

The Happy Highly Sensitive Life Podcast

Working as an HSP: 5 Things I Wish I Knew at the Start of My Career

Podcast Transcript
Episode 14

Hello my friend,

Question for you.

What are the moments you feel happiest at work?

When you are happy, what are the exact feelings you feel?

These are the questions I asked myself a few years ago. At that point, I was 20 years into my career and looking to bring some new life into my job. And when I asked myself these questions, I discovered that my happiest moments came from feeling **obsessed** with a new project. From enjoying **playful** moments with people around me. And doing **creative** projects that gave me a chance to invent a new way to do something.

I was happiest at work when I felt Obsessed, Playful, and Creative. I put these words on a sticky note on my computer monitor so from moment to moment, I could look for opportunities to feel immersed, lighthearted and inventive at work. To find a new level of feeling satisfied.

At the time that I had these words as my motto, my career had gone through many evolutions. From working in a mental health setting as a therapist to a non-profit and then college and university settings. If you'd asked me how I wanted to feel when I first started working 20 years before, my answer would have been different. As a teenager, I wanted to be a therapist. I wanted to feel helpful and lift the weight from other people and do work that was built from my big empathetic heart. As my career progressed, I still wanted to make an impact and help people create new possibilities for their lives.

But, I found out there's a rub when it comes to being an introverted HSP and choosing work built around my empathetic nature. It took a toll on me, physically, mentally and emotionally.

Working has always felt like an important part of who I am. But I also felt like I was a mismatch for the world of work in terms of how it left me depleted.

Today, connecting with other HSPs, I know I'm not the only one that's felt this way. And so in this episode, I want to share with you 5 things I wish I'd known as an HSP when I first started working. My hope is that this information will give you permission to craft your work in a way that works for you, whether you're just starting out or 20 years into your career. Wherever you are in your journey, if your empathic nature has you putting others' needs in front of your own, I hope you come away with permission to take care of yourself and what you need.

Let's dive into those 5 things I wish I'd known starting out.

#1 There are many ways to help and make a difference in the world, propelled by your big empathetic heart and it's okay for that work to evolve and take different forms throughout your life.

When I was in my teens, we talked about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator a lot in my house. I learned early that I'm an INFP. Those four magic letters gave me so much self-understanding at a time that I felt anything but ordinary. The Myers-Briggs listed certain professions that would be a good fit for me as an INFP and being a therapist was among them. When I thought about what I wanted to do for work, my heart expanded at the idea of helping others as a therapist.

But, once I started training to be a counselor, there was a heaviness that started to weigh me down in graduate school. I pushed myself hard at work to prove I could do it and to show that I could measure up. The work took an emotional toll. But there was also a sense of satisfaction. What I did every day felt really important and I took pride in helping other people and making a difference. That made it all worthwhile.

If you were to look at your work day and ask yourself, what parts of your day drain your energy and what parts of your day expand your energy, it's possible that, as an empathetic person, you'd say the same thing did both. Working directly with clients, patients or students would be both an expander in the moment and also a drain. In the beginning, doing work that comes from your heart is an expander. But eventually, based on how the modern work schedules function, reporting to work day after day, hour by hour, there's a tipping point and seeing clients so constantly eventually starts contracting you.

Over time, at the end of the day, I'd collapse in front of the television. Alone. With a bag of sweet tarts or red hots. I had bad dreams about my work and a recurrent nightmare someone was trying to break in my bedroom window. I slept fitfully, waking up in the middle of the night. I started sleeping with the TV on every night to try to buffer the energy I was carrying with me from my work day. I couldn't keep up with my friends to socialize. I dodged their phone calls, too tired to talk. At some point I had this worry that my life would end up being all about work if something didn't change.

I never thought to question my choice of becoming a therapist. It's what I'd wanted since I was a teenager. I had no idea what else I would do. The tradeoff seemed worth it too. When your identity is tied around making a difference, it's not easy to just walk away.

However, the pressure to meet the needs of others day in and day out started to wear me down.

Which takes me to the 2nd thing I wish I'd known.

#2 To notice signs of stress and imbalance in your body and make adjustments to how you're working.

