# AfHA Ep6Happilly Sensitive with Becky Black

**Linda:** Well, hello, welcome to the Happtivist podcast for Action for Happiness Australia. We want to inspire action for a compassionate and connected society. To do this, we use and share the science of well-being, but in a way that you can connect with, understand and apply immediately. In this podcast, we promote individual and collective action. We want to empower you with your wellbeing, provide ideas, make connexions, and inspire you. So, who's with us in this episode? Well, hello, I'm Linda, Secretary of Action for Happiness Australia. I'm also a facilitator, coach and trainer. I'm passionate about wellbeing at work and the restorative power of walking in nature. It's benefits to our body, brain and mind. In this episode, our topic is "Happily Sensitive - wellbeing and high sensitivity". And with me today, I have a special guest, Becky Black. Becky is in the final stages of her PhD candidacy at the Centre of Wellbeing Science, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, the University of Melbourne in Australia. Her research project is focussed specifically on high levels of wellbeing and the personality trait of sensory processing sensitivity. With a recent research publication arising from the project. She is currently a teaching and learning specialist at the Centre of Wellbeing Science. Becky is also a coordinator of the "My Wellbeing Planner" programme at the Centre for Wellbeing Science that helps individuals develop a personalised wellbeing and performance plan and supports them to implement it in her spare time. Becky enjoys ballroom and Latin dancing, playing piano, swimming, walking in nature and spending time with her family. Becky, welcome.

**Becky:** Thank you, Linda. It's an absolute honour to be here. Thank you so much.

**Linda:** We are honoured to have you. So, Becky, I read the article that you co-authored with Peggy Kearn and it really resonated with me. So, I'm delighted to have this opportunity to delve into the topic a little deeper. So, let's start by unpacking for our audience what sensory processing sensitivity is. It's certainly a mouthful.

**Becky:** That's for sure. It is a bit of a mouthful. So sensory processing sensitivity is the kind of more technical name or it's shortened to SPS. It's a regular personality trait, although it's not as well-known as the traits of the Big Five. That's like openness and conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism or emotional stability. SPS is what's known as an interstitial trait, so it's more fine grained than those traits that are in the Big Five. And it's also commonly known. Some people will be familiar with the term of being a highly sensitive person or HSP. So about 25 to 30% of the general population will score high on this trait. So, it is fairly common, but it's not all that well known. In fact, many people who score high on the trait don't know about SPS, and it's not the same thing as introversion. A lot of people think it is, but it's quite different because about 30% of highly sensitive people score high on extroversion, and that brings its own challenges for wellbeing. But we'll get into that a little bit later. In a lot of research that's been done on the trait, it's been associated with poor well-being outcomes like high rates of depression and anxiety and stress, low levels of subjective happiness. And that's just to name a few. I'll out myself. I score high on SPS and I typically score high on well-being measures. So, you know what? I was reading all the research saying that it's associated with all these dysfunctional well-being. I thought, surely I can't be the only highly sensitive person who's got high well-being. And that's what got me started on my PhD research.

**Linda:** Fantastic. Thank. You. So, I do just want to underscore that that is not a disorder. It is simply a personality trait. Yep. And can be a trait that people who are introverted might have, but also people who might be extroverted as well. Yeah. So how might someone know if they have the trait then how does it manifest?

**Becky:** So, as I just mentioned, people often don't know about the trait, but some report feeling like they're a bit different or a bit out of step with the mainstream, particularly in Western cultures. Many people learn bits and pieces about the trait from something they've read, or they've heard. And then as they learn more about the trait or they hear about the experiences of other SPS's, that information often resonates with them and they'll think, Oh my gosh, that's just like me. So, you know, I've heard of quite a few people that have that, that kind of thing has, has sent them off on a, on a mission to find out more. And so, they've just kind of self directed and, and learnt more themselves. There's also a questionnaire that you can take and it's free. It's on the web. I always direct people to Dr. Elaine Aron's website because she's the world's foremost researcher and expert on the trait. And that website is that H. S person. So, the other thing about the trade is that it's characterised by this four main aspects to it that most people will typically kind of experience. HSP's they tend to process information more deeply and thoroughly and they will react more strongly to emotional stimuli.

