

The
**Highly
Sensitive
Person**



*How to
Thrive When
the World
Overwhelms
You*

Elaine N. Aron

The Highly

Sensitive Person



How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You

Elaine N. Aron

A Birch Lane Press Book
Published by Carol Publishing Group



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

To Irene Bernadicou Pettit, Ph.D.
—being both poet and peasant, she knew how to plant this seed and tend
it until it blossomed.

To Art, who especially loves the flowers
—one more love we share.

I believe in aristocracy, though—if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power ... but ... of the sensitive, the considerate.... Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos. Thousands of them perish in obscurity, a few are great names. They are sensitive for others as well as themselves, they are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure ...

—E. M. Forster, “What I Believe,” in *Two Cheers for Democracy*

Table of Contents

Title Page

Dedication

Preface

Are You Highly Sensitive?

Acknowledgments

1 - The Facts About Being Highly Sensitive

2 - Digging Deeper

3 - General Health and Lifestyle for HSPs

4 - Reframing Your Childhood and Adolescence

5 - Social Relationships

6 - Thriving at Work

7. - Close Relationships

8 - Healing the Deeper Wounds

9 - Medics, Medications, and HSPs

10 - Soul and Spirit

Tips for Health-Care Professionals Working With Highly Sensitive

People

Tips for Teachers Working With Highly Sensitive Students

Tips for Employers of Highly Sensitive People

Notes

Copyright Page

Preface

“Cry baby!”

“Scaredy-cat!”

“Don’t be a spoilsport!”

Echoes from the past? And how about this well-meaning warning: “You’re just too sensitive for your own good.”

If you were like me, you heard a lot of that, and it made you feel there must be something very different about you. I was convinced that I had a fatal flaw that I had to hide and that doomed me to a second-rate life. I thought there was something wrong with me.

In fact, there is something very right with you and me. If you answered true to fourteen or more of the questions on the self-test at the beginning of this book, or if the detailed description in chapter 1 seems to fit you (really the best test), then you are a very special type of human being, a highly sensitive person—which hereafter we’ll call an HSP. And this book is just for you.

Having a sensitive nervous system is normal, a basically neutral trait. You probably inherited it. It occurs in about 15–20 percent of the population. It means you are aware of subtleties in your surroundings, a great advantage in many situations. It also means you are more easily overwhelmed when you have been out in a highly stimulating environment for too long, bombarded by sights and sounds until you are exhausted in a nervous-system sort of way. Thus, being sensitive has both advantages and disadvantages.

In our culture, however, possessing this trait is not considered ideal and that fact probably has had a major impact on you. Well-meaning parents and teachers probably tried to help you “overcome” it, as if it were a defect. Other children were not always as nice about it. As an adult, it has probably been harder to find the right career and relationships and generally to feel self-worth and self-confidence.

What This Book Offers You

This book provides basic, detailed information you need about your trait, data that exist nowhere else. It is the product of five years of research, in-

depth interviews, clinical experience, courses and individual consultations with hundreds of HSPs, and careful reading between the lines of what psychology has already learned about the trait but does not realize it knows. In the first three chapters you will learn all the basic facts about your trait and how to handle overstimulation and overarousal of your nervous system.

Next, this book considers the impact of your sensitivity on your personal history, career, relationships, and inner life. It focuses on the advantages you may not have thought of, plus it gives advice about typical problems some HSPs face, such as shyness or difficulty finding the right sort of work.

It is quite a journey we'll take. Most of the HSPs I've helped with the information that is in this book have told me that it has dramatically changed their lives—and they've told me to tell you that.

A Word to the Sensitive-But-Less-So

First, if you have picked up this book because you're the parent, spouse, or friend of an HSP, then you're especially welcome here. Your relationship with your HSP will be greatly improved.

Second, a telephone survey of three hundred randomly selected individuals of all ages found that while 20 percent were extremely or quite sensitive, another 22 percent were moderately sensitive. Those of you who fall into this moderately sensitive category will also benefit from this book.

By the way, 42 percent said they were not sensitive at all—which suggests why the highly sensitive can feel so completely out of step with a large part of the world. And naturally, it's that segment of the population that's always turning up the radio or honking their horns.

Further, it is safe to say that everyone can become highly sensitive at times—for example, after a month alone in a mountain cabin. And everyone becomes more sensitive as they age. Indeed, most people, whether they admit it or not, probably have a highly sensitive facet that comes to the fore in certain situations.

