, I called my mom to ask her about the kinds of messages she received from her parents about how to deal with emotions.

She was born in the late 1940s and said it was very common for her to hear phrases like "kids should be seen and not heard", "big boys and big girls don't cry" and "what are you crying about? I'll give you something to cry about."

My heart went out to her when she told me the story about how she broke her wrist at the age of 5 and didn't cry because she'd been trained not to.

Recently, my mom took Elaine Aron's high sensitivity quiz, I'll link it in the show notes, and I was very surprised that she came back as being an HSP. I never would have guessed that she was an HSP. My heart went out to her and to all HSPs who heard those kinds of messages and had to stifle your emotional truth.

I like to understand why our parents or caretakers inherited this idea that emotions are a liability, and to do that, we have to look at the norms of Western Culture. Way before we were born and our parents were born, men with influence created a narrative that emotion is weakness. This line of thinking permeated the culture, creating a "right way" to express yourself that was devoid of emotion.

Our parents got the message that being emotional was an undesirable feminine trait. And being logical was the "right way" and a masculine concept. And even if you had parents that were super aware of trying to create an emotionally expressive home, at school, or soccer practice, or watching tv, the messages were still everywhere. Even in our efforts to comfort people, we hear "there, there, don't cry" Pick yourself up and move on.

We have been swimming in the idea that having feelings presents a liability. This idea is deeply woven into the fabric of our society.

There is a master stereotype that says people who display emotion are untrustworthy.

Why is this notion harmful?

This idea has kept women from gaining power, from developing financial independence, and voting. As a result, women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Underpaid. And undervalued. And it's only recently that the first female was elected to one of the highest offices in the US.

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This pressure to suppress emotion is bad for men too and especially HSP men, who must shut down the appearance of vulnerability to fit some definition of masculinity. And Black Indigenous People of Color have additional pressure to appear to be unharmed by race-based insults and to brush them off as if they don't cause pain.

But the truth is, the emotions we've been conditioned to view as a problem are essential to making a decision that's right for you.

Emotions are here for a reason. They get your attention and make you stop to notice what's happening so you can tune in and listen to the messages coming from them.

Let's take this thought in another direction.

Imagine accepting a marriage proposal without consulting your emotions.

I actually did this. I said yes to a proposal based on having made up my mind with a pros and cons list. Obviously, I wasn't fully conscious that I was disconnected from my emotions at the time. I'd pushed them aside for so long that when the time came to say I do, I couldn't see that I wasn't brimming with joy the way you'd expect a newly engaged person to be. I was resolute and determined. It was time for me to get married. I was 34 and all my friends had been married for some time. I was going to walk down that aisle.

And as the months of our marriage progressed, I learned that it takes a lot of energy to sidestep and ignore my emotional truth. Emotions come out one way or another. They kept me awake at night. I baked a lot of cupcakes. I couldn't be on social media because the pictures of my friends living happy lives were too hard for me to look at. I started to change into a different person. I lost my lightness and joy.

In the end, what's on that pros and cons list can't make things feel right in the middle of the night when you're face to face with yourself. When you're having a Liz Gilbert moment on your knees on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night, questioning the future of your marriage. Liz Gilbert is the author of her memoir titled *Eat, Pray, Love*.

I had married a wonderful man that was not my right person. And when I started to let myself recognize that I'd made a mistake, I worried what other people would think if I ended my marriage. I worried about becoming unglued trying to have the hard conversation about ending our marriage. I worried about hurting him.

I started therapy. And after a period of time I couldn't ignore my inner truth.

Eventually, I stepped out onto that invisible bridge. And we had the conversation that ended our marriage. He made plans to move out, and we got divorced. I reclaimed my emotional inner compass. Unexpectedly, this was a homecoming. I reconnected to a lost part of myself.

And guess what? We had a very amicable separation and divorce. I know how lucky we are that this was the case. I ended up connecting him to his next partner. And a few years later, I met my spouse, Adam. Now I have a partnership that is aligned and *right*, because I took the leap and listened to my deep knowing and ended that relationship. Yes, I was scared. And it was hard. But I had to be true to my emotions and my inner knowing.

You hear my story and you're probably thinking, of course you want to tune into your feelings before accepting a marriage proposal. But what about other big life changes like whether to accept a job offer or to make a big move? How do you let emotions weigh in there?

## Why your emotions give you an advantage

Research shows that certain emotions actually help people make better decisions.

In a gambling study, when people lost and felt sad and disappointed, this actually led them to make decisions that had a bigger payoff in future hands.

