

Becky M: Everything can change in an instant. Out of nowhere, a lightbulb turns on, and we suddenly shift our way of thinking. This is Lightbulb Moment, with Becky Mollenkamp, a podcast that explores those moments, what they mean, how they happen, and how they forever reshape our businesses and our lives.

Sarah Peck: I always used to think that I was not a great fit for companies. I was so uncomfortable in so many different places, and I thought something was wrong with me. Then, over time, I learned, I'm just a really highly-sensitive person. I'm very introverted. The environment really gets under my skin in certain ways. I had to design my working conditions to fit my best, which I didn't think was possible, at first.

Becky M: This is going to be a great one, today. My friend Sarah Peck is joining me. She's the founder and director of Startup Pregnant, a media company including a podcast that documents the stories of women's leadership across work and family. I've known Sarah online for quite a while and had the joy of meeting her in person earlier this year at a retreat. She's so smart, and kind, and insightful. Basically, I hope I can be her when I grow up.

Hi, Sarah. Thank you so much for being here. I'm so excited to have you on the show.

Sarah Peck: I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Becky M: First, tell me, you talked to me about this. You said you're an HSP, which I gleaned meant highly-sensitive person, but I don't know much about that. Tell me about what that looks like, what you think that is. I know you said you haven't had an official diagnosis, but you've done a lot of reading. Tell me a little about what that means to be an HSP.

Sarah Peck: Yeah, so I have a lot of friends. It's funny, I think you gravitate towards people that you have similarities with. I have a lot of friends, oftentimes internet friends and Instagram friends, to be honest, who have said and shared that they are HSP, highly-sensitive people. There are also kids that are highly sensitive. When I look back and start to piece together the patterns, and I study my own life, I can see all of these commonalities and these themes. I'm like, "You know what? I haven't talked to a doctor, but I bet that this is me."

What it means is things like, if there's a fluorescent light in a room, it really, really hurts my eyes. I just thought everybody else was tolerating it, and I was the one who couldn't get it together to figure out why this light was bothering. I would get massive headaches. I started bringing a baseball cap to work so that I could cover my eyes a little bit, so that I could control some of the parts of my environment.

I get so overwhelmed. People who know this will find this hilarious, because when I'm out and about, and I'm in the flow and being my extroverted side, people think that's the way I am all the time. That's me max two hours a day. Busy, crowded environments take a lot out of me. Noise takes a lot out of me. Even just, when I was younger, when I was four, I wouldn't wear socks, because the bumps on the socks were too irritating to my feet. I would always wear my shoes without socks.

Now, as an adult, I don't know why I thought that was more comfortable. My mother had to deal with this child that was very particular, and also, who got consistently uncomfortable with the way that clothes felt, that wool was too scratchy, the light was too bright. When I started to piece all of these things together, I realized, you know what? I may just have more receptors on my skin. I may just have more data stimulation. It is overwhelming to me, and that's just the way my body was formed.

Becky M: It's interesting, because when I hear highly-sensitive person, my immediate thought is you mean that you are more emotional, or that you are more easily hurt, emotionally. That's where my brain went. I didn't realize at all that what you were saying is that you were more prone to your environment affecting you physically. I think that's interesting.

Sarah Peck: I think it's a blind. It can be all of the different things, too. It can be a high level of feelings, a high level of emotions. One of the tenants of introversion, and Susan Cain talks about this in her book, is that people have different amounts of receptors, environmental stimuli receptors. Extroverts might actually have fewer of them, so they want more stimulation to get the baseline level of this is what feels good. I want some stimulation from the world. Introverts might have a whole lot more. You go out, and you're like, "Hey, that waterfall, really noisy. I'm full. That's enough."

Becky M: Interesting. You feel like it's very related to, then, being an introvert.

Sarah Peck: I think so. I like to, if I had to design my perfect workday, it would be about four hours of spending time with other people, and about eight hours of total, solo isolation time.