**Becky:** And that includes having strong feelings of empathy. They can also be more easily overstimulated, like they will reach their saturation point more quickly and easily than people who score low on space. And everyone's got a saturation point where, you know, four stimuli and, you know, they think I've had enough. I just I need a bit of time out. But people who are high on space will reach that more quickly and easily. And they're also very aware of subtleties in the environment. They'll notice small details that that others might not notice. And, like just kind of think talking about the difference in the kind of mental processing, the cognitive processing, there's been a number of functional MRI studies done on people who are high on SPS and they've shown that more areas of their brain light up and are active in response to different stimuli, like they've exposed them to visual stimuli and emotional, different emotional stimuli. And so, there's more areas of their brain kind of lit up and active that compared to people who are low on space. So, there's some kind of neuroscience evidence there as well.

**Linda:** Fantastic. Very interesting. And we will put the link to Elaine Aron's website in the show notes as well. For anyone who wants to go to the site and perhaps do the questionnaire and find out more about how they might score on that as well. So, one of the things you just mentioned was that people can sometimes feel a little different, especially in Western societies. And so, in Western societies we tend to emphasise the social outgoingness or being extroverted and what we call the high arousal, positive emotions. So, you know, those high levels of excitement or joy and we tend to associate those with well-being. And we were talking a little bit about this earlier on. So, whilst sometimes introversion and negative emotion can be looked down on or even pathologized in society as well, so I think one of the points that you make is really important that this introvert, extrovert, centric conception of wellbeing doesn't fit everyone. And so, people can feel different or feel othered even as a result. And you know, I know I've been in situations where my preference for things are emotions that are kind of lower level, not as strong. So, it might be around contentment or interests have they've just really not cut the mustard for people, you know. And I'm aware that they've might have appeared a bit underwhelming to others. So, so I think that really underscores the fact that just wellbeing is not the same for all of us and for some highly sensitive people, for instance, or HSPs. It might look different to the broader social norms or conceptions of wellbeing. So, I guess I'm wondering then what does wellbeing look and feel like for HSPs?

**Becky:** So, in my research, I did an online survey first with 430 people, and then I interviewed 12 experts who scored high on well-being. All of the people who were interviewed, they thought about wellbeing as like having many different dimensions or different parts to it, including like emotional well-being, mental well-being, physical spiritual well-being. And, and they talked about relationships, relational aspects or social aspects. Most of them talked about it as being holistic. So, having everything kind of in balance. For example, one, one person spoke about well-being being a wheel and all the different segments had to be in balance for the wheel to roll. Some of them talked about well-being as feeling like the best self you know; you can be or being very comfortable in my space and with myself. Those kinds of things.

**Linda:** Given that more kind of holistic view of well-being for some. Can you tell us more about what are the enablers of well-being are for people with HSP? So, you know, if you are a person who thinks you might score high on sensory processing sensitivity or be happy, or even if you have a friend or family member that you think may be, what can you do either to enable your own well-being or to enable, you know, the well-being of a happy that you love and care for?

**Becky:** Mm hmm. Thanks. So, yeah, from the from the interviews that I did, there were kind of a few main themes that kind of came out of the interviews. So, one of the one of the most important things and all of the people I interviewed said that having regular periods of solitude was extremely important for their well-being. So if you're an HSP yourself, it's important to recognise that need and, and to kind of honour that need and that if you if you're kind of you have a friend or a partner or a relative or something, you know, it's great and important for you to understand that the help in your life does need these regular periods of solitude. And it's not that they don't want to be with you, but just that their system needs that downtime so that they can recharge. The other things that came out were like emotion focussed, enablers of well-being. So, a lot of a lot of the people that I spoke to, they talked about regulating their emotions and being able to do that, helped them to maintain their well-being. And so, they did this through either reframing their internal dialogue. It gave them the time to respond to their own negative emotions and stress, and that kind of helped them feel empowered as well.

