

Sustainable Practice Checklist for the Highly Sensitive Therapist



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Not sure if you're a Highly Sensitive Person? [Click here to take the self-test.](#)

You're finally doing work that you love, work that is meaningful, but question whether it's sustainable for the long haul. You regularly feel overwhelmed and are exhausted by the end of the day. Perhaps you have even fantasized about leaving this profession all together. What if you could find relief from the stress of being a therapist by prioritizing self-care and organizing your practice? Below I talk about what High Sensitivity is and offer a few simple solutions to tame the overwhelm so that you can reconnect with your strengths as a Highly Sensitive Therapist.

Sensitivity Defined

So, what exactly is High Sensitivity? You may have heard the many misconceptions that it's the same as introversion, shyness, autism, borderline personality disorder, ADHD and on and on. Although some of these traits or disorders can overlap with High Sensitivity, there are not the same. Let me break it down for you...

High Sensitivity, also known as Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), is an innate temperament variation that allows the brain and nervous system to process subtle details. Around 30% of HSPs are extroverts and some are High Sensation Seekers. SPS shows up equally among all genders in 15-20% of the population, expressed as the following core characteristics:

- Depth of Processing: think deeply and process extensively
- Overarousal/Overstimulation: easy to get dysregulated or overwhelmed
- Emotional Responsiveness/Empathy: feeling highs and lows more than others
- Sensitive to Subtle Stimuli: tend to notice little changes or details

Due to this innate trait to think and feel deeply, Highly Sensitive Therapists (HST) have amazing gifts of perception, intuition, empathy and creativity. However, the ability to notice subtleties, have a strong capacity for empathy and process details deeply also leads to exhaustion and overwhelm. Your brain and nervous system are constantly working. The more clients you see, the busier you are, the more exhausted and overwhelmed you're going to feel.

Highly Sensitive Therapists especially struggle when modeling their practices after their non-HST colleagues. Back-to-back clients all day is not going to work for the Highly Sensitive Therapist, at least not for the long-term. We need to get more downtime and have more structure to our routines if we are going to have sustainable practices. By having solid systems in place to support regular self-care, we can reduce overwhelm and do our best work with clients. This will leave us feeling fulfilled as well. Now let's talk self-care...

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Self-Care Strategies

1. Close your eyes for at least 60 seconds after every client session or after an hour working at the computer. Nothing to do here, just breathe and decompress. You're cutting down on sensory input and giving your mind a break from processing the world around you.
2. Downtime is crucial for maintaining energy levels throughout the day. Schedule a short break every two hours. Ideally, you can just let your mind wander and process during this time. That couch you have in your office is not just for clients! If you feel comfortable, close the curtains and lay down for 5-10 minutes with eyes closed. Be sure to set a timer so that you can completely relax.
3. Carve out a dedicated lunch hour EVERY day and resist the urge to use that time for other tasks. Use half of your lunch break to eat and the other half to do something small that fuels you on an emotional or spiritual level. Depending on what's accessible to your office, ideas include:
 - Take yourself out for a walk or get outdoors.
 - Have a solo dance party to your favorite jam.
 - Do a brief meditation or a few yoga poses.
 - Connect with a colleague or loved one.
 - Read for pleasure.
 - The world is your oyster - what would make you feel nourished?

Takeaway

Getting a self-care strategy in place reduces wasted time on burnout recovery. We've all had our "sensitivity hangovers" where we push too hard one day and it takes a full day (or more) to restore our normal energy levels. Maintaining consistent energy levels is as easy as incorporating mini sensory breaks throughout the day.

Simple Systems & Scheduling

1. Set aside one hour at the beginning of each day to strategize and complete time-sensitive tasks:
 - Start each day intentionally by creating a plan for the day. Spend 5-10 minutes looking over your to-do list to highlight the most important tasks for the day. Be realistic with the time you have and prioritize tasks that take the most focus.
 - Then, respond to client emails and take care of urgent matters. This will allow you to feel more relaxed and present with your clients, knowing there's nothing pending.

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2. Nothing gets me overwhelmed more than emails piling up! To save time and brainpower, create templates for common emails such as new client inquiries, insurance questions, or networking requests. You can store these templates in various ways, but use whatever system feels the least cumbersome to you:

- Create a “canned response” in gmail.
- Send the email to yourself to save in a separate folder in your inbox.
- Save email templates in a Google or Word doc.

3. Implement automated systems whenever possible to simplify recurring tasks and reduce stimulation levels (aka screen time and brain power):

- Choose an online appointment scheduler through your practice management system or through a separate platform such as Acuity or Full Slate. If you need to be HIPAA compliant, be sure to get the Business Associate Agreement (BAA).
- Setup an email autoresponder that indicates your current response time and answers common questions. Include a link to your online appointment scheduler and relevant pages on your website such as fees or insurance questions.

4. Highly Sensitive brains are wired to inhibit action which means we pause and reflect before acting. Therefore, making decisions and transitioning between tasks can get quite exhausting. Reduce decision fatigue and to-do list anxiety by having dedicated times to do certain tasks every week and batching similar tasks together. For instance:

- Try writing all your notes at the beginning or end of each day or choose one day per week.
- Only answer emails at predetermined times, such as the beginning and/or end of each day. Constantly checking emails throughout the day is distracting, exhausting and potentially overwhelming.
- Set aside a few hours one day per month to auto-schedule social media posts for the entire month and another day to write blog posts.
- Schedule set times for intake calls, client sessions, networking meetings and marketing tasks throughout the week.

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5. I have included a sample schedule below that starts each day with a planning hour, incorporates breaks every two hours, and has dedicated time for intake calls and client sessions. You'll also notice batched time slots for marketing and clinical reading as well as unscheduled hours for overflow or unexpected tasks. Creating a bounded and consistent schedule is essential for reducing decision fatigue and overwhelm. Instead of constantly worrying about when you're going to get tasks done, you know you've carved out time for that!

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
9:00am	Plan/Emails	Plan/Emails	Plan/Emails	Plan/Emails	Plan/Emails
10:00am	Emails	Notes	Notes	Notes	Emails
11:00am	<i>Short Break</i> Reading	<i>Short Break</i> Admin	<i>Short Break</i>	<i>Short Break</i> Admin	<i>Short Break</i>
12:00pm	Reading	Client	Client	Client	Networking
1:00pm	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Networking/ Lunch
2:00pm	Marketing	Client	Client	Client	
3:00pm	<i>Short Break</i> Marketing	<i>Short Break</i> Intake Calls	<i>Short Break</i>	<i>Short Break</i> Intake Calls	
4:00pm	Marketing	Client	Client	Client	
5:00pm	Marketing	Client	Client	Client	

Takeaway

Since the HSP brain is wired to reflect before action and notice subtle details that others miss, we transition into new tasks slowly and make meaning of everything around us. This causes us to use more energy than most on everyday tasks. The key to reduce decision fatigue and overwhelm is to automate tasks that you do often and batch longer tasks together so you can immerse yourself in the work. Creating a consistent schedule, that you hold with tight boundaries, is essential for self-preservation.

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Final Thoughts

This list may feel overwhelming right now. That's understandable. I encourage you to start slowly by first incorporating more self-care practices, leaving room for imperfection. Then, as you feel more energy and focus, you can gradually integrate more organization into your practice.

Creating a practice that suits your Sensitive temperament will allow your therapeutic gifts of perception, empathy, intuition and creativity to shine. This work can be difficult for us, but getting daily doses of self-care and implementing a consistent schedule will free up more energy and reduce the overwhelm. You can have a sustainable practice and find joy in your work again.



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