Becky M: Let's talk about workplace, then, because you said that's really what brought this lightbulb moment about for you, was working in a, probably corporate or traditional kind of setting and realizing that it wasn't working for you. What was it like before? Because you mentioned that it took you a long time to come to this realization, because you felt like there were a lot of pressure from society to behave a certain way. What did that look like before you came to this realization for yourself?

Sarah Peck: Corporate work was, I felt sick a lot of the time, getting up, going to work, being in, this was the heyday of open office environments. We're all in a big bullpen together. Everyone can see what everyone else is doing. There's that sense, for me, and I think this is the kind of thing that people will either nod and totally get it, or ... This is what happens to me. People will be like, "Sarah, you said this thing, and it's totally me." Other people will not understand at all.

That sense of somebody watching you from behind. I always felt like somebody was watching me, so I felt like I was kind of raising my shoulders a little bit. I couldn't let myself dive into my own creativity, like, wander into my mind, and be in this space where I could write or design really fully into an idea, because I was always afraid I was going to get interrupted or there was just going to be a lot of noise. There were people in the desk next to us having loud phone calls.

For some people, that is a dream. The whole Wall Street, like, noise pit, sounds like a dream. For me, that sounds like, I don't think I would last more than three days in that environment.

Becky M: What kind of work were you doing, then?

Sarah Peck: I had graduated from an architecture school, a design school. I was working at an urban planning and landscape architecture firm. It was one of the biggest companies in the landscape architecture world, but that doesn't mean it was a huge company. It was about 200 people. We were working on projects all over the world.

I loved the idea of what we were doing, but the way that it was done, like the environment of the office, I just couldn't. It was a struggle every day, and there are some days where I just laid in bed at home under the covers as long as possible before I went to work, just so that I could kind of recuperate. I ended up spending Sundays just shuttered in my own room, lights down as low as possible, yoga by myself, writing in my journal, because I needed to restore and rejuvenate in order to make it through another week.

Becky M: It wasn't so much about the type of work you were doing or what you were doing, but more about the environment in which you were doing it, right?

Sarah Peck: 100%. That's exactly right.

Becky M: Which is interesting, because I also worked in corporate before going out on my own. I have similar feelings about, like, "I can't take another day of this." Mine were not so much about the environment. It was more about the type of work I was doing or the kinds of people I was working with. It's interesting for me to hear all of this, because I am probably one of those people who says, "I don't quite get that feeling of somebody's watching me, other than maybe a boss that drives me nuts."

: It's interesting to hear your perspective, because I think, maybe I'm naturally more extroverted than I even realized, because this isn't something that resonates with me. I find it really fascinating.

Sarah Peck: Right, and this is what's so interesting, I think, in, this was kind of maybe the straw that broke the camel's back, was, we were a design firm interested in designing great places for people. I just thought, why didn't we take more time to design and think about the spaces in which the humans were working to do this creative work that was their purpose and mission?

Susan Cain, one of my heroes, she has done so much work. She's partnering with companies like Steelcase to design better offices. Small, quiet, mobile meeting rooms, and little felt studio spaces where you can sit by yourself and work, adding flexible phone stations and little work stations into open office environments, so you actually get the whole spectrum. People who want to be in the hustle and bustle, or they want to be in a place that feels like a noisy coffee shop, versus people who really need the quiet in order to think. Now they have the chance to be able to get that environment, as well, through these really cool architectural pieces.

Becky M: Yeah, that is fascinating. Coming from that architecture background, I'm sure you've thought about this, and I never had. Also, I guess, because of who you are with this highly-sensitive nature. You're thinking about this, but for me, I'm like, "I would never think that." I would love to get to the point of having multiple employees and maybe even having an office space. It's really something very interesting for me to think about, because I know we all come from our own perspective. We think everyone is a lot like us, even if we don't realize I'm doing that. This is probably one of those ways where I would assume everyone loves working in the way I do, where it's highly collaborative, and it's all together. It's kind of noisy and fun. I can see where that atmosphere doesn't work for everyone.

Sarah Peck: I think this is one of the most interesting things about the interviewing process, too. So often, we spend a lot of time trying to figure out whether or not somebody has the skills and the abilities, but we don't ask them, "How do you work best? What are your inner team dynamics?"

