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## Too Sensitive? The Science and Experience of Highly Sensitive People

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# Too Sensitive?

*The Science and Experience of Highly Sensitive People*



Written by Lauren Rhodes

Illustrated by Lydia Newman-Heggie





Seemingly everyday experiences are too loud or too cold or too overwhelming. The light from my computer charger can keep me awake at night. As an adult, I have adapted my life to accommodate my sensitivity. I do not watch many violent movies. I try not to overbook my schedule. I venture into new things with extreme caution. I respond heavily to other people's emotions and to different kinds of stimuli in my environment, like sounds or bright lights. When I was a child, this came across as shyness. Now, my behavior may come across as introversion or being antisocial. It is none of these things. I am a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), or someone who has Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS).

The main parts of being a Highly Sensitive Person that manifest in daily life are being easily overwhelmed and being highly aware of subtleties.

Dr. Elaine Aron, the pioneering researcher of Highly Sensitive People, began studying Sensory Processing Sensitivity in 1991. Sensory Processing Sensitivity is the scientific term for high sensitivity, a widespread trait. According to Aron's research, out of the world's population, 15-20 percent of people are Highly Sensitive. However, this trait is not well known. My untested hypothesis for this lack of common familiarity with SPS is that it may not sound real to people who do not have it; opening up about the topic could lead to ridicule if it does not sound real; and that it is difficult to talk about, because of the nature of the people whom it affects. If a Highly Sensitive Person attempts to explain their experience to someone who does not believe them, this could potentially be an overwhelming and negative experience, because of their sensitivity.

Like the title of this article, Highly Sensitive People may be told that we are "too sensitive". The trait of Sensory Processing Sensitivity is specifically focused on experiences of four things: depth of processing, overstimulation, emotional intensity, and sensory sensitivity. I believe that sharing the scientific background of Sensory Processing Sensitivity is an important step in finding more recognition in the wider world. In a study, "Sensory Processing Sensitivity: A Review in the Light of the Evolution of Biological Responsivity," Aron et al. find that the neural regions relating to visual attention and visual processing are more highly stimulated in Highly Sensitive People. Sensory Processing Sensitivity has actually been found in over 100 different species, not just humans, because it is a survival mechanism in some situations. Broadly, it is good for a species to have a minority of organisms that are Highly Sensitive, so that the overall group benefits. The main benefit of sensitivity in organisms, especially social animals, is the ability to learn from one situation and make a better choice of how to react in another situation. If an entire species were Highly Sensitive, the biological costs would outweigh the benefits.

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In a study by Acevedo et al. including Dr. Elaine Aron, "The highly sensitive brain: an fMRI study of sensory processing sensitivity and response to others' emotions," the researchers discovered that the brain areas responsible for awareness and responsiveness were activated in different situations, and activated more highly by people with

Sensory Processing Sensitivity. These situations included seeing photos of strangers and of their romantic partners with facial expressions that were either neutral, happy, or sad. There is much other research backing that in general Sensory Processing Sensitivity is a trait that is associated with higher than average responsivity to stimuli, both environmental and social.

The main parts of being a Highly Sensitive Person that manifest in daily life are being easily overwhelmed and being highly aware of subtleties. A self-test available on Aron's website, which can help people determine if they are Highly Sensitive, includes checking boxes on statements with which the test-taker agrees. The trait can be misunderstood as introversion or shyness, because a Highly Sensitive Person often may avoid overstimulating situations and may be too overwhelmed to socialize. Highly Sensitive People tend to pick up on extra sensory input. It is easy to become overwhelmed by too much input. For example, I am sensitive to cold, light, sound, touch, smell, pain, and emotions. If I have done too many things in a day and have not had time to sit and do nothing, I am emotionally overwhelmed, even if none of the things have been upsetting. I am unable to function well if I am overwhelmed in a sensory way.

Being highly aware of subtleties is, in some ways, the inverse of being overwhelmed easily. Highly Sensitive People tend to notice subtle things in our environments, like quiet sounds or tiny lights or small interactions. Sometimes this can manifest in Highly Sensitive People enjoying subtle sensory input, but I think of this sensitivity to subtleties with more of a sense of annoyance. When I try to fall asleep, often times a very quiet but persistent sound, or a light coming under my door, will keep me awake (to which my previous roommates can attest). I understand that this could sound like some people are sensitive, and therefore other people are insensitive. This is not the case at all. As this is a trait, there does not need to be judgement attached to sensitivity, and it is more about a minority of people being Highly Sensitive rather than dividing people into sensitive and insensitive. Some Highly Sensitive People may feel judged for their sensitivity, and I am learning not to judge my own.

I am personally grateful to Dr. Elaine Aron for her research. This is a way in which I am able to understand my identity, and learning about the scientific basis for my experiences helps me accept myself. One of the important things I want to remember with this kind of science is that while the science is validating and crucial to conveying the reality of the trait, my experience is also valid by itself. That is, the science behind the trait helps explain and validate Sensory Processing Sensitivity, while the individual and collective experiences of Highly Sensitive People are also important to learn about. So: am I too sensitive? I am highly sensitive, but I do not need to judge myself for that. ●