We have been socialized to accept that there's a certain amount of stress that we should just see as normal and par for the course with going to work. It's just the way it is. That's why it's called work, afterall.

If you're feeling like you're on a slowly burning ship but you look around and none of your coworkers seem to think the ship is burning, or if having things on fire is central to the work you're doing, with clients or patients or students with high needs all the time, it's easy to see the smoke and just start to normalize the daily stress.

As an HSP, because of your ability to sense subtleties in your environment, you may be the first to detect that you're getting singed and inhaling smoke. If you can notice the early signs of stress in yourself, you can step in early to make adjustments. To take time off and care for your mental well-being by changing up your work schedule. Working in this type of work environment, I never thought about self-care in this way. I just held out until I could take a planned day off or a vacation.

The environments I worked in always encouraged people to think about their own self-care, but there were limits about what form that would take.

The way workloads are set-up, you become conditioned in your workplace to go no matter what. No adjustments can be made to the work for you. You must adjust yourself to do the work because people are counting on you.

Different workplaces have different norms about what's acceptable to do. I would often meditate between sessions for just 5 minutes to reboot and that was okay. But in one workplace, I closed my door during lunch to reduce stimulation and shut my eyes, but from time to time I heard comments from more extroverted coworkers about my door being shut and me not being social enough. Seeing 6 students a day, that quiet time was key for me to get through the day and I'm glad I did that for myself.

When you're a very conscientious employee, you're likely to absorb the stress and try to carry on. If you're sleeping poorly from stress after a very hard stretch of work, instead of taking time off, you start drinking more caffeine. More caffeine means you're holding more tension in your jaw and grinding your teeth. You start having more headaches or migraines so you take more advil. Your stomach is upset and you're on edge and more easily overstimulated from the caffeine. If you're like me, you start reaching for sugar, which also increases your anxiety. You start feeling more and more crummy every day. And the lack of time freedom leads to pushing forward and becoming disconnected from your own needs to meet the needs of others.

As an HSP, being forced to move very fast through your day, hustling from meeting to meeting, from client to client or patient to patient, creates a state of stress and disconnects you from:

- Your natural pause and check response that wants to look before taking action.
- Your thorough thought process
- Your full emotional responses
- Your intuition and inner knowing

This creates a bottleneck of unprocessed experiences and unfelt emotions that shows up as

- Repeatedly thinking about what occurred during the day and beating yourself up for what you said or did. Maybe even feeling ashamed about something

that occurred, if you think you weren't as conscientious as you like to be, or didn't speak as carefully as you like to

- Trouble sleeping
- Self-soothing with sugar, food or alcohol
- Low energy and being tired all the time
- Feeling uninspired about life

And over time, burnout.

We spend 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime. That's ⅓ of your life. In my late 20s when I recognized that I needed to have more energy left for a personal life, I started questioning the way I was working. I knew there had to be another way to have more time freedom in my workday and I started looking for it. I wasn't ready to work for myself yet, but there had to be another way to work for someone else doing meaningful work and also having more freedom to take care of myself.

Work is a marathon, not a 50 yard dash and you increase your chance of being vital at mid-life when you move away from constant pressure cooker work environments.

That takes me to the 3rd thing I wish I'd known when I first started working and that's **#3 How to really release stress from your nervous system.** If you haven't listened to Episode 3, How to Cope with Intense Situation as an HSP, you'll find the tips in that episode really useful. I'll link it in the show notes.

On a stress filled day, you need to finish the stress-response cycle. As Emily and Amelia Nagoski describe in the book *Burnout*, stress has a beginning, middle and end. Your body doesn't know the stressor is over just because you've switched into your cozy sweatpants. The Nagoski's say you have to help your body cross the finish line after the stressor is over.

So let's say you've had a stressful day. You have to release this pent up energy from your body. But animals know to do this. A zebra who's just outrun a cheetah will shake or run in circles or ripple their back to recalibrate the nervous system, and to release the stress and adrenaline that's taken over the body. My dog Zuzu races in circles after she gets a bath. She's working the stress hormones that built during that bath out of her body. 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. Notice your mind and body settling down as you walk.

