

How to Cope with Intense Situations as an Highly Sensitive P...

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SPEAKERS

Marya Choby

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- M** Marya Choby 00:01

Welcome to the Happy Highly Sensitive Life Podcast, where we talk about building a life that lights you up as a highly sensitive person. In this show, you'll feel like you're sitting down with a friend who is here to help you unlock your energy. Find the work you're designed to do. Express your true self, and follow your heart. It's time to shift the conversation about sensitivity. In this space, your feelings are always valid, a joyful life and work you love are meant for you. And the possibilities are endless.
 - M** Marya Choby 00:36

Hello, hello, and welcome to the Happy Highly Sensitive Life podcast. You know, as HSPs, we can experience physiological changes when we're in intense situations. If you're an HSP, you know what this is like. You have a job interview or an unexpected problem to deal with and your heart starts pounding and your stomach is churning. You're sweating, you have trouble thinking straight. Well, in this episode, I want to help you make sense of what's going on and share strategies to cope before, during and after. So you can restore that physiological calm in your day and get a decent night of sleep afterwards.
 - M** Marya Choby 01:20

In this episode, I'll talk about four strategies for coping during an intense situation. We'll talk about how to help yourself recover in the minutes and hours afterwards. I'll also talk about one daily habit that will give you an edge over the stress response. And I'll share what a day in my life looks like when I have something big on the calendar that has the potential to be physiologically stressful and intense. I want you to have the strategies to cope with the intensity that comes from being outside your comfort zone. So your days are more satisfying. And also, so there's nothing standing in the way of you following your heart and trying new things to fulfill your life purpose. Because as an HSP, you have wisdom and inspired observations that make you a visionary. You see subtleties and have perspectives that your family, friends, community and even the world needs to hear.

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Marya Choby 02:25

If you haven't listened to Episode Two yet about what it's like being an HSP, I highly recommend that you go back and listen to that. I talked about the four traits all HSP share. So as an HSP, physiologically, your survival brain is reading the energy of a situation and relying on instincts to pick up on a threat. If something feels off, say you're surprised by an unexpected error in the data you just submitted to your boss or you're forced to move quickly into an unexpected an unknown situation. Say you're called on to give a report or update in a meeting full of strangers when you weren't even on the agenda to speak your self protective fight or flight reaction kicks in right in the middle of your office. So here's what happens. When your survival brain is triggered. Your body's stress system takes over and dumps all its resources into being able to get you to safety. Your heart pumps blood to your legs and arms so you have the power to run away. I can actually feel tingling in my legs and arms as blood pumps into my extremities. And your pumping heart makes you hot and sweaty. For me, I end up with massive sweat rings. With all this work going on your body needs to conserve energy by pulling resources away from your thinking brain, which controls problem solving, focus and attention. And that's why your mind goes blank. If you've ever done something for the first time and walked away thinking I am never doing that again. That was awful. Once was enough for me. You probably had an intense physiological stress response in that moment. And there's a continuum of responses you may have. Maybe you just have butterflies in your stomach when you see an unexpected email from your boss come into your inbox. Or you may have full on sweating, heart pumping, stomach tightening and brain freeze when you're giving a public talk for the first time. As a kid I used to take singing lessons and before recitals, I never understood why I was so rattled. My gastrointestinal system was in overdrive. I was tooting up a storm, and I was so afraid my mind would go blank and I forget the words. Singing is not very easy when you're holding your breath out of fear. I've also had this response before a hard conversation. You know how people always say they avoid having a talk because they're afraid of hurting the other person's feelings. Well, I