Emotion is at the heart of wisdom, and research proves it.

You know how you have a hard conversation and then think about what was said over and over? You've probably had a well-meaning friend tell you to just move on and let it go already.

But research shows that going over all the little details of a moment actually helps you to learn from the experience.

You may be tempted to push away those sticky feelings that keep boomeranging back around or to distract yourself from what went on, but when you take the time to be with the feelings, you get a little bit wiser.

The truth is, as an HSP who is emotionally attuned, you have wisdom that comes from being tuned into the emotions of people around you. You make detailed observations about people, places, and situations.

This makes you a good decision maker and a conscientious employee. You are self-reflective and can think about your performance and know how you can grow. You're insightful. And friends, family and colleagues seek you out for your wise advice. You see details and context other people miss.

And guess what, when you express your emotions, you also give the people you're with

permission to be real and honest and vulnerable and to share how they're feeling as well. You create the space for authentic connection.

Not to mention, as an HSP, your depth of feeling also means you can be filled up by the beauty of positive emotions. Your ability to savor beautiful moments helps to build resilience and counteract the moments when your heart stings a bit more, too.

And my goal today is that you'll walk away with some specific strategies you can begin to use to make sense of your feelings and find peace within. But first, let's talk about why you may experience a glob of unnamed emotions.

## Why it can be hard to know what you're feeling

You're feeling something, but you don't know what it is.

Here are some of the reasons this happens to me.

I have noticed that if ...

- I'm hustling through my day, and I don't have time to think carefully about what's going on around me, say someone asks me a question or I get an email and there's pressure for me to get back to them quickly so I don't have the time to think about my response for very long
- I have to talk off the top of my head without preparing first, like in a meeting
- I've had to move quickly into a new situation or a group of people, and I don't get a chance to slowly warm up to and take in a new environment
- Someone asks for help and I feel pressured to say yes when I want to say no
- I've had an intense interaction where my heart started racing and my mind went blank as I talked about in the last episode
- I've been intuitively picking up on someone else's needs or point of view. I may have trouble figuring out what I'm feeling and what I want separate from what they want
- And sometimes, of course, I've deliberately brushed past my feelings by pushing them down. Numbing them up with tv, napping and sugar. Because something feels off and I'm not sure I can handle what is coming up

I imagine this may also be true for you as well. So I want to share with you 7 ways to cope with feelings so you know you can handle anything that comes your way emotionally.

# 7 ways to cope with big feelings

## Strategy 1: Affect labeling

Affect labeling is simply giving a name to an emotion that you're feeling.

Let's look at the research behind this. In a study at UCLA, researchers discovered that participants with a spider phobia who were asked to approach a spider had less of a physiological stress reaction if they labeled their anxiety about the spider. Saying "I'm scared, there's a spider" worked better than trying to think differently about the spider ("What a nice spider") or distracting themselves from the spider.

Naming the issue and saying "I'm scared, there's a spider" lets your brain stop trying to alert you to danger so you can start looking for solutions.

The more specifically you can name your fear, the better.

How do you do this?

1. Write down a sentence or two about how you're feeling and what's causing those feelings. 'I feel disappointed because this project isn't being received well by my co-workers'.
2. Or talk with a friend just to get it out. Let them know you're just looking to vent. Then say how you're feeling and why.

If I notice a sticky feeling, say I'm worried about an upcoming meeting, I can even feel relief by doing affect labeling in my own head. Reciting to myself what I'm feeling and why. "I am feeling anxious and I'm worried about Monday's performance evaluation."

If you're a jumble of emotions and thoughts and you don't know what you're feeling, ask yourself if you're having a STOP feeling or a GO feeling.

A STOP feeling is a feeling of resistance, anxiety, worry. You get a red light and feel a NO.

A GO is a feeling of opening, of ease, contentment, excitement, joy. You get a green light, you feel a YES.

If you're trying to figure out how you feel, ask yourself, am I feeling a STOP or GO feeling? A yes or no feeling? A red light or a green light? Then from there, you can begin to name your feelings more specifically.

Let's look at some core feelings. These are a good place to start building your emotional vocabulary.