And Some Things to Say to Non-HSPs

Sometimes non-HSPs feel excluded and hurt by the idea that we are different from them and maybe sound like we think we are somehow

better. They say, “Do you mean I’m not sensitive?” One problem is that “sensitive” also means being understanding and aware. Both HSPs and non-HSPs can have these qualities, which are optimized when we are feeling good and alert to the subtle. When very calm, HSPs may even enjoy the advantage of picking up more delicate nuances. When overaroused, however, a frequent state for HSPs, we are anything but understanding or sensitive. Instead, we are overwhelmed, frazzled, and need to be alone. By contrast, your non-HSP friends are actually more understanding of others in highly chaotic situations.

I thought long and hard about what to call this trait. I knew I didn’t want to repeat the mistake of confusing it with introversion, shyness, inhibitedness, and a host of other misnomers laid on us by other psychologists. None of them captures the neutral, much less the positive, aspects of the trait. “Sensitivity” does express the neutral fact of greater receptivity to stimulation. So it seemed to be time to make up for the bias against HSPs by using a term that might be taken in our favor.

On the other hand, being “highly sensitive” is anything but positive to some. While sitting in my quiet house writing this, at a time when no one is talking about the trait, I’ll go on record: This book will generate more than its share of hurtful jokes and comments about HSPs. There is tremendous collective psychological energy around the idea of being sensitive—almost as much as around gender issues, with which sensitivity is often confused. (There are as many male as female babies born sensitive; but men are not supposed to possess the trait and women are. Both genders pay a high price for that confusion.) So just be prepared for that energy. Protect both your sensitivity and your newly budding understanding of it by not talking about it at all when that seems most prudent.

Mostly, enjoy knowing that there are also many like-minded people out there. We have not been in touch before. But we are now, and both we and our society will be the better for it. In chapters 1, 6, and 10, I will comment at some length on the HSP’s important social function.

What You Need

I have found that HSPs benefit from a fourfold approach, which the chapters in this book will follow.

1. *Self-knowledge.* You have to understand what it means to be an HSP. Thoroughly. And how it fits with your other traits and how your

society's negative attitude has affected you. Then you need to know your sensitive body very well. No more ignoring your body because it seems too uncooperative or weak.

2. *Reframing*. You must actively reframe much of your past in the light of knowing you came into the world highly sensitive. So many of your "failures" were inevitable because neither you nor your parents and teachers, friends and colleagues, understood you. Reframing how you experienced your past can lead to solid self-esteem, and self-esteem is especially important for HSPs, for it decreases our overarousal in new (and therefore highly stimulating) situations.

Reframing is not automatic, however. That is why I include "activities" at the end of each chapter that often involve it.

3. *Healing*. If you have not yet done so, you must begin to heal the deeper wounds. You were very sensitive as a child; family and school problems, childhood illnesses, and the like all affected you more than others. Furthermore, you were different from other kids and almost surely suffered for that.

HSPs especially, sensing the intense feelings that must arise, may hold back from the inner work necessary to heal the wounds from the past. Caution and slowness are justified. But you will cheat yourself if you delay.

4. *Help With Feeling Okay When Out in the World and Learning When to Be Less Out*. You can be, should be, and need to be involved in the world. It truly needs you. But you have to be skilled at avoiding overdoing or underdoing it. This book, free of the confusing messages from a less sensitive culture, is about discovering that way.

I will also teach you about your trait's effect on your close relationships. And I'll discuss psychotherapy and HSPs—which HSPs should be in therapy and why, what kind, with whom, and especially how therapy differs for HSPs. Then I'll consider HSPs and medical care, including plenty of information on medications like Prozac, often taken by HSPs. At the end of this book we will savor our rich inner life.

About Myself

I am a research psychologist, university professor, psychotherapist, and published novelist. What matters most, however, is that I am an HSP like you. I am definitely not writing from on high, aiming down to help you,

poor soul, overcome your “syndrome.” I know personally about *our* trait, its assets and its challenges.

As a child, at home, I hid from the chaos in my family. At school I avoided sports, games, and kids in general. What a mixture of relief and humiliation when my strategy succeeded and I was totally ignored.