realized I avoided having hard conversations because I didn't want to come unglued. Have my mind go blank and forget all the important points I wanted to make, or worse cry, when I was actually mad. Many years ago working as a social worker, I had to testify in court. Luckily, it didn't happen often. But whenever I had a court date on my schedule, I knew I would be extremely stressed. And the night after, I would be tossing and turning with an emotional hangover. Thinking about all that went on, going over and over it in my brain. I was definitely not resting with all the emotional energy that was still coursing through my body. So I have learned many things since then about how to cope with this physiological response. And I want to share all that I've learned with you today. Because I want you to have all the tricks and strategies at your disposal. So you can go and do whatever is in your heart to do, whether it's speaking out about a cause that's near and dear to your heart, or advocating for changes at your kids' school during a PTO meeting. I want you to have supportive strategies to use when you're heading into that doctor's appointment to get test results or going into a job interview for your dream job. And I want to tell you that, because this response often happens in new situations, as you get more practice, say at public speaking, the strength of your physiological reactions will decrease. About 10 years ago, I walked in to give my first presentation to a college class at the university I worked at as an academic coach. I had all the physiological symptoms. And of course, I'd prepared like crazy. I had all my talking points ready for when my mind went blank, I had my piece of paper that I could look at in case that happened. As HSPs we know to be overprepared walking into these things to be able to compensate if our mind does go blank. And I made it through that presentation. Since then, I've given countless presentations in college classrooms. I've even taught my own class and each time I was able to preserve my internal calm more and more. And my message to you is this. When you find the cause, or the activity that lights you up, it makes stepping out of your comfort zone and the energy exchange worth it. Now, let's talk about four strategies to cope with a stress reaction. The first one is relaxation breathing. I start relaxation breathing the moment I feel my first butterflies in my stomach. Butterflies in my stomach tend to be the first sign that I'm getting anxious and stressed. So I start relaxation breathing the first moment I noticed them, and I continue it during my event. So let's talk about relaxation breathing. When your heart is pounding in your chest, relaxation breathing is one of the best things you can do. And you may think that you know how to breathe, but as you'll learn a sec, we've all gotten the wrong advice. But before we go there, let's talk about why breathing? Well, because your heart rate changes with your breathing. There are two parts of the breath, the inhale and the exhale. The inhale speeds up your heart rate, the exhale slows it down. So you need them both right? But how often do you hear "just take a deep breath", it's actually the wrong advice. When you're stressed and your heart is racing, you want to focus on exhaling. That's the part that calms your heart.

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Marya Choby 08:37

Taking a fast deep breath in could just leave you hyperventilating into a brown paper bag. Okay, so instead, exhale through your nose, lengthen the outbreath, using your diaphragm to force the air down to the spot below your belly button. Can you breathe out for a 10 count and in for a five count, that's 15 seconds per breath. Your goal is to slow your breathing down to four to six breaths per minute. So on your first few breaths, you're probably not going to be breathing that deeply. That's okay. As you keep going with it, you will deepen and deepen your breath. I use it before and during stressful events like a job interview, or in the waiting room before a medical procedure.

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Marya Choby 09:26

Okay, so let's talk about the next strategy. It's one you would use if you don't love focusing on your breathing and it's called the grounding technique. It helps you come back to the present moment and your body by using your five senses and here's how it goes. Notice five things you can see and say them out loud. So I see my computer. I see my water glass. I see the clock. I see my phone laying beside me. I see the picture on the wall. Then you'll notice four things you can feel and say them out loud. I feel my feet warm in my socks, I feel the hair on the back of my neck. I feel the chair supporting me, I feel my shirt touching my skin. Notice three sounds, it could be the sound of the computer whirring, the sound of typing or the clock ticking. Say the three things out loud. Notice two things you can smell, it may be a new carpet smell or coffee down the hall, say them out loud. And notice one thing you can taste, maybe the toothpaste from brushing your teeth or a hint of your lunch leftover and say them out loud. So you can use an abbreviated version of this anywhere. I like to do it sitting in my chair waiting for what's coming next. If you're in public, just name the sensations quietly to yourself. I feel the chair connecting with my legs, my feet touching the floor, I notice the taste in my mouth, I focus on the visual of my hands holding my phone. So take a minute now and reconnect with your toes, feel them wherever you are and wiggle them in your shoes. This is one thing I do just about anywhere when I need to easily reconnect to my body. I just focus on wiggling my toes and the feel of feeling my toes wherever I am. So here's the third strategy that will help you break through brain freeze. And it's note taking. So resources are being pulled away from the problem-solving part of your brain to power your body to get away from danger. And if you feel your brain disconnect from your body, and suddenly you can't remember anything, that's because your brain on high alert has limited working memory. Your working memory is the memory you use to remember a phone number or directions to someone's house. Being stressed makes it hard to hold two thoughts in your mind. And notetaking is the remedy that I use. Taking notes or writing about what's happening activates the thinking or cognitive brain and prefrontal cortex and it reduces that brain freeze. I used it when my dog Zuzu was having a health crisis. She's completely fine now,

but I used it to track her symptoms and to write down what the doctor was saying. I use it during doctor's appointments when I'm getting test results back and need to remember the results and need to remember to ask specific questions. I've also used it when I have a surprise at work that rattles me. I carry a notepad and pen with me wherever I go. And especially if I'm going to be in a stressful meeting. You can even have a notepad with you if you're having a stressful phone call with a family member. Have notes to look at, make notes as you go along. The problem-solving cognitive brain balances out that survival brain and writing can tap into that.