What if you're not into exercise, or you can't head out the door easily? Here are some other things that will do it.

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 shudder and have an emotional release.

Laugh. It shows your body that the world is a safe place to be again. Watch those funny videos or have a good belly laugh with a coworker, friend or your partner.

Get a Hug. 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 stress has passed. Hug until you feel more relaxed. And yes petting your dog or cat, works too.

Have a big cry to shift the energy in your body.

One of my favorite strategies for processing the emotions is to journal.

If your thoughts are carrying an emotional charge or you're experiencing thoughts that just keep going through your mind over and over, research shows that engaging the problem solving part of the brain by journaling reduces the emotional impact. 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 allow me to make sense of what's going on to be able to get back to mental peace.

When I was working as a counselor, I eventually started a running routine and started dabbling in meditation.

If I'd known this research about releasing stress, I would've been more vigilant about moving my body every day, which is the thing that really clears out the stress for me. I wish I'd noticed earlier that eating sugar after work and eating for comfort during the workday tanked my energy and kept me from having the fuel to go for a walk or

run to get the stress out.

Find the strategies that really make the difference for you to release stress every day and find mental peace.

Speaking of mental peace, that takes me to number 4.

#4 I wish I'd accepted my sensitivity earlier. High sensitivity has 4 core traits. First: Depth of processing, which means you're tuned into what's going on around you, processing your environment, and interactions.

You are more perceptive than non-HSPs and this strength also requires some additional care to deal with the overstimulation you feel in new, intense or chaotic spaces. Overstimulation is the second trait.

You are empathetic and emotionally responsive. You are easily moved and brain studies show that for HSPs, there's a part of the brain that has higher activation to happy and sad emotional states. You feel things deeply. That's the 3rd trait.

Trait 4, You Sense subtleties. You notice the little things. As an HSP, your senses are active, but not from having excellent nose or ears. But from having brain areas that are more activated with the complex processing of sensory input.

For so long, I didn't realize I was actually resisting my sensitivity. 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 with a very challenging 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 speak up about it. I worried I would seem needy or high maintenance.

Sometimes consciously and often unconsciously I'd think to myself, "What's wrong with me?" "What's my problem?". "Why can't I just get over this?" "if only I weren't so sensitive; if only I didn't feel this way."

When you accept your feelings, and discover the messages coming from your emotions, you can build a work life that truly works for you. If you haven't listened to *episode 4, How to Cope With Your Feelings as a HSP*, it's a good one packed full of usable strategies. I will link it in the show notes.

For so long I felt different from my peers. And I just wanted to fit in and not stick out. At some point, I realized that being different also gave me an edge in being able to think differently about life, to look beyond what we're told we need to do to have a good life and chart my own way. Maybe there were other possibilities for how to make work work for me. Perhaps self-sacrifice didn't need to be central to doing meaningful work. When you start setting up your life so you can thrive, and you start considering your own needs in addition to the needs of others, you know you're beginning to truly understand and accept yourself.

Which takes me to #5

#5. I wish I'd come to a deeper level of self-understanding through knowing about my Human Design. If you love the insights you get from the MBTI and Enneagram, I'm betting you'll love the insights you get from learning about your human design. Human Design synthesizes Astrology, the Chinese I'Ching, The Kabbalah, the Hindu Chakras and Quantum Physics, it uses your birth date, time and place to create your unique human design chart.

Human Design helps you understand yourself, showing you how you're meant to work and rest, tap into your inner knowing, attract opportunities, and fulfill your life purpose.

When your Human Design chart is interpreted you can understand exactly how you're an empath and take in the energy of others. As I talk about in episode 11, it's always struck me that empathy shows up differently in different people. And in varying degrees. My way of experiencing empathy may feel different than yours.

When I discovered Human Design, I finally had a framework for understanding how we empathically experience other people. For the first time, I got why I felt so turned upside down by working as a therapist. I have an Open Identity Center, which is a trait many therapists and intuitives have.

With an Open Identity Center, you are deeply sensitive. The empathic gift of this center is that you can deeply experience the essence of other people. You feel the

identity and purpose of people around you. With this center open, you're not technically emotionally empathic but you are very attuned to others' identity and also to the energy of spaces.