In junior high school an extravert took me under her wing. In high school that relationship continued, plus I studied most of the time. In college my life became far more difficult. After many stops and starts, including a four-year marriage undertaken too young, I finally graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California at Berkeley. But I spent my share of time crying in rest rooms, thinking I was going crazy. (My research has found that retreating like this, often to cry, is typical of HSPs.)

In my first try at graduate school I was provided with an office, to which I also retreated and cried, trying to regain some calm. Because of such reactions, I stopped my studies with a master’s degree, even though I was highly encouraged to continue for a doctorate. It took twenty-five years for me to gain the information about my trait that made it possible to understand my reactions and so complete that doctorate.

When I was twenty-three, I met my current husband and settled down into a very protected life of writing and rearing a son. I was simultaneously delighted and ashamed of not being “out there.” I was vaguely aware of my lost opportunities to learn, to enjoy more public recognition of my abilities, to be more connected with all kinds of people. But from bitter experience I thought I had no choice.

Some arousing events, however, cannot be avoided. I had to undergo a medical procedure from which I assumed I would recover in a few weeks. Instead, for months my body seemed to resound with physical and emotional reactions. I was being forced to face once again that mysterious “fatal flaw” of mine that made me so different. So I tried some psychotherapy. And got lucky. After listening to me for a few sessions, my therapist said, “But of course you were upset; you are a very highly sensitive person.”

What is this, I thought, some excuse? She said she had never thought much about it, but from her experience it seemed that there were real differences in people’s tolerance for stimulation and also their openness to the deeper significance of an experience, good and bad. To her, such sensitivity was hardly a sign of a mental flaw or disorder. At least she hoped not, for she was highly sensitive herself. I recall her grin. “As are most of the people who strike me as really worth knowing.”

I spent several years in therapy, none of it wasted, working through various issues from my childhood. But the central theme became the impact of this trait. There was my sense of being flawed. There was the willingness of others to protect me in return for enjoying my imagination, empathy, creativity, and insight, which I myself hardly appreciated. And there was my resulting isolation from the world. But as I gained insight, I was able to reenter the world. I take great pleasure now in being part of things, a professional, and sharing the special gifts of my sensitivity.

The Research Behind This Book

As knowledge about my trait changed my life, I decided to read more about it, but there was almost nothing available. I thought the closest topic might be introversion. The psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote very wisely on the subject, calling it a tendency to turn inward. The work of Jung, himself an HSP, has been a major help to me, but the more scientific work on introversion was focused on introverts not being sociable, and it was that idea which made me wonder if introversion and sensitivity were being wrongly equated.

With so little information to go on, I decided to put a notice in a newsletter that went to the staff of the university where I was teaching at the time. I asked to interview anyone who felt they were highly sensitive to stimulation, introverted, or quick to react emotionally. Soon I had more volunteers than I needed.

Next, the local paper did a story on the research. Even though there was nothing said in the article about how to reach me, over a hundred people phoned and wrote me, thanking me, wanting help, or just wanting to say, "Me, too." Two years later, people were still contacting me. (HSPs sometimes think things over for a while before making their move!)

Based on the interviews (forty for two to three hours each), I designed a questionnaire that I have distributed to thousands all over North America. And I directed a random-dialing telephone survey of three hundred people as well. The point that matters for you is that everything in this book is based on solid research, my own or that of others. Or I am speaking from my repeated observations of HSPs, from my courses, conversations, individual consultations, and psychotherapy with them. These opportunities to explore the personal lives of HSPs have numbered

in the thousands. Even so, I will say “probably” and “maybe” more than you are used to in books for the general reader, but I think HSPs appreciate that.

Deciding to do all of this research, writing, and teaching has made me a kind of pioneer. But that, too, is part of being an HSP. We are often the first ones to see what needs to be done. As our confidence in our virtues grows, perhaps more and more of us will speak up—in our sensitive way.

Instructions to the Reader

1. Again, I address the reader as an HSP, but this book is written equally for someone seeking to understand HSPs, whether as a friend, relative, advisor, employer, educator, or health professional.

2. This book involves seeing yourself as having a trait common to many. That is, it labels you. The advantages are that you can feel normal and benefit from the experience and research of others. But any label misses your uniqueness. HSPs are each utterly different, even with their common trait. Please remind yourself of that as you proceed.