“No” feelings, stop feelings or resistance feelings:

- Anxious or Fearful- Apprehensive about an upcoming event or situation
- Worried- Distressed, uneasy, troubled
- Irritated- Annoyed by someone or something
- Mad or angry- Strong negative response as a result of a perceived wrong
- Disappointed- Sad or displeased by someone or something failing to meet hopes or expectations
- Sad- Unhappiness caused by a loss or disappointment
- Depressed- State of general unhappiness or melancholy
- Guilt- Feeling regret for a wrongdoing as it relates to another
- Shame- Feeling humiliated and distressed about making a perceived mistake

“Yes” feelings, go feelings or “green light” feelings of opening:

- Contentment- Serene or tranquil
- Attraction- Drawn to someone or something that is seen as favorable
- Joyful- Great pleasure and happiness
- Easeful- Peaceful or restful
- Satisfaction- The state of pleasurable fulfillment

Naming the feeling is the first step toward accepting it.

Why is it important to accept your feelings? Because the “emotions you resist persist”. Feelings that aren’t felt are never finished.

The same is true for troubling thoughts.

You will be weighted down more and feel more troubled or haunted by a thought if you try to push it away or ignore it.

Unknowingly, what happens when we do that is that those thoughts gain steam.

Research shows that trying not to think about it backfires.

I mentioned this study in the last episode, but it’s important to repeat. In one study, participants were told not to think about white polar bears. As a result of these directions, participants started thinking about them even more than when they had permission to think freely about white polar bears.

The researchers discovered that when you say “I’m not going to think about that”, when you push the thoughts or memories away or try to ignore them, your brain checks-in periodically to keep a watch out for them. At each check-in, your brain brings to mind the forbidden content. Once you become tired or stressed, your mind lets up and the

thoughts re-emerge. When that happens, your mind decides those thoughts are really dangerous. And then you worry and think about it even more.

So what's another strategy?

The white polar bear researchers found that a very absorbing replacement thought worked. They told participants to think of a red Volkswagen instead of a white bear. They found that giving the participants something else to focus on helped them to avoid thinking about the unwanted white bears.

That's strategy #2. Give yourself something specific to focus on instead.

### **Strategy #2: Give yourself something specific to focus on instead.**

I have a very specific way that I distract myself, if I've tried everything else and my mind and body can't relax when I'm trying to fall asleep because of emotions - I play a movie in my mind. I imagine the opening scenes of *When Harry Met Sally*. In my mind, I imagine the dialogue, and the images of the scenes. I imagine Sally sitting in her car at the curb and Harry making out with his girlfriend, Amanda Reese, saying goodbye. And on and on until I fall asleep. As I imagine this, it's totally absorbing and I can feel my body relax. We'll talk more about distraction in a bit. But first, let's keep talking about creating space for your feelings to be there.

Let's look at strategy #3, which is journaling.

### **Strategy #3: Journaling**

Research shows that writing engages the problem-solving part of the brain, which helps to lower the intensity coming from the emotional brain.

If your thoughts are carrying an emotional charge or you're experiencing sticky thoughts, those thoughts that just keep going through your mind over and over, engage your problem-solving part of the brain by journaling about what's on your mind. Writing about it lets you take a step back to view the situation from a different perspective.

I was never much of a journaler until I learned how good it can be for releasing emotions. Now, if I have something on my mind, even just a few minutes of writing about it can help to make sense of what's happening to be able to get back to mental peace.



Do this: Write down the unpleasant thoughts. How do they make you feel? Why? Once you have made sense of the situation, your brain feels free to move on. Sometimes, all I need is 5 minutes of journaling to put my thoughts to rest.

Let's look at strategy #4. Have a designated worry time.

#### **Strategy #4: Have a designated worry time**

Researchers found that having a designated time to worry worked. When you start to worry at an inconvenient time, tell yourself you'll worry at the designated time. Try to postpone the worried thoughts. Research has found that asking people to simply set aside half an hour a day for worrying allows them to avoid worrying during the rest of their day. So next time an unwanted thought comes up, tell yourself, "I'm not going to think about that until my scheduled worry time."

#### **Strategy #5: Talking about shame**

Shame is one of those sticky emotions. If you've ever been in a shame spiral, you know how it eats you up. The shame of eating the whole bag of candy. The shame of being highly sensitive.

Shame is a social emotion, so we keep a secret to protect ourselves from getting hurt. But it actually keeps us from being seen fully, says Brene Brown.

The antidote to shame is to speak openly about what you're ashamed of.

The most shame resilient people do the following things, says Brown.

1. You notice you're in shame.-- Oh, look, I'm feeling shame.
2. You identify what triggered it.--I'm feeling ashamed because I ate the entire bag of chocolate.
3. You talk about it.-- You call a friend, your mom, your partner.
4. You use the word shame. "I'm in a shame spiral", you may say.