There's a lot of lip service paid to the idea of culture fit, but it's really not well done. How do you design for culture fit? There are a couple of companies that I know that when people make it through the interview skills process, they then go through things like taking the strengths finder, and Sally [Hogsfield 00:09:49]?

Becky M: Hogshead.

Sarah Peck: Hogshead, thank you, the Fascinate quiz, and then the Ocean, or the Myers-Briggs, so that you get this whole interpersonal field dynamic of, what are the psychographics of this person? How do they function best in a team? Where should we put them in the design of space? If you think of humans as like, they're the most expensive and most important capital, piece of your team. You want to be able to get them to work at the highest level possible.

I think our batting average for both management and talent management is just not great. We're designing at the level of mitigating against things we're afraid of. We're doing HR policy, and there needs to be a new level of thought about how do we create a team dynamic that really maximizes the input, and satisfaction, and well-being of all these people for the company and the people's best interest?

Becky M: That includes the environment in which they're working, just the physical space. Sometimes, that means maybe you have to sacrifice some space, because I think a lot what of what's happened with design is, how many people can we cram into this room so that our overhead is less?

Sarah Peck: Yes. It happens across all ... People think, "Well, now we can just make remote work. People can choose their environment." Unless you're actually paying attention and giving it a little thought and design, remote can be just as hard. It comes with a whole host of other problems. How do you stay connected? How do you stay motivated? How do you communicate to each other when it's mostly asynchronous? Do you do everything live? What's your method for systematizing things and sharing information?

Both kinds of spaces, and all of it requires an analysis of what are our goals, and how are we doing it? How are we implementing it? How are we

communicating it? 100% of what you said about designing the environment. I just would like people to start to ask the question. How can we create a better space for people to work?

Becky M: I love that. I want to circle back to that in a minute to talk about how you're doing that for yourself, now. Let's go back to this idea of your lightbulb moment. What I know is that for some people, a lightbulb moment is literally that. There's just a switch that's flipped, and suddenly, they're thinking in a new way. For other people, it's more of a gradual realization. How did that work for you, where you came to this realization about being a highly-sensitive person?

Sarah Peck: It was definitely more gradual. I think, I always felt a lot of guilt that I couldn't fit into this 9:00 to 5:00 model. Yet, at the same time, the only thing I really craved doing, I was a long-time athlete in college. I did yoga teacher training. I just knew my own biorhythms and my own particularities, that I did really great work in the morning for about three hours, and then I took a break for about two hours to do some physical activity. Then, I got back in, and I had another big work session.

My productivity was amazing when I could design it myself. When I had to sit in one place, in the same office, and there was so much of the pressure of performing, and how fast are you working? Who's staying there latest? The bright lights were on all day. I just felt like a soggy piece of bread by the end of the day. I just felt useless and not at all functional.

Then, come 6:00 at night, going to the gym feels like this chore. Like, "Ugh, now I've got to climb out of this pile of bread soup and find a way to get on the treadmill, and that sounds terrible." I honestly wish I had been a little more brazen, and done it faster, and just been like, "I'm going to leave at 2:00 every day and go to the gym."

I did start sneaking out. I don't even know why it's called sneaking out. It's just called going to lunch. I started going to lunch. I worked in Sausalito, California, which is gorgeous, and it's on the water. I started going down to the kayaking dock about 20 minutes away. I would walk down, and I would rent a kayak for 20 minutes. I would get on the water, and then I would come back. It made me just, it felt like an exhale. Like, "Oh, I can do this, now. I can sit down. I can process all of this drawing." It was slow. It was slow and steady, and I had to gain an inch here, and gain an inch there, and realize that maybe this wasn't a nice to have kind of thing, but this was fundamental for my health, my well-being, my productivity, my output, my contribution.

Becky M: What do you think got you to that place of realizing that? I think sometimes we have these things where we think, "This would be nice, or this is kind of nice," but how do you get to that place of realizing, "No, this isn't just nice. This is necessary."

