

The Happy Highly Sensitive Life Podcast

How to Survive A Social Gathering as a Highly Sensitive Person

Podcast Transcript

Episode 8

If you're a highly sensitive person, then you know that socializing isn't always an easy-breezy low-stress thing, whether you're an introvert or an extrovert.

Because you're a deep processor as an HSP, when you're in a group social setting, there's a lot to tune into that can feel chaotic and overstimulating. Especially if you're in a new environment around new people. You notice the subtle body language of the people you're talking to. You're tuned into noise volume and hear the emotional tone of conversations around you. All of your senses are on full alert. This makes you perceptive, and dialed into the heartbeat of the space you're in. Your perceptiveness means you really see people. You get what drives people and you have insights and perspectives others might miss. You are a person of depth and substance.

Your deep processing and depth also means you probably prefer to have deeper, more thoughtful conversation with one person rather than navigating small talk or a group conversation with relative strangers who are jockeying for attention by loudly telling the funniest, most entertaining story. So often, because of my deep processing, I feel two beats behind a fast-paced conversation. If I try to match the quick-pace of the conversation, I speak without having a chance to think about what I really want to say. Afterwards, I invariably kick myself for sticking my foot in my mouth. How is it possible that I could be so careful and seemingly still speak without thinking?

Even extroverted HSPs who feel energized being around other people can get overstimulated by socializing. You'll be enjoying yourself one minute and then suddenly crash from the sensory overload.

Whether you're an introvert or extrovert, if you're with people you know well, love and trust, socializing is less taxing, since you can relax more around them. But moving into a new social situation, going to holiday gatherings, parties, or weddings, requires a survival plan going in.

Even if you know the host well, when they're tied up mingling with other guests, it's not guaranteed that you'll get much quality time with them. And then you'll get stuck making small talk with all their friends.

Hosting your own party or social gathering may also be unexpectedly overwhelming. I always hear people talk about how they love to have people over and to entertain, but that hasn't been my experience because my attention feels so divided it's overwhelming. Trying to

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serve food while answering questions people have about things like "where's the bathroom?" or what's going on in my life. Making sure everyone is content and happy and socializing. I feel pulled in so many different directions. When we moved into a home that was large enough to host gatherings, I dreamt of having a yearly Oktoberfest party. We did it the first year we moved in and invited our new neighbors and some family and friends and I was surprised by how much work it was and that it wasn't very fun for me. It's more enjoyable for me to have a small intimate gathering with people I know and can let my guard down.

It's easy to compare how you socialize with how other people socialize and think you need to do it their way. When I was in my 20s, I remember going to friends' weddings with 100s of people. Back then, I thought weddings needed to be large to show people how well known and liked you are. I worried that I wouldn't know enough people to invite to my own wedding.

Because I didn't have a ton of people in my phone contact list, I'd randomly worry that my funeral would be empty and few people would attend. It was a weird thing to worry about. I thought the value of my life would be judged by whether I had a large enough social circle.

Looking back, I know that social needs change with our stage of life. When I was single and living alone, I needed to socialize more. Meditation groups or girl's night out on a weeknight and Saturday night dinners with friends filled a need for connection.

Now that I'm married, my social needs are met right at home. You pretty much have to pry me out of the house with a crowbar. And as I've gotten older, I no longer compare myself socially to other people. I recognize that as an HSP, I want to preserve my energy for the things and people that light me up and get me. I am not at my best when my energy is spread thin with multiple obligations and so when I do say yes, it needs to be to the invitations that are aligned. Now I aim to have the level of socialization that's right for me. And to have a balance where I'm not on the go so much that I'm exhausted. And I'm not bored from sitting at home too much.

I've also accepted that I thrive in smaller groups of people I know well. When Adam and I got married, we deliberately had a small wedding of 25 people, officiated by Adam's brother on my sister's front porch. I'll drop a picture in the show notes. It was the perfect way to do it for us. Just our very closest family and friends were there. We went really non-traditional and after a simple meal catered by a local Italian restaurant, finished the night with a foosball tournament in the basement. We could never have had that intimate, homey, cozy feel if we had a giant wedding at a rented space.

Today, I have a rich inner life and feel most satisfied when I can focus on that, surrounded and connected to a small group of very loved people. I find that it's stressful for me to have to field tons of invitations from acquaintances and people I don't know very well or with extroverted friends who seemingly can socialize constantly and at the drop of a hat.