Shame thrives because you're convinced you're all alone and no one else could possibly understand. You think others will judge you as unlovable if they knew this thing you did or who you are. That's why sharing it with a trusted buddy removes us from our isolation and reduces the power that shame holds over you.

Before I started writing and sharing about my life, certain stories held so much shame. Pooping my pants in grade school. Getting in a fight with my sister in the hallway of high

school. These were unmentionable stories. The more I write and talk about them, the less shame I feel.

I started telling my friend Nancy about my sugar binges. I learned she binged on sugar, too. And I no longer had a big, unspeakable secret. I started telling friends that I'm highly sensitive. They accept me and they accept it. I see that this part of me is lovable. I see it's okay.

Let's transition into talking for a minute about distraction techniques. I do these when I've tried exploring my feelings and journaling and it's not cutting it.

When you need a break from sticky thoughts or those thoughts that are haunting you. Engage your mind mentally.

That's strategy #6. Engage your mind in higher level mental activities.

### **Strategy #6: Engage your mind in higher level mental activities**

In the past, when I was getting ready for work or driving to work, I used to stress about my day or I'd get irritated or agonize about something I wished I'd said the day before, creating an entire speech of what I'd say if I had the chance to go back to that moment.

Listening to podcasts and audiobooks while I was getting ready in the morning halted my morning brooding and improved my mental state, and frequently gave me creative solutions and new ways to think about my situation. I became happier when I started listening to podcasts and audiobooks.

Let's talk about 1 more strategy for when you need a break from sticky thoughts, and that's strategy #7, exercise.

### **Strategy #7: Exercise**

The same spot in your brain that is home to the fight-or-flight response, also houses receptors for the "don't worry, be happy" chemical.

According to *The Joy of Movement* by Kelly McGonigal, these endorphins are released after 20-minutes of moderately hard continual exercise that gets your heart pumping. Cycling, walking on an incline on a treadmill, and hiking have all been shown to trigger the happy response.

A runner's high is really a release of endorphins to make you feel better and stronger, so you'll keep moving.

These chemicals:

- Lower anxiety and your sense of being overwhelmed and social anxiety
- Increase feelings of inner peace and optimism
- And also increase your pain tolerance

On days you exercise, you're less likely to feel overwhelmed and to have your mental well-being rocked by stressful events.

If you're looking for inspiration to exercise, I recommend Kelly McGonigal's book *The Joy of Movement*. The stories she shares are intended to help you fall in love with moving your body. I was moved and inspired by this book.

Okay, now we've talked about 7 strategies for coping with strong emotions.

## One practice that will give you an edge for coping with feelings

There's one daily practice that can give you an edge when it comes to dealing with your emotions.

And that's meditation. In the last episode, we talked about how meditation can help you navigate intense situations with more ease (I'll link that episode in the show notes so you can go back and listen). Well, meditation also helps you boost your emotional awareness in the moment.

As HSPs, we're so attuned to other people, meditation helps you tune into yourself.

When I meditate in the morning, I'm more mindful of my feelings and reactions. Meditation gives me an extra moment of pausing and hearing my inner voice before I respond and react. It gives me a dedicated time to focus on myself. To become more attuned to my own thoughts and feelings and my mental patterns without judgment. As I mentioned in the last episode, even 5 minutes a day helps. If you're looking for tips on getting started with meditation, episode 3 can help with that. I'll link it in the show notes.

I hope that you're thinking a bit differently now about what it means to be a person with feelings.

Our emotions are a gift. And as an HSP, your gut, heart and mind know things. And in some cultures, you'd be seen as a leader and called a sage or even a visionary.

I'm here to nudge you to grab onto the power that comes from having these qualities, while taking care of yourself to offset the ways they can leave you worn out.

If you're ready to contribute to a cultural shift regarding how emotions are viewed, Celebrate every time you stand in your emotional power and make a heart-centered decision. Raise your kids to know that all feelings are welcome. Learn to articulate a full range of emotions for yourself, which models self-acceptance.

When you express your emotions, you give other people permission to share how they're feeling as well. You allow other people to be real, honest and vulnerable about what's going on for them. And to be seen.

This trait makes you a leader.

You may wonder if you strong enough to be with your feelings. I have wondered about that myself. And it's been through stepping out and walking across that invisible bridge that I've discovered more resilience than I've ever imagined.

I hope these strategies help you tap into your own resilience.

If you have a question for me about something you heard on this podcast or want to suggest a topic for a future episode, email me at [questions@happyhighlysensitivelife.com](mailto:questions@happyhighlysensitivelife.com).

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