Sarah Peck: That's a hard question, and it's a really important one. For me, and maybe other people feel this way, too, I felt like it took me a long time to learn to listen to myself. The voice that I had, the things that I was saying to myself, like, "I would like to go exercise now." I always brushed them off, in some ... Well, I won't say always. I sometimes brushed them off and said, "I know you

would like to exercise now, but who says that's important?" Because I took the culture paradigm in a social construct and said, "I've got to do it this way."

Because why? Because someone else was telling me to? I now highly doubt that, but it is, the culture tied is strong, especially in companies and corporations. Being able to cultivate that listening quality and trust yourself, like, the sooner you can do it, the better. It's been one of the most important skills that I have. Just keep listening, and keep learning, and keep finding that inner knowing. It doesn't sound like what you expect it to sound like. It might not be that loud.

My voice isn't one that's like, "Yo, Sarah. Go do this right now." It's more like, "This would be nice." You're like, "How heavy should I weigh that?" When you realize that it's your inner voice, I think you should weigh it stronger than anything else.

Becky M: Yeah, and that's so great to hear, because I think the idea of lightbulb moments, it may sound like it's always that thing where it's like, "Aha," and you just immediately have it all figured out. That's typically, even if that's sort of how it feels, in the moment, usually it's not the case. There's a whole lot that's led up to that. It's really just more about the time that you are finally accepting and listening to that voice.

It's great to hear you say that sometimes it is gradual. Sometimes you have to slowly start to into tune with that, and really start to hear it, and listen to it, and act on it.

Sarah Peck: Just to layer onto that, I think that when you listen, if ... The first thing that your voice says is a little whisper. Sometimes it's easy to say, "Nah, that's not important." Then, it gets a little louder. Someone said this, "Your voice will whisper until it has to shout. Then, finally, it'll smack you over the head." You know, that smack over the head might be the lightbulb moment that people are talking about. We didn't hear those first few whispers, until finally, you get Mono, and you leave work for three weeks, and you're so sick, and you can't go back, and you just stop. That's a lightbulb moment, but maybe we could have gone back in time a little bit and seen, were there whispers? Were there little knocks on the door? When could I have heard this earlier?

Becky M: That's so great. With this gradual realization that you had, and knowing that what you were currently doing wasn't working, you were starting to feel what did work. Did it make it to the point where you had to leave that job? Do you think there was a way that you could have make it work? Talk to me about how things changed.

Sarah Peck: I spent a lot of energy trying to change the situation from the inside. I did make a lot of progress. I ended up changing the type of job that I had and getting a semi-private office, which was really great. What I noticed was that people would come and ask me if they could work from my office. I would have one buddy or another buddy throughout the day, because they needed exactly what I needed. They wanted a little bit of space to be able to think and draw without being interrupted.

I said, "Okay, this is great. A, I'm not alone. B, it's also really unfair that I'm the only one that gets this space. That's not quite right." We did some internal

design work to think about, how do we change this space? What can we do? I put a proposal together to get new lighting, and on, and on, and on.

At the end of the day, I had to realize that if something, if it's not the right fit for you, and you just try to polish the edges, it still might not be the right fit. This coincided at a time in my life when I was dating somebody, and we decided to get engaged. I ended up moving across the country from San Francisco to New York City. It was that impetus that helped me say, "I'm also going to leap. I'm going to start this business that I've been dabbling in, on the side."

A lot of forces came together at the same time to help push me into the new realm. I left, and I started my own writing consultancy, and had a very nerve-racking year, and had a lot of learning curve to figure out how to set it all up. Working up and starting, design my environment, and my space, and my systems, and routines, it was hard. I don't want to say it was a piece of cake, because you have to figure out, when do I show up to work? What does it look like? If I break the rules, how? What are the new rules and systems?

It was really luxurious, because I was able to do things like complete yoga teacher training, and take Wednesdays to be an all-athletic and writing day. It meant the world to me. I don't know if I can go back without it.