**Becky:** A lot of them pointed to self-awareness, for instance, knowing what works for them and how much they need of that on different days. And also, being just being aware of our needs and proactively acting on those needs and taking care of those needs. And another key thing that came out was self-acceptance, just knowing our own limitations and being okay with that. And that's one thing that they also said that learning more about the trait of spouse helped them to kind of be more accepting of their experience and thinking not kind of trying to push themselves and fit in with what other people or society expected of them so much where they were able to recognise well, okay, my system has had enough. It's time for me to take some time out kind of thing. They all talked about how important self-compassion was practising self-compassion was for their well-being. So being kind to ourselves and speaking to ourselves like we would treat a good friend. They were also behavioural enablers, like doing some type of regular physical, mental or self-care behaviours. These included things like physical movement, either walking in nature, connecting with nature. That was mentioned several times and they all mentioned some type of contemplative practise like mindfulness or meditation or tai chi.

**Becky:** And as I said, I spoke about solitude before that theme of solitude came through when they were talking about these regular activities. They enjoyed doing these kinds of things alone. I remember one person spoke about just having each night for about an hour, excuse me, she would do some kind of craft activity, so some type of needlework or knitting or something like that, because it just allowed her brain to kind of switch off a little bit and just focus on the. And then there was social enablers. So, they all of the people I spoke to talked about close, supportive relationships being very important. Most of them talked about having a really small select group of friends and how they also preferred to meet up with friends one on one rather than in a larger group. So, I kind of mentioned about the more extroverted HSP is how that can be a bit of a challenge for their well-being. Balancing that need for social interaction with their need for solitude. Was more of a challenge for the more extroverted people because they really enjoy being with other people, but they still need regular periods of solitude to recharge. So, they kind of the main the main themes, the main enablers, I guess, of wellbeing that came out in the interviews.

**Linda:** Fantastic. Thank you. And I really love what you said in relation to people knowing their limits and their boundaries and also knowing that it's their system that needs a break. So, if you are someone who's, you know, has a hope in your life, then it is about accepting that and being non-judgmental. So not being, you know, feeling rejected or anything if the person needs their alone time. Just I think more of an appreciation that this is what the person the person system needs. And they still, you know, love and care for us dearly and they need their own solitude. Would you agree?

**Becky:** Definitely. That's yeah, for sure.

**Linda:** Yeah. And it's okay to leave parties early or go and sit in a quiet corner.

**Becky:** Okay. Yeah.

**Linda:** Whatever needs to happen.

**Becky:** Yeah, yeah.

**Linda:** Fantastic. So, let's end with some advice to help us put this into action. So, the American positive psychology guru, Sonja Lyubomirsky, in her book A Practical Guide to Getting the Life You Want - The How of Happiness looked at how and why strategies worked in relation to our engagement with them. So, she identified five critical mechanisms for action, and they are positive emotion, time, social support, motivation, effort and commitment. And the final one is habit. So, let's have a look at what this could look like for enhancing your wellbeing if you are an HSP. So positive emotion. The first one Becky, what would you suggest there?

**Becky:** I think understanding that there are lots of different positive emotions available to us and they're all valid. That can be important. This this kind of points to self-acceptance and self-awareness to and just knowing that I enjoy feeling contented and calm and peaceful and being okay with that is, is really important. Not trying to make myself fit in with what society sees as so called normal.

**Linda:** Fantastic. And I think my takeaway for that as well is that the research indicates that the whole range of positive emotions are beneficial for our well-being. So, we don't need to experience those really high level, strong emotions to still get the wellbeing benefits we can get the wellbeing benefits from contentment and calmness and interest and curiosity and all of those lovely emotions. And of course, that the positive emotions again look different for all of us.