Now I selectively say yes to invitations. I delay giving an answer. I give myself time to consider what I'm saying yes to and to consider what I'll be giving up to put time and energy into this extra activity. IMO, HSPs should always say "I need to check my calendar" so you have time to think about it. If you're ambivalent, the answer is probably no.

If you're in a life transition phase, say you've just moved to a new town or a new job; there's no getting around the more depleting stage of making new friends. When you haven't reached the phase of relative comfort and ease with them yet.

When I am going to a get together, I approach socializing like running a marathon. You wouldn't go into a 26-mile race without a solid plan to make it through. When I was in college, I survived social situations by drinking. But several years ago, I pretty much stopped drinking, even at parties. I hated how it made me feel the next day, and a single drink turned me into a quiet ghost in the corner. That was the exact opposite of the effect I was going for. But without alcohol, I was anxious and felt like I was walking into a party naked. Unexpectedly, because I wasn't drinking and alcohol wasn't clouding my powers of observation, I learned a few things about how to survive and even have fun at social gatherings.

Today, In the episode, I'm going to share what I learned that you can use whether you're drinking or not.

You will learn...

- How to physically and mentally prepare to socialize
- What to do if you regret saying yes to an invitation at the 11th hour
- How to feel more confident and practice mindful socializing
- What you can do to stop beating yourself up for something you said or did while you're out

I want you to have tips and strategies to enjoy the events that you decide to attend as you move into the holiday season. And also to give yourself permission to do only what feels aligned and lights you up.

Let's get started by talking about how to prepare physically and mentally to socialize.

If you listened to [Episode 3, How to Cope with Intense Situations](#), you may have heard me say that I practice a two-phased self-care plan. Phase 1 is resting up before an event, so I have solid energy going in. Phase 2 is recovering after the event is over.

When I have a party or group dinner on my calendar, I try not to commit to anything else on the day of the event. I deliberately make it a low-key day. The day of, I stay home and do things that restore my energy. Take a long walk, read a good book. Watch tv. Exercise. Since exercising lowers social anxiety, and increases courage and optimism.

Before my event, I set an intention for the party that describes how I want to feel while I'm there and choose a word or mantra that reminds me of that feeling.

Here's why I do this. Our brain has an automotive filtering system that sees what it deems is important. We see what we want to see. According to Caroline Webb in her book, [How To Have A Good Day](#), we see anything that we're (1) consciously prioritizing (2) worried about and (3) that reflects how we're feeling. I'll link that book in the show notes.

Trafton Drew's psychology study with his colleagues at Harvard's Visual Attention Lab provides evidence of this. Putting a picture of a gorilla in a lung scan, they tested radiologists to see if they'd see it. 83% of them didn't. If we're not looking for something, we simply won't notice it. Our perception of our environment is skewed heavily by our automatic thoughts and assumptions.

Webb gives us three questions to use to set intentions. They're the 3 A's, Aim, Attitude and Attention. Identify

1. Your **Aim**. What's your goal or intention? What will make this event successful in your mind?
2. What's your **Attitude** going to be? How do you want to feel about this situation?
3. Where do you want to focus your **Attention**? What do you want to see more of and then be on the lookout for?

For my office holiday party 2 years ago, I set the intention to feel more "playful". Playful is light, silly and goofy, and creative. The opposite of stressed. With playful as my mantra, I volunteered to help organize the party. The morning of the party, I set my intentions using the three A's:

My Aim? I wanted to prioritize connecting with my co-workers and having fun. My normal default is to prioritize having everything perfect, which stresses me out and makes me impatient and less present.

My Attitude? I wanted to hold the intention of having more fun.

My Attention? I wanted to notice people having a good time, rather than obsess over what wasn't perfect. With this intention, I was better able to notice how I was starting to stress about the little details. Things like, how would I wedge a vase of flowers in my car so it wouldn't spill while I drove? Would the caterer show up on time? Would my coworkers enjoy themselves? Normally, I'd wedge the vase of flowers so it stays upright in the car. And race around multitasking and worrying over whether the party will be good enough. Since my aim was to have fun, I decided I need to let all that go, including the flowers, which I ended up leaving at home. My intention to feel playful led me to make different decisions, so I'd be more relaxed. I started setting up earlier, so I wasn't rushed. I had a coworker help me, which lowered my stress level and made it more fun. I called the caterer to confirm again and then let it go. I could feel my lightness. My good mood was not affected by external circumstances or other people. This was liberating. Webb's intention setting helped me find a new level of positive emotion and playfulness.

