

HIGHLY  
SENSITIVE  
PEOPLE

IN AN  
INSENSITIVE  
WORLD

*How to Create a Happy Life*

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# THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING HIGHLY SENSITIVE

Two types within the same species

It has been estimated that one in every five people is highly sensitive. Not just among human beings but also other higher animals, it is possible to distinguish between two types: the highly sensitive and the more resilient – the latter taking more chances and being more self-assertive.

As well as distinguishing between two different genders, we can also divide human beings into these two types. It seems that the difference between the two types sometimes is greater than the difference between the two genders.

The highly sensitive trait is not a new discovery. It has just been called other things – introversion, for example. The American psychologist and researcher Elaine Aron (1997) has introduced and described the idea of the ‘highly sensitive person’. She talks about how she herself believed being introverted and being highly sensitive were the same thing until she realised that 30 per cent of highly sensitive people are socially extroverted.

The trait has also been called inhibited, anxious or shy. Words like these only describe how the trait appears to others when the highly sensitive person feels unsupported and unsafe. Describing the trait in such ways does not take into account that even though highly sensitive people may experience more problems and challenges than others when under pressure, they are also capable of deep happiness when their surroundings are peaceful.

The fact that we can be unhappy, if the right circumstances are not in place, but at the same time also can flourish wonderfully under the right circumstances is supported by research findings. One study showed that children with strong reactions (measured by heart rate and immune response) in challenging situations (i.e. sensitive children) became ill more often and had more accidents than other children when put under pressure (Boyce *et al.* 1995). But these children were less ill and had fewer accidents than others when in their normal and familiar surroundings.

### We receive more inputs and think deeply about them

Highly sensitive people have a very delicate nervous system. We register more nuances, and overall the inputs we receive go deeper into our system. We have a great imagination and lively inner world, which means that the inputs and impressions we receive from the outside can trigger a multitude of concepts, associations and thoughts. In this way our 'hard drive' is quickly filled and we will feel over-stimulated.

My own experience of this is that when I am on the verge of having too many inputs, I feel as if there is no space in my head for more information. If I am with strangers, this may occur in as little as 30 minutes or an hour. I can pull myself together, stay present and even pretend that I am still enjoying myself. But I will be spending a lot of energy on this and afterwards will be exhausted.

Nobody likes being over-stimulated and overwhelmed. If you are a delicate soul, you will reach your limit of what feels like pleasant stimulation a lot faster than other people. You will then need to withdraw when too many things are happening around you.

You may recognise what Erik describes in the example below; when you try to steal a break for yourself, you fear that others will perceive you as sickly, hypersensitive, aloof or unsociable.

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'When I attend big birthday parties in my family, I go to the bathroom fairly often to look at myself in the mirror and massage my hands with hot water and soap. When several people have tried to open the locked door, I feel obliged to leave the bathroom even though I have not had enough peace and quiet. Once I tried to hide behind a newspaper. I went and sat in a corner and held up the paper to hide my face. Behind the newspaper I closed my eyes and tried to find some inner calm. My uncle, who loves a bit of fun, sneaked up on me, tore the paper out of my hands and shouted, "So here you are, trying to hide!" and everybody laughed. For me it felt extremely unpleasant.'

*Erik, 48*

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It is not just difficult inputs and impressions that will over-stimulate you. The good inputs – such as a party where you are enjoying yourself – will also at some point become too much for you and you may have to withdraw when the party is at its height.

This is where we suffer the most from the limitations of being highly sensitive. Most of us want to be able to keep at it for as long as everybody else. In part it is uncomfortable to have to disappoint the host who would want us to stay. In part it feels like a loss not being able to join in for the rest of the party. And we fear that other people may perceive us as boring, antisocial or rude when we leave the party before it is over.

Our delicate nervous systems, which often force us to withdraw from things we enjoy, are also what enable us to experience great joy.

Pleasant inputs such as fine art, listening to music or birdsong, smelling flowers, tasting something delicious or experiencing magnificent scenery – all of this can bring us great joy. We take it deeply into our selves and it fills us with delight.

### Sensitive to sensory inputs

If you are highly sensitive, you probably already know how difficult it can be to distract yourself from unpleasant sounds, sights or scents. You may experience being disturbed and irritated by things you have not chosen and cannot filter out. Sounds that other people may experience as normal you will experience as highly intrusive noise that throws your nervous system off balance.