**Becky:** Yeah, for sure.

**Linda:** So, time and variety, Becky suggestion for that one.

**Becky:** So, Time. I think when I think about time, I would say spending time doing spending regular time in solitude is probably the most important kind of wellbeing practise for HSP's and kind of prioritising that. And also when, when you when you're in solitude, you, you can just like most of the people that I've spoken to, just love that aspect of being able to just let your thoughts drift wherever they want to go and, you know, not having to converse and respond to other people's needs and. It, you know, some sometimes, you know, like solitude time could even be reading a book or it could be listening to a podcast or, you know. But yeah, I would say making sure there's some, some solitude time in, in your day or in your week on a regular basis is pretty important.

**Linda:** Nice. Thank you. For me, time spent walking's important, especially in nature. And as you were talking about just having time to let your thoughts drift, what came to me was that our soft fascination or the attention restoration theory that they talk about when we're in nature as well. And I'm wondering if that's kind of part of being in nature for me, is that sense of, you know, just having your attention just softly drawn to whatever's happening at that time?

**Becky:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Linda:** So, number three is social support. So, what would you suggest here?

**Becky:** I, I would say I know what you need. And that might look different throughout a given day or on different days. So, we all need to feel connected to other people, to each other. We all need to feel like we belong and that we are loved. And, you know, we need to look for space. We need to balance that. That time spent with other people, that social support. We need to balance that with solitude, as I just mentioned. I, I find it helpful to myself to, to schedule in a quiet day or some quiet time alone if, if I know I have a busy day coming up or I know there's a busy time coming up, even things like going on holiday, they're wonderful and exciting, but it can also be very taxing on your system as an HSP. So, I always make sure I've got a quiet day with nothing timetabled in after I've travelled and arrived at my destination and then at different points throughout the holiday I'll have just a day with nothing timetabled in. And then I always have a quiet day or two scheduled in for after, after I get home again and that, that helps me to balance the, the social support that I need with just what my system needs. And yeah, and like my personal preference is to, similar to the people I interviewed is, is to just spend. My time with either one on one with close friends or loved ones or with just a very small group.

**Linda:** I love that they are such practical strategies that I think lots of people I know I can certainly relate to. And I think you made this point in your article that, you know, lots of wellbeing models include relationships as part of that kind of well-being element. And even if we set aside the more academic or conceptual models and even just talk about the ones that are more kind of popular, even so, PERMA, which is Martin Seligman's one that has relationships or the five ways to well-being, which is the UK New Economics model that of course has relationships as well, or connect and even Action for Happiness. Our own Action for Happiness Ten Keys also has relating as part of that. And so, I think as a HSP knowing that that alone time or that solitude can also contribute to your well-being as well, I think is really important.

**Becky:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Linda:** So, when it comes to motivation, effort and commitment, I know of saying no and prioritising your own well-being can take effort and commitment, especially when you have, you know, people pulling you in all directions at times. So, my sense is the suggestion would be to keep at it in terms of maintaining your boundaries. And what would you suggest, Becky?

**Becky:** Yeah, definitely. It is something that we have to work at and saying. Saying no to demands on our time can be one of the most challenging things for her to do. And the people that I interviewed, they all agreed it was it was challenging, but it was something they were continually working at and they were getting better at it the more they did it. So, as you said, it's important to prioritise our wellbeing. And if, you know, if you're just starting out doing this, it can be helpful to kind of practise saying no to something that's fairly low stakes. Like, for example, you might get a request from an acquaintance or, you know, just as opposed to and you could say practise saying no to that request as opposed to if you started out with something more, more, more high stakes, it would be saying trying to say no to a close friend or a loved one. That's much more challenging. And even the people I interviewed, they spoke about this, too, that it was much they found it much more difficult to say no when it was their loved ones, where they had to kind of they knew that they didn't have the capacity to do what was being asked of them. But they found it really, really difficult to say no to that loved one. So, I think it's easier. I know this is something that I did when I was, you know, starting to practise saying no. You know, I started out with something that was low stakes. And then as you get better at that, then you know, you can expand it into other areas.