You may begin to share the identity of the people you are with and the environment you are in. I haven't shared this anywhere before. Working as a therapist, my Open Identity Center got hooked. I hadn't learned to stay grounded in myself enough at that point. I could so strongly feel the hopelessness of the client that I'd feel rattled by it and wonder how the heck I was supposed to help them. Human Design shows you how you experience the energy of others and in episode 11 I share many strategies for staying grounded and protecting your energy. It's a good episode to checkout. I will link it in the show notes.

Do HSPs find Human Design helpful?

Kelly S says,

"After listening to your podcast on Human Design, I did some research into my Human Design... It helped me tune my choices when I was looking for jobs and reminded me that being my authentic self in interviews and on my LinkedIn profile would help me get the job I wanted, versus the job I thought I needed. I'm happy to say that I found a new job that's a great fit."

I'm always a fan of any tool that leads to better self understanding and self acceptance.

Now, remember those 3 words I mentioned at the beginning of this episode about how I wanted to feel at work? Obsessed, playful and creative? Learning about my HD showed me why these feeling states are so important to me.

As a Manifesting Generator energy Type, I'm driven by the energy to create new ways of doing things, I long to follow my creative inspiration and to be wholly immersed in it, without interruption.

I yearn for the flexibility and freedom to be creative and to follow my gut and do what lights me up. To follow where my inspiration takes me, which makes me well-suited to working for myself and being my own boss without having to respond to orders from others. Knowing this explains why having a full calendar can feel like such a downer why I have always longed to work for myself and to have freedom and flexibility in my days to follow my creative flow and create my own agenda, And why I've always loved bringing my vision to life in new projects.

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When I learned about my Human Design, I felt more deeply seen and understood. And that gave me even more permission to lean into building an aligned work life.

We are coming off a monumental life shift after living through a global pandemic. People are wondering how to create more alignment with work. They're asking what makes it worth it to give your time and energy to work for 40 or 50 hours a week. They're looking for more out of work.

How has the pandemic impacted how you feel about your job or work? Maybe you're settled in at your current job and looking for solutions to manage your empath energy at work. My hope is that this episode and resources I've mentioned here will help you to care for yourself in the midst of a busy work life..

Maybe, if you're like so many HSPs I hear from, you may be wondering how to make a job change to have more life. I've heard this question from so many HSPs that I recorded my thoughts and professional advice for you and packaged it together into a mini course called the Aligned Job Short Course. If you're wondering how to find a job you want and one that's a fit for you as a highly sensitive person, and need a nudge of encouragement to help you begin moving forward, and feel more assured in your job search, this class will help. In the AJSC, I share what I learned about making job changes and also from my experience working as a career coach. I answer questions like:

- How do I make a job change to have a better quality of life, and more time freedom at work, without retraining, and still being able to pay the bills?
- How do I vet a future employer to see if they have good boundaries and create work-life balance?
- How do I find an employer who cares about the wellbeing of their employees and clients.
- Plus, I'll introduce you to What Human Design can show you about how you're designed to approach work.

As Sam B says "As a highly sensitive introvert, I have always struggled to find the right fit in workplaces and until I found out I was a HSP I never knew why." She goes on to say, "The usual "how to find a job" advice has never sat well with me, but with your course I felt 'seen' and it was truly refreshing." I found your course absolutely life altering and I am not exaggerating."

If your intuition is nudging you to learn more about [The Aligned Job Short Course](#), use the [link](#) in the show notes to learn more about it and enroll.

I hope this episode has given you some new inspiration for giving yourself what you need to thrive and be well, not only today, but also down the road in the more mature stages of your career.

If you'd like to receive regular news from me, sign up for my email newsletter by following the link in the show notes. You can also connect with me on Pinterest at Happy Highly Sensitive Life where I share short videos packed full of meaningful strategies for living and working with greater ease and alignment as an HSP.

If you enjoyed this podcast episode, please share it with a friend, subscribe, leave a positive comment and rate and review it. This helps other HSPs find the show.