



# Why Am I So Sensitive?

(Is something  
wrong with me?)

A guidebook by Emily Agnew





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"Why am I so sensitive?"

"Why do I think about things more than other people?"

"Why can't I toughen up?"

If you are creative, sensitive and anxious, you likely grew up asking yourself these questions. Being thoughtful and observant, you couldn't help but notice you were different somehow from most people around you. And over time, you began to worry that this difference might not be a good thing. A new question gradually dawned in your mind, hanging in the background and coloring your experience of life:

"Is something wrong with me?"

As a result, whether through your own mistaken assumptions or through other's judgments, you learned to feel ashamed of yourself. This shame made you anxious. Your anxiety made you awkward and socially or even physically clumsy. And your shame and confusion increased. I know, because this happened to me, too.

What I did not know then was that I was among the 15 to 20% of the human population born with a constellation of genetic attributes called *sensory processing sensitivity*, or more commonly, high sensitivity. This trait of high sensitivity was first identified by the researcher and psychologist Elaine Aron, PhD. And it has since been found to exist in most animal species as well, from fruit flies to rhesus monkeys.

To be clear, sensitivity is *not* a syndrome, a disease, or a diagnosable disorder: rather, it is preference for taking in extensive and subtle information about a situation and processing that information before acting.

So how on earth does it happen that so many of us who are born sensitive end up feeling like something is wrong with us, when in fact we are not only thoughtful and empathetic, but also highly intelligent, perceptive, and conscientious? And how can we find our way out of this debilitating cycle of shame, anxiety, and self-criticism?



# Sensitivity without the shame

As I walked around our neighborhood one day, pondering this challenge of sensitive anxiety, I passed a woman walking a dog that looked like an improbably small golden retriever. It had a beautiful coat of golden fur with a white blaze on its face and white paws. But what really captivated me was the dog's eyes. They were full of an alert, lively intelligence. "What kind of dog is this?!" I asked the woman. "He's a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever," she replied.

I was so taken with this dog that I hurried home to google "Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers", which I learned are called

"Tollers" for short. Scanning the search results, I spotted an article entitled "Top 10 Reasons NOT to Get a Toller". As I clicked on it and started reading, I found myself laughing out loud.

No wonder I'd been drawn to this dog: if I'd been born a dog myself, I'd have been his sister. I'm not even a dog person: the family golden retriever knocked me down a few too many times when I was a toddler. On top of that, I have a hyper-sensitive nose, and the smell of wet dog is enough to make me keel over. But Tollers sounded just like me—*without the shame and anxiety.*



**I learned that these special dogs—**

**—TEND TO RESERVE THEIR TRUE ENTHUSIASM FOR FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS**

It is a myth that all HSPs (highly sensitive people) are quiet: whether introverted or extroverted (and yes, 30 % of sensitive people are extroverts), we can be animated, expressive, and uninhibited when we are with people we know well. But many HSPs find crowded or noisy events like big parties or festivals overstimulating and draining, preferring to socialize one-on-one or in small groups. And we require ample time alone to recharge after engaging in stimulating activities.

**—ARE HIGHLY INTELLIGENT**

In fact, Toller owners must go beyond ordinary obedience training to teach their dogs a wide variety of skills, because a bored Toller will pester you to death or destroy your house. Similarly, as the owner of a powerful, deep-processing HSP brain, you must give it the discipline, creative stimulation, and variety it needs or it will chew you up inside and send you spiraling down into anxiety.

**—NEED THE RIGHT PHYSICAL CARE OR THEY GET CRAZED**

For Duck Tolling Retrievers, “the right kind of physical care” means at least an hour each day of vigorous, varied exercise, preferably outside. Similarly, creative, sensitive, anxious people need a sturdy self-care routine that includes regular exercise, time in the nature, ample sleep and health-supportive eating. Cutting corners with our physical self-care makes us much more prone to anxiety and depression.

