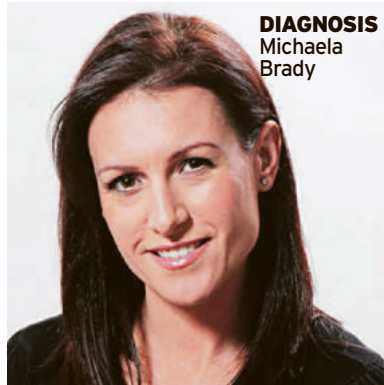


HSP AFFECTS 20% OF POPULATION



DIAGNOSIS
Michaela
Brady

BY MICHAELA BRADY

IT'S become something of a buzzword, dropped into the cultural conversation recently.

But I must admit I was not particularly familiar with the term Highly Sensitive Person, or HSP, until it was referenced on the TV series *The White Lotus*.

In one scene teenage pals Olivia and Paula are in their room when they're interrupted by mother Nicole.

"Mom!" exclaims Olivia. "You can't just open the door, Paula is a HSP!"

Nicole, unconvinced, retorts: "That's not real" but Olivia insists it is a diagnosis.

I was intrigued by the characters' conflicting stances on HSP. The friends were absolute advocates of its validity, whereas, Nicole perceived it as exaggerated nonsense.

Why, as a psychotherapist, educated in a wide range of mental health issues, was I not sufficiently informed on this one?

If it's a medical diagnosis why isn't it listed as one in the DSM-5, the clinician's "go-to" guide for accessing mental health issues?

Well, it's excluded because it's not actually a medical condition, as insisted by Olivia. That said, it's not codswallop as inferred by Nicole.

I know, because, as I've just discovered, I'm a HSP myself.

EVIDENCE

So what is it, apart from apparently needing a door-knock to ease its affects? Is it backed by any empirical evidence? Are there tips to thrive if you're prone to such a disposition?

Let us explore a topic that's got us talking. With celebrities such as Nicole Kidman, Alanis Morissette and Lorde identifying as HSPs, what exactly does it mean?

The term may initially conjure up notions of an introverted, sensitive sort. The "wallflower" type who could really blossom, if they lightened up a little and grew a thicker skin.

This may sometimes apply but it more accurately refers to a personality type whose brain processes information a little differently.

Also known as Extra Sensory Processing, it's a neurological disposition as opposed to shyness or introversion.

In a nutshell, the nervous system is easily excited by exposure to emotional, physical or social stimuli.

HSPs are sensitive to subtleties others are often oblivious to. They have a tendency to think and feel deeply, which can be advantageous or to their detriment. In

“I'm great at my job, but I'm not sure I'm the man for the job”

SINGER LORDE ON HOW HSP IMPACTS HER



TV SERIES
Pals Olivia and
Paula in *The
White Lotus*

Creative with a rich inner life & love for art and nature.. they are

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other words, it has its pros and cons.

According to Dr Elaine Aaron, a clinical psychologist who coined the phrase back in the 1990s, approximately 20% of the population are on the HSP spectrum. Including me.

You can imagine my surprise to realise, while on my quest for knowledge, that I tick several boxes and I'm not alone. I'm joined by some of my clients, friends and a whole host of celebrities.

Nicole Kidman confessed to being

HSP, further adding "Most actors are." Among them are Robert Frost, Steve Martin, Scarlett Johansson, Glen Close and Wynona Rider, who said: "Maybe I'm too sensitive for this world." Musical genius Kanye West is also a HSP.

If you are curious and want clarity, you can do Dr Aaron's Highly Sensitive Persons test. This is a scientifically verified measuring tool.

You will be asked questions such as: Are you overwhelmed by bright lights, loud sounds, strong smells, or sensitive to course fabrics? Do you have a low pain threshold? Are you easily

startled? Do you read or absorb other's moods? Do you avoid horror movies due to deep disturbance by them, or are you irritated if expected to do too much at once?

Maybe you can relate to some of these as I did. I have a particular preference for panicking around loud sounds or chaotic environments.

Being a HSP poses both pros and cons. When at their best they are highly intuitive, intelligent, empathetic and engaging, so they connect easily with others.

They are usually creative, have a rich inner life and are moved by art, beauty and nature, so life it's rarely

dull. There is a downside though, due to their sensitive sensory systems they can get easily overwhelmed. This can lead to stress, anxiety, irritation and burnout.

It's so important to integrate practices to keep the negatives in check and bring the balance back. The following are some tips to thrive at being a HSP.

■ Think about your triggers: Reflect on what causes you to dip into distress. Maybe it's loud sounds, strong scents, bright lights or crowds. Reduce your exposure to these. For instance avoid the shops at peak times and reduce driving in rush hour

AND IT HAS PROS & CONS



INTUITIVE Actress Nicole Kidman

“It made normal a part of me that I’ve felt ashamed & proud of

ALANIS MORISSETTE ON HER HSP DIAGNOSIS



INTELLIGENT Singer songwriter Alanis Morissette

What stars are saying about their diagnosis

ALANIS MORISSETTE: “It normalised a part of me that I have felt both ashamed and proud of my whole life.”

LORDE: “I’m great at my job, but I’m not sure I’m the man for the job. I’m a highly sensitive person. I’m not built for the pop star life. To have a public-facing existence is something I find really intense and something I’m not good at.”



NICOLE KIDMAN: “Most actors are highly sensitive people, but you have this incredible scrutiny. It’s that constant push-pull of going, ‘How do I stay human and vulnerable and real, and at the same time, not let this affect me?’”

Researcher on exactly what condition is

DR ELAINE Aron, the world’s first researcher on HSP, explains what it is: “One out of five people are highly sensitive. If you’re not, someone you know is.

“The highly sensitive have a great deal to offer, but need to be better understood.

“Scientifically, high sensitivity is known as ‘sensory processing sensitivity’.

“It is present from birth and equally in males as females. HSPs process experiences more deeply.

“They are often leaders in their field. They think more about the meaning of life.

“They can be very slow at making decisions. They have strong emotional responses.

“They cry easily, but feel good things more strongly also.”

traffic if possible. When travelling by train or plane, be equipped with ear plugs, an eye mask and comfy clothing or whatever increases your inner calm.

- Practise relaxation techniques when you are feeling frazzled. Take some deep breaths or a time out, tackle one task at a time, slow down, meditate, light candles, burn incense, or listen to soothing music. Make time to rest and recharge regularly, your mind and body will benefit immensely.
- Practise Deep breathing. This is

clinically proven to activate our “relaxation response”, not only that, it increases concentration, clarity and focus. Inhale for a count of six and exhale for a count of six, repeat, 10-15 times to de-stress and reset.

- Embrace nature. If busy environments spiral you into stress, then immersing yourself in the peace of nature can provide the perfect antidote.
- Shake it off. As a therapist I encounter a lot of trauma, anxiety and grief. If I sense I’ve absorbed some, I literally do a Taylor Swift and “shake it off”. I imagine, as I shake my hands that I am releasing the emotions I’ve

soaked up. This is surprisingly effective, especially is you sing along with the song.

Although over thinking can be a torment, absorbing others moods a menace and noise a nuisance. I believe being able to truly connect with ourselves and others is a trait to be cherished.

To feel deeply, whether delight or despair, is a sign we are alive.

A quote springs to mind from the movie Vanilla Sky: “The sweet is never as sweet without the sour.”

- Michaela Brady is a psychotherapist, consultant and speaker.