3. While you are reading this book, you will probably see everything in your life in light of being highly sensitive. That is to be expected. In fact, it is exactly the idea. Total immersion helps with learning any new language, including a new way of talking about yourself. If others feel a little concerned, left out, or annoyed, ask for their patience. There will come a day when the concept will settle in and you’ll be talking about it less.

4. This book includes some activities which I have found useful for HSPs. But I’m not going to say that you *must* do them if you want to gain anything from this book. Trust your HSP intuition and do what feels right.

5. Any of the activities could bring up strong feelings. If that happens, I do urge you to seek professional help. If you are now in therapy, this book should fit well with your work there. The ideas here might even shorten the time you will need therapy as you envision a new ideal self—not the culture’s ideal but your own, someone you can be and maybe already are. But remember that this book does not substitute for a good therapist when things get intense or confusing.

This is an exciting moment for me as I imagine you turning the page and entering into this new world of mine, of yours, of *ours*. After

thinking for so long that you might be the only one, it is nice to. have company, isn't it?

Are You Highly Sensitive?

A SELF-TEST

Answer each question according to the way you feel. Answer true if it is at least somewhat true for you. Answer false if it is not very true or not at all true for you.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| I seem to be aware of subtleties in my environment. | T | F |
| Other people's moods affect me. | T | F |
| I tend to be very sensitive to pain. | T | F |
| I find myself needing to withdraw during busy days, into bed or into a darkened room or any place where I can have some privacy and relief from stimulation. | T | F |
| I am particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine. | T | F |
| I am easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens close by. | T | F |
| I have a rich, complex inner life. | T | F |
| I am made uncomfortable by loud noises. | T | F |
| I am deeply moved by the arts or music. | T | F |
| I am conscientious. | T | F |
| I startle easily. | T | F |
| I get rattled when I have a lot to do in a short amount of time. | T | F |
| When people are uncomfortable in a physical environment I tend to know what needs to be done to make it more comfortable (like changing the lighting or the seating). | T | F |
| I am annoyed when people try to get me to do too many things at once. | T | F |
| I try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things. | T | F |

I make it a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows.	T	F
I become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around me.	T	F
Being very hungry creates a strong reaction in me, disrupting my concentration or mood.	T	F
Changes in my life shake me up.	T	F
I notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, works of art.	T	F
I make it a high priority to arrange my life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.	T	F
When I must compete or be observed while performing a task, I become so nervous or shaky that I do much worse than I would otherwise.	T	F
When I was a child, my parents or teachers seemed to see me as sensitive or shy.	T	F

SCORING YOURSELF

If you answered true to twelve or more of the questions, you're probably highly sensitive.

But frankly, no psychological test is so accurate that you should base your life on it. If only one or two questions are true of you but they are extremely true, you might also be justified in calling yourself highly sensitive.

Read on, and if you recognize yourself in the in-depth description of a highly sensitive person in chapter I, consider yourself one. The rest of this book will help you understand yourself better and learn to thrive in today's not-so-sensitive world.

Acknowledgments

I especially want to acknowledge all the highly sensitive people I interviewed. You were the first to come forward and talk about what you had known very privately about yourself for a long time, changing yourselves from isolated individuals to a group to be respected. My thanks also to those who have come to my courses or seen me for a consultation or in psychotherapy. Every word of this book reflects what you all have taught me.

My many student research assistants—too many to name—also earn a big thanks, as do Barbara Kouts, my agent, and Bruce Shostak, my editor at Carol, for their effort to see that this book reached all of you. Barbara found a publisher with vision; Bruce brought the manuscript into good shape, reining me in at all the right places but otherwise letting me run with it as I saw it.

It's harder to find words for my husband, Art. But here are some: Friend, colleague, supporter, beloved—thanks, with all my love.

The Facts About Being Highly Sensitive

A (Wrong) Sense of Being Flawed

In this chapter you will learn the basic facts about your trait and how it makes you different from others. You will also discover the rest of your inherited personality and have your eyes opened about your culture's view of you. But first you should meet Kristen.

She Thought She Was Crazy

Kristen was the twenty-third interview of my research on HSPs. She was an intelligent, clear-eyed college student. But soon into our interview her voice began to tremble.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "But I really signed up to see you because you're a psychologist and I had to talk to someone who could tell me—" Her voice broke. "Am I *crazy*?" I studied her with sympathy. She was obviously feeling desperate, but nothing she had said so far had given me any sense of mental illness. But then, I was already listening differently to people like Kristen.