**—LIVE TO DO CHALLENGING, HELPFUL, USEFUL WORK**

Tollers are working dogs: they love to herd and retrieve. This means they can be hard to train, because they get bored if they aren’t doing something stimulating and useful. HSPs, too, often struggle to find work that satisfies our hunger for meaning and creative stimulation on the one hand, and our need for predictability and financial sustainability on the other. We have to be inventive and flexible in creating a sustainable work life, and patient with ourselves when we seem to be taking longer at it than our less-sensitive peers.

**—LET OUT A CHARACTERISTIC SCREAM WHEN THEY GET OVEREXCITED**

Tollers are no picnic to be around when they get too wound up. They have a high-pitched bark that makes anyone within earshot want to run for the hills. The HSP version of a Toller scream is full-system overwhelm: the body is screaming, “This is too much!! Get me out of here!” What follows is not pretty: if we don’t find a way to reduce our overarousal, we may shut down, freak out, or blow up.



# Getting the self-care we need

Looking at yourself through the metaphor of these lovely dogs makes it easier to grasp that there is no shame in being different. Sensitive people *are* different: the key is to understand your trait so you can begin to appreciate your formidable strengths rather than defining yourself as weird, weak, or somehow deficient compared to less-sensitive people.

The more you are able to accept yourself and your trait, the easier you'll find it to identify and act on the care you need. And this is of crucial importance to your well-being, because HSPs do need a different kind of care than less-sensitive people. At the minimum, we need more sleep and more downtime, and we are particularly sensitive to what we eat. And to thrive, we need a nurturing, supportive environment.

*I grow dahlias, and dahlias are the same way. You have to dig the tubers up every fall; wash, divide, label, and store them; repot them in the spring; replant them again outside, stake them, and tie them. It's so much work, you'd be right to ask, "How could growing dahlias possibly be worth it?"*

*But in return for this special care, a single dahlia plant will bloom constantly for three months, producing armfuls of gorgeous blossoms that fill every vase in our house from late July until the first frost in October.*

And it's the same way for sensitive people. When our self-care is poor, life starts to feel like an ordeal to be endured. By contrast, when we are well-rested, well-fed, and self-connected we bloom, overflowing with the wonderful creative energy I call "YES!" energy.





In this state of mind and body, we experience life as an exciting challenge to be embraced.

But what if you grew up not knowing you were a dahlia? If you were surrounded by daisies, you'd learn to give yourself daisy care. You would fail to bloom, because daisies need almost no care at all. And then you'd wonder what on earth was wrong with you.

Learning you are built more like a dahlia than a daisy can go a long way towards healing the shame of feeling different. In fact, if all this information about sensitivity and self-care is new to you, you may already feel some relief simply from learning that the trait of high sensitivity exists, that you share it with 15 to 20 % of people, and that it is normal.

However, information alone may not be enough to give you relief if you were subtly judged or overtly mocked for being "too sensitive", "a crybaby", or "a wimp."

## Understanding the origins of sensitive anxiety

It's important to understand how HSP children typically respond when they are repeatedly teased and labeled in this harsh way: *they try to change themselves to fit in*. In an effort to cope with sustained criticism and judgment, rather than attack back, they turn their sensitive strengths against themselves.

They try to be perfect, using self-criticism as a weapon against themselves. They use their keen skills of observation and empathy to "read the room" and conform to what the adults (or the other children) around them seem to want. They hold in their feelings and silently suffer from anxiety.

A tough childhood magnifies the challenge all HSPs face of being dahlias in a daisy society. Research shows that sensitive children who grow up in a difficult home environment face a significantly higher risk of anxiety and depression later in life\*.

Furthermore, HSP anxiety is not garden-variety worry. Your sensitive mind is hardwired to consider all the angles, possibilities, and implications of a situation, and if it heads off in the wrong direction, you can spiral down quickly. The resulting exhaustion and overwhelm makes everyday life that much harder. And if you make mistakes, your inner critic becomes louder, making you even more anxious.