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Marya Choby 13:08

Alright, now that you know about relaxation breathing, grounding technique and note taking, let's look at one more. This is a science-backed mantra that can help you make a good impression when all eyes are on you. Researchers set out to see if people perform better under pressure if they try to calm down, or if they allow themselves to embrace their anxiety. Participants were told they needed to give a speech and they should relax by repeating the mantra "I am calm". Another group was told to embrace the anxiety and repeat to themselves "I am excited". Anxiety and excitement feel pretty similar. Now both groups were still anxious. But the ones who embrace the feeling of excitement felt more confident and handled the pressure better. And the audience saw that group as more persuasive and competent and confident. So next time you have to perform or go to a social event, psych yourself up by saying, "I am excited". I use this before I go into parties to help me make it through the front door.

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Marya Choby 14:16

So you've made it through your stressful event. How can you recover in the minutes and hours after you've been in an intense situation? So on days when you've been in fight or flight you need to finish the stress response cycle, as Emily and Amelia Nagoski describe in the book "Burnout". So stress has a beginning, middle and end. Your body doesn't know the stressor is over just because you've switched into your cozy sweat pants. I can feel the emotional energy still present in my body after an event like this. It feels like an emotional hangover or a feeling of intense vulnerability. Like I've been exposed. It can keep me awake at night. You have to help your body cross the finish line after the stressor is over. So let's say you've had a heart pounding day, you have to release this pent up energy from your body. Animals instinctively know to do this. A zebra whose just outrun a cheetah will shake or run in circles or ripple their back to recalibrate their nervous system, and release the stress and adrenaline that's taken over the body. My dog races in circles after she gets a bath. She's working the stress hormones that built up during that bath out of her body. So move your body for 20 minutes by walking or doing cardio or cardio sports.

Go for a brisk walk afterwards and you'll feel the stress hormones working out of your body. And notice your mind and body settling down as you walk. So what if you're not into exercise or you can't head out the door easily? Here's some other things that will do it according to Emily and Amelia Nagoski. Tremble or shake your body and ripple your spine to reset your nervous system. Tense your muscles while bringing to mind your stressful moment until you feel your body shutter and have an emotional release. Another thing that will do it is having a fun conversation and laughing. It shows your body that the world is a safe place to be again. You can also hug a friend. A long 20 second hug with someone you trust will release oxytocin and lower your heart rate. Changing the hormones in your body signals that the risk of danger is past. Just hug it out until you feel more relaxed. And yes, petting your dog or cat works too. You can also have a big old cry to shift the energy in your body. Just let it go. Find the strategy that works best for you. For me, heart pumping exercise makes all the difference. And in that time, my brain has a chance to review what happened. Observing myself in these moments, I can see my mind thinking about what occurred in an effort to try to piece together what went on when my fight or flight brain was in charge and my problem-solving brain was offline.

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Marya Choby 17:10

So one of my favorite strategies for processing the emotional aspect afterwards is to journal. Research shows that writing engages the problem-solving part of the brain, which I talked about a few minutes ago. It helps to lower the intensity coming from the emotional brain. So if your thoughts are carrying an emotional charge, I call them sticky thoughts, those thoughts that just keep boomeranging through your mind over and over. Engage that 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. You know, I was actually 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 allow me to make sense of what's going on to be able to get back to mental peace. So do this, write down the unpleasant thoughts, how do they make you feel and why? Once you've made sense of the situation, your brain feels free to move on. Sometimes all I need is five minutes of journaling to put my thoughts to rest. If I get into bed at night and have any amount of an emotional hangover, or feel vulnerable and like I have unfinished emotional business about what's occurred, I pull out my journal and write about it. It doesn't have to be for long at all. Let yourself make sense of it. Because pushing it away or ignoring the feelings can weigh you down more and unknowingly, what happens when we do this is that those thoughts gain steam. Research shows that trying not to think about it backfires. In one study, participants were told not to think about white polar bears. And 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. So once you become tired or stressed or you lay down in bed at night, your mind lets up and the thoughts reemerge. When that happens, your mind decides those thoughts must be really dangerous. And then you worry and think about them even more. So what's another strategy? Well, 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. So that's another strategy to try. Give yourself something specific to focus on instead, I have a very specific way that I distract my 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. Now I am a very visual person. So this works for me. It is totally absorbing for me and I can feel my body start to release.

