

About the Trait of High Sensitivity by Emily Agnew

About 15 to 20% of us on the planet are born with a trait called *high sensitivity*, which affects the way we process information. This trait was first identified by the psychologist Elaine Aron and has since been found in over a hundred other species, from wolves to horses to pumpkinseed sunfish. Among human beings, as in these animal species, the trait is not a pathology or a diagnosis. Rather, sensitivity is an evolutionarily adaptive response to new stimuli and to risk.

Elaine Aron's first book, *The Highly Sensitive Person*, was published in 1996. In the years since then, knowledge of the trait has become more widespread. But unfortunately, even though there are nearly 1.5 billion sensitive people on the planet, the majority of parents, teachers, doctors, mental health professionals, and sensitive people themselves still know little, if anything, about the trait.

One misconception is that highly sensitive people (HSPs) are "oversensitive" or somehow weak. On the contrary. Our sensitivity comes with many gifts, which we can enjoy if we are giving ourselves the right kind of self-care.

As a group, sensitive people are highly intelligent and creative. We are principled, conscientious, and empathetic towards others, carefully considering the effects and consequences of our actions. We are easily moved by music, art, and beauty. And we have an unusual capacity for connection with our spiritual intuition, which serves us in our search for a deeply meaningful life.

Another common misconception is that all highly sensitive people are introverts. About 70 percent of sensitive people are indeed introverted, preferring to be alone to rest and recharge when they get overstimulated. But the remaining 30 percent of sensitive people are extroverts, enjoying stimulating social situations and activities similar to those preferred by their non-HSP extrovert peers. If you are a sensitive extrovert, however, you still need your "alone" time to recharge, just like sensitive introverts do.



If you are not sure whether you are sensitive person, you can take this [quiz](#) to find out. Then ponder whether you are an introvert or an extrovert. The answer matters, because self-care can look different for introverted and extroverted HSPs.

Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, however, if you are built sensitive, you are bound experience heightened sensitivity to stimuli. This comes with the trait, and looks different from person to person. The possibilities include sensitivity to sounds, smells, bright lights, caffeine and other drugs, intense or violent movies, rough fabrics, crowds, and other people's moods.

Your heightened sensitivity to stimuli also includes *internal* stimuli—specifically, your thoughts. Your exceptional mind is wired to take in even subtle details from your environment and process them deeply. The sheer possibility-generating power of your mind is so formidable that it can overwhelm you, even when the possibilities are positive ones.

And if the express train of your mind gets on a negative track, it can quickly take you to a bad part of town

Unfortunately, a highly sensitive mind is capable of generating anxiety-producing thoughts just as rapidly as constructive or happy ones. Combine this with your sensitive capacity for emotional intensity, and you can see how you might become overwhelmed by your thoughts if they go in a negative direction.

If you don't know how to manage your mind and your anxiety, you can spiral into anxiety or depression. As a result, you may sometimes wish you could escape from your own head. And no wonder: when your thoughts are self-critical, your head is not a fun place to be.

If you grew up feeling ashamed of your sensitivity, you may have internalized that shame. This internal environment puts you at a significantly higher risk for anxiety and depression. If you are a sensitive man, depending what country you live in, you may also have the added vulnerability of cultural judgment. In North America, for example, it's no secret that men are supposed to be tough, not sensitive or emotional.

But there's good news...

Sensitive people who grew up being loved and accepted for their sensitivity are as happy as, or even happier than, their non-sensitive peers. Research indicates that we thrive when we are given opportunities to experience new or challenging situations in ways that allow us to manage the resulting stimulation.

But does this mean that if you had a difficult childhood, you are doomed to depression and anxiety? No, thank goodness. Happy sensitive people are happy because they have a good inner relationship. And while your inner relationship may not yet be a good one, it is something you have control over, and you can change it for the better.

For starters, it is a profound relief to discover you haven't been crazy or weird all this time. You were simply sensitive, but you didn't know it. Paradoxically, the first round of relief may come in the form of grief. As you begin to accept your sensitivity and give yourself the care you hadn't known you needed, you may find yourself mourning the times in your life when you didn't get acceptance and support.

As the grief passes, though, you begin to realize that the obstacle to happiness was never your sensitive mind itself, nor your sensitive body. The obstacle has been *your relationship with your yourself*. Once you learn how to be present with your mind and your body in a new way, you can shift that inner relationship with yourself to be positive and supportive.

For you, a flexible, sturdy personal infrastructure is essential

You can't accomplish these inner changes if you are chronically overstimulated and exhausted, however. Ample sleep, time to de-stimulate when you need to, and consistent ways of grounding yourself in your body, from meditation to exercise, are key for you.

To put it another way, your *emotional self-care* and your *physical self-care* comprise an infinity loop, each feeding the other. As you master the skills to manage your mind, you'll find it easier to sense the care your body needs. The better your physical self-care gets, the more easily you can connect to your spiritual intuition. And your spiritual intuition guides you to improve your inner relationship. You've come full circle in a new, positive spiral.

This is how you are meant to feel and to live. Exceptional wisdom, intuition, and foresight are all part of your sensitivity. Historically, highly sensitive people have held key roles as wise men and wise women, priests, shamans, and royal advisors. In the 21st century, sensitive people only rarely carry this kind of official title. Yet our wisdom is needed more than ever.

But to claim these gifts in a consistent way, you have to be in a balanced state of mind and health. Your first act of self-care is to evaluate your own infrastructure, in the light of your new understanding of stimulation and sensitivity. How is your sleep? Your

eating? Your exercise routine, if you have one? Your schedule? Your personal support system? Your spiritual connection?

And how is your inner relationship? Are you as kind and supportive to yourself as a best friend would be? Or do you shame, criticize, and demean yourself? Do you feel connected to your spiritual intuition? Or do you have that exhausting feeling of “It’s all up to me and I can’t quite manage it all” that we feel when we are cut off from our inner knowing?

On the [Sustainably Sensitive](http://www.sustainablysensitive.com) website, you’ll find dozens of in-depth articles and videos exploring different aspects of sensitive self-care, including ways of nurturing your inner relationship. And if you need help with specific issues, contact me and we can talk about 1:1 sessions and how I might be able to support you.

***[Sustainably Sensitive](http://www.sustainablysensitive.com)** sessions, programs and classes with Emily are designed to help you build a healthy inner relationship, a sturdy, flexible personal infrastructure, and a strong connection to your spiritual intuition—the key elements of a happy, sustainable life for a sensitive person. Read more at www.sustainablysensitive.com/services.*

All credit to Elaine Aron for information on high sensitivity (see *The Highly Sensitive Person* by Elaine Aron, Broadway Books, 1997)