# How do you handle this downward spiral?

If you are like many sensitive people, you've tried a variety of strategies to cope with anxiety and to overcome the feeling there is something wrong with you. Along the way, you may have noticed something troubling: the effectiveness of these strategies is inconsistent and the relief you get does not always last:

## **NUMBING OUT—OR SIMPLY AVOIDING THINGS THAT MAKE YOU ANXIOUS**

Any time you use a substance or an activity to avoid feeling unpleasant feelings, you are numbing. When you do this, you effectively tell your inner world, "I don't want to listen, because what I hear might hurt." Numbing yourself can be a seductive option, because it may actually feel good in the short term. However, the long-term cost is high: your joy and your pain are all in the same box, so they all get shut down together...and you can't find out what the pain was trying to tell you.

Avoiding people or activities that make you anxious is understandable, but equally problematic. You may get relief on the short term, but in the longer term, avoidance can drastically narrow your options in the world and leave you isolated.



## MEDICATION

Medication, under a doctor's supervision, can help people who face anxiety so severe that it's hard for them to function. But if they try to use the medication to get rid of the anxiety rather than to calm themselves enough to look into its causes, they are missing a big opportunity.

Anxiety is a message from your body and mind telling you something is not right. Medication can help you manage anxiety, but to heal the root causes of anxiety, you must learn how to hear the message it brings.

## THERAPY

Sessions with a therapist can be a godsend if you are anxious. In an environment where your thoughts and feelings are met with acceptance and compassion, things begin to seem possible for you that did not seem possible before.

On the other hand, you may also have experienced therapy that felt like all talk and no change. And it turns out there's a powerful reason some therapy is fruitless: fascinating research<sup>2</sup> has shown that the success of therapy is profoundly affected by your ability to go inside and listen to yourself in a highly specific way. If you don't know how to do this—and few people are born with this skill—then you will not experience the inner changes you seek.

## MEDITATION, MINDFULNESS, YOGA, EXERCISE, AND OTHER BODY-GROUNDING AND AWARENESS PRACTICES

Exercise is well-documented as a highly effective antidote to anxiety and depression<sup>3</sup>:

if it were a drug, it would dominate the market. Yoga is particularly powerful for HSPs, bridging the worlds of the physical and the spiritual. And meditation and mindfulness are powerful ways help you connect to your spiritual intuition, which we'll talk about more in a minute.

If you are creative, sensitive, and anxious, it is impossible to overstate the positive impact these self-care practices can have on your anxiety level. They help keep you away from the edge of the "cliff of anxiety".

## But what happens afterwards?

With the exception of numbing, the above strategies are all healthy, effective ways to address anxiety. But thinking back on all you've tried, ask yourself these questions:

- » If you've gone to therapy and experienced some relief, did it last?
- » When you've exercised, what has happened when the endorphin high wore off?
- » If you've meditated or done yoga and felt peaceful afterwards, does that peace stick with you throughout the day?

Or does the anxiety creep back in after an hour or two, as it used to do for me, despite weekly therapy and daily walks, yoga, and meditation?

Here's the reality: therapy, medication, exercise, yoga, meditation, and exercise can all be powerful ways to get relief from anxiety. *But if you want the relief to last, you must get to the source of the anxiety. And that means—*

# You need a new way to relate to your mind

It's one thing for your sensitive mind to grasp intellectually that there is nothing wrong with you. But it's another thing entirely for you to trust that idea. Remember, you learned to criticize and shame yourself to try to stay safe. You can't expect that to stop until these critical, shaming parts of you are **convinced there is a competent new sheriff in town.**

That sheriff is you. And to get your badge, you have to learn how to listen to yourself in new way—a way you've never done before.

If you are like most people, you know two ways of relating to your thoughts and emotions.

One is to *analyze* your thoughts and emotions. We all know what that looks like: it's the most common (and unfortunately the least helpful) way people relate their thoughts and emotions. A more sophisticated technique, which you may have mastered if you are a meditator, is to *observe* your thoughts and emotions from the standpoint of a detached witness.

Here's the hitch, though: analysis can bring intellectual understanding. And observation from a witnessing awareness can bring the relief of detachment.