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Marya Choby 20:30

Okay, so now you have a whole arsenal of strategies to cope during intense situations. You've got relaxation breathing, and grounding, and note taking and reframing anxiety as excitement. And afterwards to finish the stress response, you've got exercise, tensing your muscles until your body trembles, hugging, laughing, crying to change your physiology, and then journaling or focusing specifically on something else. Let's talk about one daily habit with that will give you an edge over the stress response and help you remember to use these techniques in the moment. And that's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. Mindfulness has become quite mainstream, it's no longer just monks meditating on cushions, it's well studied. And about 10 years ago, I was a participant in a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction study, which involved brain imaging to measure brain changes triggered by regular mindfulness practice. And we know that mindfulness has a whole host of benefits. In the moment it interrupts the stress state, it increases your overall sense of well-being. It increases your relaxation brainwaves, and reduces the brainwaves associated with a very busy, alert and focused mind. You can switch your brainwaves from a chaotic brainwave pattern of worry and scarcity thinking to a coherent, abundant sense of well-being, expansive and healing brainwave pattern. With mindfulness, the brain shows increased connections in the problem-solving part of the brain, and decreased reactivity in the survival brain when under stress. Elaine Aron, HSP researcher, recommends daily meditation and as much as possible so your body learns to relax automatically. So how do you get started? Well, there are many ways to meditate and

here's the process I use, I sit in a comfortable position in a chair, or cross legged on the floor. You can even do this when you're sitting on a bus or waiting to give a presentation. Close your eyes to reduce stimulation and distraction, if that's comfortable to you. If it's not, choose a point to fix your eyes on. Begin to follow your breath. You may choose to focus on the sensation of the breath passing through your nose, or of your belly rising and falling, or to repeat the words inhale and exhale in your mind. Or you may focus on the sound of the breath passing in and out of your nose. And as you breathe, you'll notice that your mind naturally wants to hop on a carousel ride and thoughts will start to capture your attention. "I need to pay that bill. I shouldn't have said that work yesterday, I'm hungry, I need to take the dog to the vet". When you notice your mind wandering, as an act of loving care, just gently without judgment, redirect your focus back to your breathing. And just continue this over and over, holding the focus. And then watching your mind stray. You can see how your mind has automatic thought patterns that it defaults to, reviewing the past or mulling about the future. You will notice your mind began to default to these patterns. With a spirit of curiosity and non-judgmental compassion, gently redirect your focus back to the breath from these automatic mental habits. You'll begin to see that your thoughts are like clouds that move and change and keep on moving and changing. You can observe them without becoming attached to them as truth. And when you open your eyes, what I noticed is that I continued to notice what's happening in my mind. There's a space or a pause between my thoughts that wasn't there before. And that moment of pause lets me choose how I want to respond to my thoughts from moment to moment.

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Marya Choby 24:18

So for how long do you need to meditate? Well, benefits have been shown in increments of as little as five minutes a day. When you're beginning, do whatever easily fits in your schedule and increase the amount of time up to 10 to 20 minutes. On a busy day, even just five minutes can create an impact. When I used to see students and clients back to back, six sessions a day in an eight hour day. My five minutes of meditation between sessions was a lifeline. So when do you do it? Your brain will lean into meditation more easily first thing in the morning or right before bed. Your brain isn't juggling the distractions of a busy day and it can settle down more easily. If you're anticipating a very stressful day, morning meditation will help you be more resilient in disruptive and chaotic environments. If you haven't slept well, 10 minutes of meditation first thing in the morning when you wake up will lower your stress levels and leave you more focused. And before bed, meditation will help you create a coherent brainwave pattern. So you feel more balanced and have a sense of well-being. Now if it feels hard to do, start small and build momentum, a minute a day. Let yourself be a beginner, give yourself grace and permission to do it imperfectly. No matter what, you will benefit from sitting in the quiet and in the dark. And even if your