Okay, once you've chosen your mantra and set your intention for the event, think of easy conversation starters you can use to strike up conversation with your host and the people you'll meet. This makes it easier to think of something to say. Think about what you know about your host. Their partner, kids, hobbies, interests, and work. Come up with three go-to conversation topics. In a pinch, you can default to complimenting their home and to asking how long they've lived there. This is an easy launching pad for tons of other follow-up questions. Like "where did you grow up?" and "how did you and your partner meet?"

Now that you're mentally prepared, **eat something before you go.** Hangry is a bad way to go into any new situation. If I have low blood sugar, noise makes me jumpy, impatient and quiet. Everything feels like a bigger effort.

As party time gets closer, I start feeling nervous and often feel last minute regret for saying yes. I want to bail out by faking a headache. When these feelings creep up, I start rationalizing that "no one will mind if I don't show up". If you do this too, this is the time to remember why you said "yes". You do care about your friend or the cause. Or you want to expand your social circle and meet new people.

Give yourself permission to go and stay for only 30 minutes. You can do anything for 30 minutes. And once you get there, you may find you want to stay longer. To help yourself get in the right mindset to get through the front door, it's time to **reframe your nerves as excitement.**

There's [research](#) that shows that reframing nerves as excitement changes how you show up. If you think about it, the physical sensation of anxiety is similar to that of excitement. For me, I get butterflies in my stomach from both. And the research is clear. If you view your anxiety as similar to excitement and a source of energy, focus, and alertness that will help you excel, you will feel more confident and handle the pressure better. Anxiety brings a wariness and a desire to withdraw. Whereas excitement brings anticipation. Telling yourself "I am excited" helps you handle the moment better than telling yourself, "I am calm". And it works even more if you have an anxiety disorder. People with anxiety disorders think their hearts are racing out of control and their adrenaline levels are off the charts as compared to less anxious people. But research shows their physiological responses are just the same. Everyone has the same level of spike to heart rate and adrenaline. But people with anxiety disorders interpret their physiological reactions as being more significant. If you think you've got a ton of anxiety, you're even more likely to be helped by changing your mindset. Telling myself, "I am excited" as I walk into a gathering changes my confidence level as I greet people. I'm open and energetic and offer a big warm greeting rather than sneaking in quietly and then hanging back.

Now, you've got your mantra and you're telling yourself, I am excited. If you're showing up at a party alone, arrive on time. An emptier room is easier to enter into than a packed one. You'll have more one-on-one time with your host and they'll introduce you to people as they come in. You can offer to help with setting up, which will keep you busy.

Give a strong hello to the host when you arrive. Remember “I am excited” and go right over to the hostess and greet them when you first walk in. I’ve spent too many parties feeling like a party crasher because I didn’t do this. It relieves you from sitting in the wings, waiting to cut in. And sets the tone for being included, since they’ll introduce you to other people.

Once you’re there, take a seat. Sitting is more grounding and promotes deeper conversation. And you only need to talk to the people on either side of you, which is less overwhelming. I always think that conversations held by a group of people who are standing up seem to be faster paced, with louder, more boisterous storytelling. Which has never been my forte, since I always think of what I want to say once the conversation switches topics.

At the get-together, practice mindful socializing. Inject some mindfulness into the moment. Stay anchored by noticing how you’re breathing. If you’re holding your breath, as I’m apt to do, your body thinks it’s having an emergency, and it’s hard to think clearly. Periodically check in with your breathing to make sure you are still actually breathing. If your heart is pounding, relaxation breathing is one of the best things you can do because your heart rate calms as you deepen 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. You want to focus more on deepening the exhale rather than inhaling. The exhale calms your heart. A fast deep breath in may leave you hyperventilating. Instead, exhale through your nose, lengthen the out-breath, 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. Slow your breathing down to four to six breaths per minute. 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 your breath and begin to feel calmer.