“

*Alone, neither analysis nor simple observation will bring lasting change.*

”

What you need is a way to be present with yourself, so you can hold your thoughts and feelings, *and* engage with them without getting overwhelmed.

That way is called **Focusing**.





## Focusing: a godsend for sensitive people

Focusing is a subtle yet powerful skill of inner listening. It is a way of paying attention to yourself that creates in you an environment of radical acceptance. This radical acceptance is in itself a potent antidote to the early childhood experiences many HSPs share of feeling invisible, alone, or misunderstood.

You may be thinking, “But why would I want to accept feeling all those painful feelings?” This is a great question. And the answer may surprise you: radical acceptance, it turns out, is key to the internal change process.

That’s right. *You do not have to make things change:* change and forward movement occur naturally when you learn to relate to yourself in a radically accepting way.

From this accepting stance, you can listen to and address the root causes of your anxiety. Focusing calms the fear many sensitive people have of letting their intense emotions “out of the box.”

This may be the single most important of the many benefits Focusing offers us as HSPs, because if we have feelings but are afraid to feel them, we are paralyzed. With Focusing, you can *be with your anxiety—without getting overwhelmed by it.*

The very basis of Focusing is a spacious kind of presence. You learn to find the “bigger you” that is more spacious than your mind, with its analyses and judgments. This “bigger you” also includes your witnessing awareness, yet it goes beyond mere witnessing to bring compassion, curiosity, and engagement to anything that arises in you.

As you engage in this new way with yourself, you discover that your inner world can “speak” to you in a surprising variety of ways: feelings, thoughts, images, dreams, memories, physical sensations, mental “YouTube” clips, and more. And Focusing gives you the tools to understand all these forms of internal communication.

“*...be with your anxiety—without getting overwhelmed by it.*”



# Creating a sustainably sensitive life

I shared earlier that in the past, even an extensive, daily routine of exercise, meditation, and yoga, along with weekly therapy, was not enough to prevent me from spiraling back down into anxiety, every day. Now, I rarely get anxious, and if I do, know how to go in and listen and learn what I need to do to address it. And my connection to my spiritual intuition—the most powerful of our HSP resources—flows now in a way it never did before.

But best of all, I wake up every day full of “YES!” energy.

Focusing has been the key to this change. The moment I began to learn Focusing in 2010, my anxiety began to diminish. It’s true I still see a therapist if something big comes up, and in my sessions, I use my Focusing skills to go deeper, so the therapy is highly effective. But these visits to my therapist are increasingly rare: the number is down to a handful each year, because I can handle nearly everything that comes up in my weekly Focusing partnership exchanges, or Focusing on my own.

“  
*Best of all, I wake up every day full of “YES!” energy.*

”



## Sensing the right next step for yourself—

What support do you need as you heal from sensitive anxiety? I invite you to start listening to your spiritual intuition now: as you explore your options below, sense what resonates with you, then click on the program and session descriptions to read more.

### 1:1 DEEP LISTENING SESSIONS:

When life events leave you anxious or shaken, 1:1 support will help you create more presence for the pain to heal. Deep listening sessions with a facilitator intimately familiar with your HSP trait can help you strengthen your inner relationship and connect to your spiritual intuition. [Learn more...](#)

### INNER LISTENING INTENSIVE:

This powerful 6-month program provides you with 24 sessions of 1:1 mentoring and facilitation as you transform your inner relationship and establish new habits of self-care, supported by reading and writing between sessions. [Learn more...](#)