mind is hopping around, the sensory relief you will feel will provide a benefit. So do an experiment. And observe how your day goes with meditation and without it. And if you can see an observable difference in your day, where you can mindfully keep from getting sucked under by a stressful moment, that is positive reinforcement for continuing to do it day after day. Seeing the difference in your day and wanting to maintain an emotional edge and being able to see the impact meditation is having will make you want to make the time for it and prioritize it in your day. You can also consider using a meditation timer app like the Insight Timer app or the Headspace App. I'll link these for you in the show notes. So for the last 25 years, I've been an on and off meditator. In the past, I've not surprisingly done it more when I've had more stress. If I'd had an intense day and then slept poorly the night after and if I wake up grumpy, meditation is the first thing I do because I can feel the stress of tossing and turning all night melt from my body as I meditate. And then I'd also do mini episodes during the day, when I was feeling fatigued from my poor night of sleep. I don't drink coffee. So this would give me an added energy boost. Now, today I incorporate morning meditation as part of a spiritual practice of just wanting to stay connected to my internal compass, my internal voice to stay rooted in the truth of myself throughout my day. So I can show up here as my real authentic self and be of service in the best way and the highest frequency as possible. So that is my daily motivation to meditate. today. It's wanting to feel connected to myself and my inner voice.

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Marya Choby 27:52

So I want to wrap up by sharing with you my routine if I have an event on my schedule, which has the potential to be very intense. In the past, I walked into intense situations like testifying in court, with no strategies. And after it was over, sugar was my comfort and I would have an emotional hangover or feel emotionally vulnerable. Reviewing and thinking about what went on for about 24 hours after the event, I just kind of accepted that that that was going to happen. I always slept badly because there was so much emotional energy remaining in my body. But then I started adding in a run after the stressful event and that seemed to help. And then, when I trained to be a health coach, I added in relaxation breathing. And now, my self-care routine has evolved to be much more elaborate. So here's what I do in the morning when I have an intense event on my schedule. I start my day with morning meditation for as long as I can, maxing probably maxing out at about 20 minutes. And then as I'm getting ready for the event, at the first sign of any nervous butterflies in my stomach, I start my relaxation breathing. So I may do this sitting at my desk or driving to a job interview or sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office. And I continue it walking into the event. And I think to myself, "I am excited". Obviously I don't think that to myself if I'm going into a doctor's appointment, that's really not a suitable substitute that your mind would believe in that moment. But if

I'm walking into a job interview or public speaking event, I say to myself, "I am excited". And then during the event I am tuning in periodically to notice my breathing. To make sure I'm not holding my breath. I may focus on the exhale and lengthening the exhale of my breath. And I'm using grounding to stay present in my body. I just feel my toes and wiggle my toes in my shoes. And also I do notetaking so I have a pad of paper available. So afterwards, for me that emotional energy is gathered in my body. And I like to exercise it out. That's what works for me. And so I'll go on a fast paced walk, usually around my very hilly neighborhood for about 20 minutes and I can feel it start to release from my body, I can feel my pace of walking slow as the stress hormones come out of my body. And then afterwards, I'll journal, which takes this sticky zing out of my thoughts. And it preps my brain to relax and to sleep. So then, when I'm getting in bed that night, if I lay down and my brain is still going after all of that, I'll give myself something else to focus on like reading a book, which helps with relaxation. Once I turn out the lights, if I don't fall right to sleep and I can feel emotional energy still there, I'll start focusing on replaying that movie in my head that I mentioned earlier. I'll start remembering the dialogue, and picturing the scenes of When Harry Met Sally and my brain. So then the next morning, if I've had a bad night of sleep, morning meditation is a must. And then I keep doing mini meditation sessions during the day here and there if I'm feeling fatigued, but mostly I'm just focused on being very gentle with myself. So this is the routine that I use.

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Marya Choby 31:32

If you listened to Episode One, you heard how I deliberately switched jobs when I noticed that working as a therapist was changing me in a way I didn't like because of the frequent exposure to very intense situations. My life was getting smaller and smaller, and my energy to be curious and try new things was non-existent because so much of my life was physiologically intense from that work. And it was then that I learned to be intentional about what I give my energy to. So I'm giving it to things that light me up, and so I can live a full life and fulfill my life purpose. And that's what I want for you too. Please know that I am rooting for you to have every happiness that you desire.

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Marya Choby 32:26

Bye for now. I'll see you next time.

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Marya Choby 32:33

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