**Linda:** Great advice. And I think it's that I'm not sure that practise makes perfect, but maybe with practise you just become more comfortable with it.

**Becky:** Yeah, I think that's what happens. Yeah.

**Linda:** Perfect. So, our last thing here is habits. So, what habits would be helpful for HSPs in terms of their wellbeing?

**Becky:** Oh. Well, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, I think the habit of make, make solitude, regular solitude, time, a habit that like if it that's not something that you've you do, or you've done. When you're looking to introduce a new habit, it's easier to start with something small. So just make small changes. And you can also tie that, that change to something else that you do every day. Like, for example, if you want to start meditating in the morning or if you want to start scheduling in some solitude time, just start out small, say, you know, a five or ten minute meditation or five or 10 minutes on your own and then tie that to something that you do every day. Like, you know, you might have your morning coffee, or you might tie it to breakfast or something. And so, you could say to yourself, Alright, I'll meditate first for five or 10 minutes and then I'll have my breakfast or then I'll have my coffee. And so, your kind of tying it to a habit that you've already got that's, you know, a beneficial habit. And I think that the solitude one. Yeah, that's pretty important.

**Linda:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you. So, is there anything else that you think might be helpful for our listeners in relation to wellbeing and HSP’s before we wrap up?

**Becky:** Yeah, well, I think well, it certainly seems to be that the more that we learn about the trait, if we score high on SPS, the more that we can learn about the trait that does seem to have a beneficial influence on our well-being, because it just helps us to feel more self-accepting and to know that we're not weird and we're not strange and we're, we're, there's other people like us and, you know, it's normal for our system to, to get, you know, overloaded and to, to want to withdraw and just to recharge. Normalising our experience is, you know, that seems to be really helpful for our wellbeing and as well as having those regular times of solitude. I would say that the other thing that came out most strongly was practising self-compassion. I think those things go a long way towards building and maintaining well-being for highly sensitive people.

**Linda:** Right. Thank you. And for those listeners, if you haven't already listened to our Self-compassion podcast, that might be one that that might be worth listening to as well. So, Becky, I know you mentioned Elaine Aaron's website HS Persons. For people who are wanting to learn more about the trait of SPS or highly sensitive persons, where would they go to find out more?

**Becky:** Well, I think Elaine Aaron's website is a good place to start. She has written regular newsletters for a number of years and all the archives of those newsletters are on the website. And she just she kind of translates the research and talks about things that impact SPS just in an easy to understand way in the newsletters. She covers all kinds of different topics, you know, including like I know she's written a few about for adolescents who, who are growing up with being HSP. And there's obviously these kind of impacts most areas of our lives. And so, you know, there's, there's newsletters, they're about career. And she also points to other resources. She's written several books which are excellent you can find. She's got those all listed on the website as well. She's got a few more kind of scientifically research minded. There's she's got a lot of research papers on there that you can download as well. And she also has even a listing of therapists, psychotherapists who I guess sensitive to the that they know about high sensitivity and understand the trait and how that can impact. And that can be helpful because a lot of clinical psychologists don't know about the trait either. And that can impact on a person's experience in therapy as well.

**Linda:** Absolutely. Thank you. Thank you, Becky. So, thank you so much for joining us today. Becky Black, it's been wonderful to be able to chat with you. We've also loved connecting with you and sharing insights into sensory processing, sensitivity or highly sensitive persons. In our show notes, we will have any links that might support you, including the link to Elaine Aaron's website as well. So, we do want to know what you think have been inspired by and or questions you would like answered. So, leave a review on Apple Reviews, help us be found and help us to help others. And you're sharing is also an action to help others. Or you may like to leave a comment or question and you can do this via our Instagram, Facebook or LinkedIn accounts. You can find us at www.actionforhappinessaustralia.org on Facebook and LinkedIn as Action for Happiness Australia on Instagram we are Happtivist. We look forward to next time.