

# On My Mind: Are you a highly sensitive person?



Fifteen to twenty percent of people are born with a temperament that makes them especially sensitive to a wide range of sensory and emotional stimuli.

Interestingly, so are 15 – 20 percent of at least 100 other species, including fruit flies! About 20 years ago, Elaine Aron, Ph.D., coined the term “highly sensitive person” or HSP. The term came from her observation that some people feel things more deeply than most. They are more attuned to love, rejection, beauty, ugliness, delight, disappointment, comfort, hurt, praise, criticism, order, disorder, quiet, noise, pleasure, and pain — in fact, all forms of stimulation — than others. Over the past 20 years since the term was coined, hundreds of studies of adults, infants, and other species have confirmed Aron’s findings.

Some cultures (certain Asian and Scandinavian groups, for example), value the strong sensitivity trait highly. This is less true in other cultures, including ours. Like any other evolutionary trait, sensitivity has advantages and disadvantages, and it serves people in some vocations more than in others. A high degree of

sensitivity can enhance the work of architects, judges, artists, writers, theologians, chefs, landscape designers, teachers and psychotherapists. On the other hand, generals, soldiers, nightclub DJs, construction workers, CEOs, certain kinds of doctors, and lawyers might find it disadvantageous to be overly sensitive to environmental stimulus and the feelings of others. HSPs might marvel at how anyone can tolerate the pummeling that politicians regularly endure. Many HSPs are happiest when working on their own, away from the scrutiny of a boss or the public.

Because HSPs are unusually sensitive to their environments, the subtleties of others' emotions, and psychic and physical pain, they tend to be conscientious, creative, and empathic. People with this trait actually have more than the average number of active mirror neurons in their brains: When looking at others who are experiencing pain, love, joy or other emotions, they feel the others' feelings in an intense and personal way, rather than with objectivity and a certain remove.

Understanding the nature of HSPs and non-HSPs becomes particularly important in relationships. As Dr. Aron points out, "HSPs tend to see others as rude or 'clueless'; non-HSPs can see HSPs as fussy or completely neurotic."

Understanding that your partner, friend, or coworker is simply a different breed of human who feels things differently than you do can help minimize judgments, misunderstanding, and conflict.

I know a married couple in which both members are HSPs. They clearly love each other, but the husband needs time each day when he withdraws from the world to draw, write, read, and play computer games by himself. For years, his wife experienced his alone time as a rejection. One moment he was loving and kind, the next he was sealed off in his studio. She felt confused and abandoned. When she came to understand that he felt overwhelmed by the world and needed to recuperate with alone time, and when he grew to recognize that she felt acute pain when he disappeared, they became more compassionate and thoughtful with each other. And when they took each other's reactions less personally, their marriage blossomed.

Research suggests that another challenge for some HSPs is that they are more easily bored in relationships. They often long for a deeper level of engagement and conversation than they can find with many partners. Remember, HSPs tend to be unusually empathic and emotionally engaged. They tend, on a fairly constant basis, to reflect on and seek deep meaning in interactions and the world around them. Some non-HSPs find such constant intensity overwhelming, or simply

tiresome. A curious aspect of this phenomenon is that on average, HSPs are no less satisfied than others in their relationships. They may come to accept that they are more prone to interpersonal boredom. Nonetheless, this may be a reason for relationships with one HSP member to seek out significant, authentic, and emotional interactions outside the home.

For people who are not highly sensitive, HSPs can seem moody, “oversensitive” and “neurotic.” But research has demonstrated that HSPs are only more neurotic (the tendency to be anxious and depressed) than others if they had childhoods punctuated by trauma and adverse events. Because of their extreme sensitivity, HSPs’ experience of trauma is amplified. Hence, it’s no surprise that those who had difficult childhoods are more likely than non-HSPs to be anxious, depressed, and shy.

It’s important to remember that the tendency to be highly sensitive to stimulus is present from birth. Environment then shapes what we do with that inherent trait. HSPs who are raised in safe, loving, supportive environments are actually less likely to become anxious and depressed, and more likely than non-HSPs to thrive as adults. Sensitive people are more able to respond to help, psychotherapy, and kindness than people who are less sensitive. As Dr. Aron points out, “After all, the essence of their trait is adapting. They take note of and respond to their environment in the way that will best help them to survive and thrive.”

There are genetic markers for the likelihood of having the HSP trait. One of the most important genetic themes in psychiatry is that all people carry a gene for a protein that links that works for me transports serotonin through the brain. (Serotonin influences stress tolerance, anxiety, and mood, among many other things.) There are three variations on this gene: long/long, long/short, and short/short. People who carry more shorts are more likely to be depressed and anxious. But that is only true if they have had stressful lives (especially in childhood) — just as the HSP trait only leads to emotionally troubled adulthood if a person had adverse experiences in childhood. Not surprisingly, HSPs are more likely than most people to carry one of the shorter versions of the gene. Research suggests that HSPs and people with two shorts are especially good at decision making and gaining from social support, but more vulnerable to emotional distress.

You probably already have a sense of whether you are a highly sensitive person. If you have the trait, it is particularly important to understand, because many highly sensitive people have been shamed with expressions such as, “Just get over it” or

“You are so sensitive,” or just feel that they are different from others without understanding why. Understanding who you are can help you take pride in and make use of your innate differences.

To take a self test, go to [hsperson.com/test/](http://hsperson.com/test/). You will also find links at this site to the the books and writing of Elaine Aron, Ph.D., and to research by Aron and others. When you take the test, remember it is just a screening device. It points you in a direction, but it isn't foolproof. Some people with low scores have the HSP trait, while others with high scores do not. Men, whether HSPs or not, tend to score themselves lower than women.

While only 15 to 20 percent of people have scores of 14 or more, most of the people whom I have asked to take the test on Martha's Vineyard have high scores. Perhaps I am looking at a skewed sample. People who are likely to enter the world of a psychiatrist may be by nature more sensitive. But there is another interesting possibility: Perhaps the Vineyard attracts people with the HSP trait. Vineyarders have higher than national rates of alcohol use and depression, and over half have sought help from a mental health professional. (See [bit.ly/mvhsps](http://bit.ly/mvhsps).) Perhaps we are, as a group, more sensitive to the world around us. I know that one of the reasons I left Manhattan 22 years ago is that I found city life overstimulating. The Island's rural beauty and its sense of relative safety and removal from the hustle and bustle of mainland life may nurture the souls of highly sensitive people. For highly sensitive Vineyarders, the onset of summer stimulation may be overwhelming; thus the bumper stickers, “Pray for September” and “Slow Down, You're Not Off Island Anymore.”

We all come into the world with unique gifts that are then shaped by our environment. There are pros and cons to most traits, including being a member of the HSP breed of human. Understanding this trait or its absence makes it easier to be tolerant and at ease with ourselves and others, and to make the most of our inherent natures.

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