Another thing to do is to scan for tension in your body. I often find that my shoulders are pinned up next to my ears, so I work on releasing them.

Give yourself support. If you’re sitting, place your attention on the feeling of the seat supporting your body. If you’re standing, feel the bottom of your feet touching your shoes and supporting you to stand. This helps you feel grounded and to stay present in the moment.

Give yourself breaks. Go to the bathroom and soak up the joy of being by yourself. Shut your eyes and breathe.

During the party, if you don’t have anyone to talk to, make it your mission to **help other introverts relax.** You may be certain you’re the most uncomfortable person at a party. But chances are you’re not. Look around for people hanging back and strike up a conversation. You’ll find someone else who wants to have a deeper conversation. And the party will improve for both of you.

When it comes to initiating conversation, remember those conversation topics you prepared in advance and **ask questions**. My spouse, Adam's default at a party, is to smile, ask questions, and listen. He asks lots of questions. Smiling and listening makes you likable. Everyone loves to be heard. And most of the world is extroverts who love to talk. If you're good at listening, you're a perfect match.

One of the joys of not drinking is that it gives me permission to loosen up too. When they're drinking, I know they're not focused on me and what I'm saying and doing. The more they drink, the more entertaining it is for me. It's my chance to be mischievous, poke fun and be playful and it helps to keep me from getting bored, which is something that can happen to me at parties.

When it comes time to leave, **try not to ghost out**. I've been known to evaporate out the back door without saying goodbye. I always feel bad about it later. So now I decide to leave when I'm on a high note and still have the energy to say "see ya" and "thank you". Find the host, say a quick goodbye.

Once you're out the door, appreciate yourself for what you've done. Go home and crash, rest and relax. If you're beating yourself up for something you said and reviewing conversations in your head repeatedly, instead of trying to distract yourself from your thoughts, remember that the "emotions you resist persist". Rather than pushing away your thoughts and feelings, move into them.

Why? When you push them away, your brain assigns a guard of sorts to keep a watch out for them. As Kelly McGonigal says in her book, [The Willpower Instinct](#), as the guard "searches for forbidden content, it continually brings to mind what it is searching for". Once you become tired or stressed, your vigilance lets up and the thoughts keep resurfacing. When that happens, your mind decides those thoughts are really dangerous. And then you worry even more.

How do you relax your mind? If you haven't listened to Episode [3](#) and [4](#) of this podcast, go back and take a listen. I share many strategies for helping you cope with your emotions and relax your mind. I'll link these episodes in the show notes. My favorite strategy after a party is to write about what I'm thinking and feeling. **I journal about the moments I'm beating myself up over**. Even just a few minutes of writing helps.

If you want to try journaling, answer 3 questions. What's the situation you keep replaying in your mind? What's the feeling you have about that moment? What's the belief or judgment you're holding about yourself and that moment?

Here's an example:

1. **What's the situation that you're replaying in your mind?** Write about the moments you keep thinking about. If you keep remembering something you said, write down the conversation. For me, I often replay conversations in my mind, thinking, man, did I really say that? For example, I write down that my friend was lamenting the fact that her

daughter wasn't choosing to come home from college for the holiday. I said it was normal for kids to want to do their own thing and spread their wings.

2. **What's the feeling you have about that moment?** Name the feeling. I write down that "I'm worried I was insensitive."
3. **What's the belief or judgment you're holding about yourself and that moment?** I feel ashamed because I believe I've been insensitive and belittled her feelings.

Oftentimes, just naming the situation makes a difference. You could try to reframe the belief you're holding about the moment. In this situation, I was trying to normalize that her daughter wasn't coming home, saying it wasn't personal.

Journaling allows you to experience your feelings constructively, so they will pass rather than continuing to haunt you. The mind learns these thoughts are harmless. So it releases them. With a new sense of mental calm, you'll be able to sleep better.

No one is keeping score on your party performance but you. Give yourself permission to do it your way. Rest up and prepare. Get your mantra and talk yourself through your 11th hour jitters. Show up and stay grounded and breathe. Quit comparing yourself to the loud storytelling jokester in the center of the room. There's space for all kinds of runners in this race.

There you have it, friends, another episode.

This is the final episode of Season 1 for the year. I'll be back with Season 2 and a brand new episode on January 6th.

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.

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Bye now.