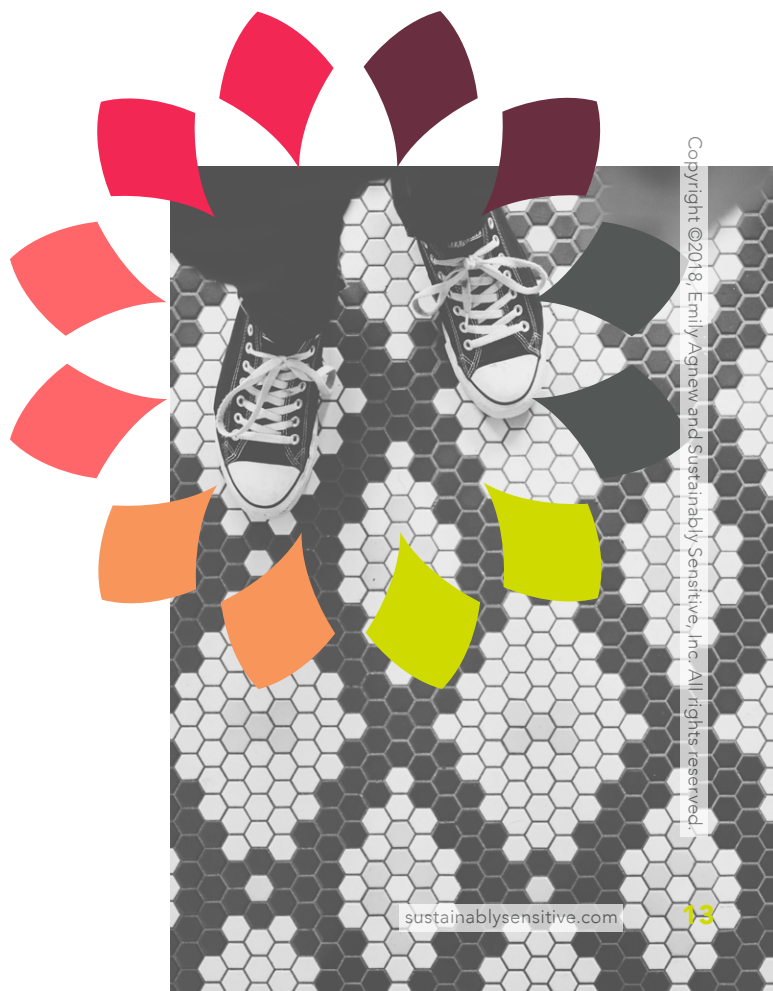
### BIG DECISIONS PROGRAM:

If you've always believed there was something wrong with you, then it's hard to trust yourself to make decisions. This self-guided program takes you through a unique, powerful process to bring you from confusion to clarity so you can be at peace with your decisions. Or invest in the premium version and get two hours of personalized support. [Learn more...](#)

*—and keep an eye out for your copy of the Sustainably Sensitive e-zine featuring in-depth articles about sensitivity, delivered to your inbox twice a month*

### SUSTAINABLY SENSITIVE BUSINESS MENTORING:

Are you a creative, sensitive person seeking to start or grow a solo business? Getting the right support at the right time can make the difference between overwhelm and sustainability. I offer business mentoring, to help you focus your effort where it will be most effective, from time-saving templates to long-term vision planning. [Learn more...](#)



# Endnotes

1 — Aron, Elaine (2010). *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person*, page. 3. New York: Routledge

2 — Gendlin, Eugene (1996). *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*, page 1. New York: The Guilford Press

3 — Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) [website](#)

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Questions? Please email me at  
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## About Emily

Emily Agnew is a certified facilitator for Focusing and Inner Bonding, a mentor, a writer...and a highly sensitive person. She supports creative, sensitive people seeking relief from anxiety, using a uniquely powerful blend of Focusing, Inner Bonding, Nonviolent Communication that helped her overcome the intense anxiety she suffered during a 30-year career as a professional oboist. Emily skillfully weaves key information about sensitivity into one-on-one sessions and classes and programs. She also teaches courses and mentors students in Ann Weiser Cornell's Focusing certification program, and writes two articles a month for the Sustainably Sensitive newsletter and blog, addressing the challenges and opportunities creative, sensitive people face in life and in business. She lives with her partner Duke in Rochester, New York and is the happy mother of a lovely daughter.

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*We can make our minds so like  
still water that beings gather about  
us that they may see, it may be,  
their own images, and so live for a  
moment with a clearer, perhaps even  
a fiercer life because of our quiet.*

W.B. YEATS

”

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