Becky M: Since then, I know you've had a child, and that also probably changes things for you, too, because now you have that freedom and space to be able to create that balance, or as close as any of us can ever get to balance, between work and parenting. I'm imagining that having done that before having that child, now that's created this place for you to be able to do the parenting and the business.

Sarah Peck: I think that this is important, too, as you start to listen to who you are and how you work, I think I would go nuts if I was trying to do everything all at once. I know there are people out there that they do the parenting thing, and they have kids at home, and then they do their business on the side at nap times, and mornings, and evenings. That would probably really fray me. I'm really happy with my choice and fortunate that we have daycare help.

I have a boundary. He goes to daycare from 8:30 to 5:30. Then, I have that time during the day. My job is to get my work done, do my writing, and then, three times a week, get my butt to a yoga class.

Becky M: And host your podcast, which is Startup Pregnant. I'm sure there you're hearing from all kinds of moms and learning that we, as you know, all do it differently. There is no right way.

Sarah Peck: Exactly. We laugh in the face of balance.

Becky M: Yeah. What is this balance of which people speak? It's hilarious that people think that's a thing.

Sarah Peck: We just make choices that are right for you. You do the best you can, and you pick your priorities. I don't want to say you can't have everything. Sure, you can strive for it all, but I think finding what's not important to you and learning what is important to you is so critical. I don't think I could record a podcast

with a screaming two year-old two feet away, so that's not my priority. He and I hang out at the park every day after daycare.

Becky M: This realization, this lightbulb moment that you had prior to where you're at now, to me it seems like it kind of helped you get to that place of understanding that you can create what works for you.

Sarah Peck: Yes, yes. It may change over time. You listen, learn, adapt, and then do your best to figure out, what is the environment that would be most supportive to me right now? If you don't know what that looks like, what is not working in the environment as it exists right now? What's not working? I'm not getting enough sleep. I am drinking too much coffee. I'm too alone. I need more people to talk to. Once you start to identify those things, you can start to test, and experiment, and bring in other elements.

Becky M: That's perfect, because now I want to talk about, how do you work, now? What have you created for yourself, now that you're no longer in that other environment, and you know these things about yourself, and what works and doesn't work for you? What are you doing for how you do your work? I'm guessing it's not at a busy coffee house.

Sarah Peck: No. I have a high desk, kind of a standing desk/sitting desk stool in the corner of one of our bedrooms. We live in Manhattan, New York, so we don't have a ton of space. My podcasting studio is like the second half of our bedroom, which is fine. I tried the closet. Too small.

Then, I work from about 9:30 till about 4:00, most days. 9:00 to noon is the most brain-on I am. If I'm writing my articles, if I'm having conversations like this one, because we're recording in the morning, that's when I can string a sentence together best. In the afternoon is when I answer the pile of emails, not the urgent VIP ones, but the regular stuff. Coordination, logistics, setting up calendars, pushing buttons, where I do, I listen back to the show, and I edit it, I am doing outreach, etc.

One day a week, so that's Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. One day a week on Wednesdays is my day to make in-person meetings and events. My doctor's appointments, my commuting downtown so that I can meet with clients, or customers, or friends, I stack it all on one day, so that I don't have a Monday where it's like, "I have to work for three hours, and then I've got to get on a train and commute, and then I've got to do this, and I'm meeting a person," which means, honestly, from working from home, I work in my yoga pants and a sports bra most days. Having to get dressed and put makeup on is one of the biggest burdens to, I think, women's work.

I stack that all on one day. I get fancy, and I go out, and I have my one nice leather jacket, or leather, fake leather. I go downtown. My shoes match, and my socks match, and I don't have underwear hanging out of my pants. Whatever. I look good. I come home, and I get back in my yoga pants, and I work the other days.

Becky M: You also mentioned earlier that at that time, going to the gym felt like a chore, I'm guessing because the environment in most gyms is pretty, there's a lot of sensory overload. How does this highly-sensitive person, self-diagnosis, how

does this show up in other parts of your life? How have you adapted there, like going to the gym?