One example is New Year's Eve. As a highly sensitive person, you can take great pleasure in the beautiful sight of fireworks across the sky. But you may struggle to cope with the loud explosions. They seem to penetrate and shake your nervous system, and you are likely to feel quite unnerved by this in the days around New Year.

When I give seminars on being highly sensitive or talk to people one to one in therapy sessions, I ask everyone to look at the best and the worst experiences of being highly sensitive. Often New Year's Eve is among people's worst experiences. The sounds of the explosions make for a living hell of infernal noise.

Seemingly more innocent noise such as neighbours moving about can also be a problem for the highly sensitive person as he or she often sleeps lightly and is woken by even small sounds.

It may be that there are surroundings and places you have to avoid. Many highly sensitive people are very affected by cold weather and draughts and have to decline invitations to garden parties. If you go to the hairdresser and somebody else is getting a perm, the smell from the chemicals may be an issue. It can be difficult to visit people who smoke; even if they agree not to smoke while you visit them, the odour from clothes and furniture may be overwhelming to your sensitive nose. I have met sensitive people who had to leave their workplace because the radio was on constantly and they were unable to shut out the noise.

Cafés with loud music, which you may not like, can present a problem. And many highly sensitive people find it distressing to be in cramped places.

Actually, it can be quite difficult to find cafés that suit the highly sensitive person. And this can be annoying for you and your companions – especially if you are all feeling tired and hungry.

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'I often get really frustrated with myself because I am so difficult to please. I wish I could let things affect me less, like other people do.'

*Susanne, 23*

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Being highly sensitive, we find it hard to take things lightly; our threshold for pain is low and we suffer more than others when our surroundings are difficult for us.

Easily affected by the moods of other people

Many highly sensitive people report that they detect when there is conflict in their surroundings. To witness a row can be exhausting – even just being in a place with tension in the air.

The upside to this receptiveness is that we can be deeply compassionate. We are able to offer empathic listening. Many highly sensitive people find jobs in care work and are valued in this area by the people they look after.

Highly sensitive people who work full-time helping and caring for others often say that they have very little energy left at the end of a working day. Our susceptibility makes us vulnerable to other people's moods and we are affected by them. We are not very good at detaching

from other people's suffering and we find it hard to leave our work behind when we come home.

It is important that you learn to look after yourself if you work with people. There will be a great risk of burning out.

People often ask me if it is possible to learn to not be so susceptible. As a highly sensitive person, you are equipped with very receptive antennae so that you will clearly experience what is happening around you. Sometimes I have wished I was able to tie a knot in those antennae to stop the inputs going into my system, that I could somehow be deaf, blind and numb. But I do not think this is possible. What you can do is become more aware of the way you think about the things you experience and feel.

It is good to look at the way you think if, for instance, you experience tension in a relationship. You may think to yourself, 'This person is probably angry with me; what am I doing wrong?' or you may think, 'This person seems frustrated; maybe he needs to look after himself more.' If you tend to think things similar to the first example, difficult situations may become more painful than they need to be. You can read more about how feelings and thoughts are closely related in Chapter 8.

Under nurturing circumstances your sensitivity to the atmosphere around you can be a resource. Here is what psychologist and expert in the nervous system, Susan Hart, says:

Infants who respond sensitively to their surroundings will be more sensitive to outside stimuli... In children raised in a safe and caring environment it could lead to



involvement, empathy, joy, interest and attunement with the environment. (Hart 2008, p.112)

Sensitive children who grow up in supportive and nurturing surroundings will mainly experience their sensitivity as an asset. And even if you have not received the loving care you needed as a child, you can learn to give it to yourself now in your adult life. You can support yourself and arrange your life in ways that give your sensitivity an opportunity to fulfil all its potential and become a resource to you.

## Conscientious

A study has shown that inhibited (sensitive) children around the age of four were less likely to cheat, break the rules or act selfishly even when they could be sure nobody was watching them. Furthermore, they gave socially competent answers when confronted with moral dilemmas (Kochanska and Thompson 1998).

Many highly sensitive people are very conscientious and tend to feel responsible for the entire world. From a young age, many of us have often sensed unease around us and tried to respond to it.

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'When I sensed my mother's unhappiness, I did everything I could to avoid being a nuisance. I thought a lot about how I could help make her life better. One day I decided to smile at everyone I met. I imagined that other people would then admire my mother because she was so good at raising children.'

*Hanne, 57*

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