

Research paper abstract template

Aim or purpose

What did the research aim to answer?

This study explored the lived experience of therapists who self-identify as being highly sensitive persons (HSP), otherwise termed sensory processing sensitivity (SPS). Aron and Aron (1997) describe SPS as an innate personality trait identified by deeper processing of information, being easily overwhelmed by stimulation, having greater empathy/emotional reactivity and being able to sense subtleties in the environment. Of particular interest in this study was how being both a therapist and a HSP impacts on participants' identity, wellbeing, and client work.

Design or methodology structure

How did you do the research?

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of ten experienced practicing therapists who self-identified as HSP. There were nine females and one male, with ages ranging from 34 to 59 years, length of practice ranging from 2 to 15 years, and length of time identifying as HSP ranging from 6 months to 12 years. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022).

Ethical approval

Who gave ethical approval for the research?

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Science, Engineering, and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Results or findings

What did you find?

Participants felt that their heightened sensitivity helped them to establish relational depth with clients quickly and that they had an intuitive understanding of the nuances of clients' issues, which was often an embodied experience. They also spoke about the importance of processing time and setting boundaries to avoid burnout, and how being a HSP therapist could be isolating without a supportive and understanding community. Some participants felt it was easier to work with clients who were also HSP as there was a shared understanding.

Research limitations

How reliable and valid are the findings?

This was an in-depth qualitative study with a small sample. Both researchers were counsellors. The first author identified as HSP, and the second author discovered she met the threshold for HSP post-recruitment. It is possible that other researchers who were not 'insider researchers' might have found different themes.

Conclusions or implications

What is the take home message?

Several personal experiential themes were derived from participants' data which reflect the lived experience of being a highly sensitive therapist. Findings have implications for therapists' training, practice, and wellbeing, and the development and maintenance of the therapeutic relationship.

Considerations given to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion

SPS is found in a minority of the population but is believed to exist in a majority of clients (Aron, 2010). There were more female than male participants from a predominantly White British ethnicity. Future research should be conducted with more gender and culturally diverse samples.