She tried again, as if afraid to give me time to answer. "I feel so different. I always did. I don't mean—I mean, my family was great. My childhood was almost idyllic until I had to go to school. Although Mom says I was always a grumpy baby."

She took a breath. I said something reassuring, and she plunged on. "But in nursery school I was afraid of everything. Even music time. When they would pass out the pots and pans to pound, I would put my hands over my ears and cry."

She looked away, her eyes glistening with tears now, too. "In elementary school I was always the teacher's pet. Yet they'd say I was 'spacey.' "

Her “spaciness” prompted a distressing series of medical and psychological tests. First for mental retardation. As a result, she was enrolled in a program for the *gifted*, which did not surprise me.

Still the message was “Something is wrong with this child.” Her hearing was tested. Normal. In fourth grade she had a brain scan on the theory that her inwardness was due to petit mal seizures. Her brain was normal.

The final diagnosis? She had “trouble screening out stimuli.” But the result was a child who believed she was defective.

Special But Deeply Misunderstood

The diagnosis was right as far as it went. HSPs do take in a lot—all the subtleties others miss. But what seems ordinary to others, like loud music or crowds, can be highly stimulating and thus stressful for HSPs.

Most people ignore sirens, glaring lights, strange odors, clutter and chaos. HSPs are disturbed by them.

Most people’s feet may be tired at the end of a day in a mall or a museum, but they’re ready for more when you suggest an evening party. HSPs need solitude after such a day. They feel jangled, overaroused.

Most people walk into a room and perhaps notice the furniture, the people—that’s about it. HSPs can be instantly aware, whether they wish to be or not, of the mood, the friendships and enmities, the freshness or staleness of the air, the personality of the one who arranged the flowers.

If you are an HSP, however, it is hard to grasp that you have some remarkable ability. How do you compare inner experiences? Not easily. Mostly you notice that you seem unable to tolerate as much as other people. You forget that you belong to a group that has often demonstrated great creativity, insight, passion, and caring—all highly valued by society.

We are a package deal, however. Our trait of sensitivity means we will also be cautious, inward, needing extra time alone. Because people without the trait (the majority) do not understand that, they see us as timid, shy, weak, or that greatest sin of all, unsociable. Fearing these labels, we try to be like others. But that leads to our becoming overaroused and distressed. Then *that* gets us labeled neurotic or crazy, first by others and then by ourselves.

Kristen’s Dangerous Year

Sooner or later everyone encounters stressful life experiences, but HSPs react more to such stimulation. If you see this reaction as part of some basic flaw, you intensify the stress already present in any life crisis. Next come feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness.

Kristen, for example, had such a crisis the year she started college. She had attended a low-key private high school and had never been away from home. Suddenly she was living among strangers, fighting in crowds for courses and books, and always overstimulated. Next she fell in love, fast and hard (as HSPs can do). Shortly after, she went to Japan to meet her boyfriend's family, an event she already had good reason to fear. It was while she was in Japan that, in her words, she "flipped out."

Kristen had never thought of herself as an anxious person, but suddenly, in Japan, she was overcome by fears and could not sleep. Then she became depressed. Frightened by her own emotions, her self-confidence plummeted. Her young boyfriend could not cope with her "craziness" and wanted to end the relationship. By then she had returned to school, but feared she was going to fail at that, too. Kristen was on the edge.

She looked up at me after sobbing out the last of her story. "Then I heard about this research, about being sensitive, and I thought, Could that be me? But it isn't, I know. Is it?"

I told her that of course I could not be sure from such a brief conversation, but I believed that, yes, her sensitivity in combination with all these stresses might well explain her state of mind. And so I had the privilege of explaining Kristen to herself—an explanation obviously long overdue.

Defining High Sensitivity—Two Facts to Remember

FACT 1: Everyone, HSP or not, feels best when neither too bored nor too aroused.

An individual will perform best on any kind of task, whether engaging in a conversation or playing in the Super Bowl, if his or her nervous system is moderately alert and aroused. Too little arousal and one is dull, ineffective. To change that underaroused physical state, we drink some coffee, turn on the radio, call a friend, strike up a conversation with a total stranger, change careers—anything!

At the other extreme, too much arousal of the nervous system and anyone will become distressed, clumsy, and confused. We cannot think;