Sarah Peck: My favorite things are swimming, and yoga, and hike. We've got a huge park, two blocks from our house. I often go, and listen to a podcast, and walk around the park. We've got a yoga studio a couple of blocks away. They've got 9:00 AM classes. I try to start my week and end my week, Mondays and Fridays, by making it to that class.

Then, swimming, if I can get to it. It's harder when it's cold in the winter. Plus, it's a little bit of a commute in New York City to find a good pool that's not charging \$500 a month for membership, where I'm just like, "What? It's a pool." Then, swimming is more when I get a chance to fit it in. Those are my favorite things to do. Once it starts to get warm, and spring and summer come, my husband and I, we try to get in the car every weekend and go up to get in the outdoors, hiking and camping almost every weekend.

Becky M: Nice. Those do feel like activities that are a little more solitary, which speaks to, I think, where you, what suits you best.

Sarah Peck: Yes. It's funny, you look back at yourself, and you're like, "Huh. I like writing. I like hiking, swimming ... These are all very solo activities."

Becky M: There's nothing wrong with it. I think, as we said in the beginning, you felt a lot of pressure from society that we're all supposed to behave a certain way. I think there is that pressure, that you're supposed to crave time with other people. You watch *Sex and the City*, or any of these things, where it's just like, people are out and about. They have all these close friends. They're going to parties. It feeds their souls, but that's not everyone.

Sarah Peck: No. There's two key things that I want to bring up with regard to that. The first is, it's a lot easier to see extroverts than introverts, because they're out and about. When you walk by a restaurant, there's just lots of people doing things. There's a bit of [inaudible 00:25:03] that comes, like, "Oh, I should be doing this, this, and this." It's a lot harder to peer inside of a library or see inside somebody's private studio and see them playing guitar, or doing watercolor painting, or writing letters.

They don't lend themselves to being public activities. There's a misrepresentation, or there's an imbalance in the kind of representation. People also take pictures when they're doing really cool things. They're, "I'm out and about, doing this awesome thing!" The other big thing, and I know I've mentioned Susan Cain like eight times, but she talks about the culture of personality, who really rose to ascendance in the early 1900s. We've had about a century of this caricature of the extrovert, the people person, the outgoing, charming, charismatic personality.

It comes from, even, a lot of Dale Carnegie's work. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* came around at the height of the century, at the turn of the 20th century, around the 1900s. There were classes for people to learn this skill. Before that, 1800s, we've really, in the American west, right, I'm taking a very American-centric point of view here for a second, but we really looked at how the culture of character, and philosophy, and wisdom.

That change, you can trace it and see how the presidency changed and how television gave rise to people being on and performing in a new way. We are still at the insight of all of that. It's something that, once I started to learn a lot more about it, I was like, "Oh, maybe I was just born in the wrong century."

Becky M: To end this, I'm hoping you can do something for me, which is, I would love to hear two little bits of advice, which is, one, for other introverts or people who feel like they might be a highly-sensitive person, what kind of advice would you give them? Then for extroverts, what kind of advice would you give them? What would you want them to know about other people who might be more introverted or highly sensitive?

Sarah Peck: Two pieces of advice. This probably applies to everyone. Just pay attention to how you feel. If you are jittery, and nervous, and bored out of your mind sitting on the couch, pay attention, right? How you feel is important. Then, the second one is that you can ... It may take time. It may not happen overnight, but you can design your life. When you think about the kind of career you want to have, think about not just the impact that you want to make or the outcome that you want, but how it's happening, because our life is constructed through a series of moments. Those moments are, that's it. That's the life. If you don't like every single moment, because you don't like how it's happening, I don't know if it's worth it.

Think about that. Pay attention to what you feel. Know that you can affect, and influence, and maybe even design your life.

Becky M: So good, and totally where my head is at, these days, so it's great to hear that from you and just to reiterate that to myself that it's all about the now. If the now doesn't feel good, you got to change the now.

Sarah Peck: Right. Right?

Becky M: So good. Thank you so much for doing this, Sarah. It's been fantastic. I really appreciate your time.

Sarah Peck: I loved it. Thanks for having me.

Becky M: Thank you.