

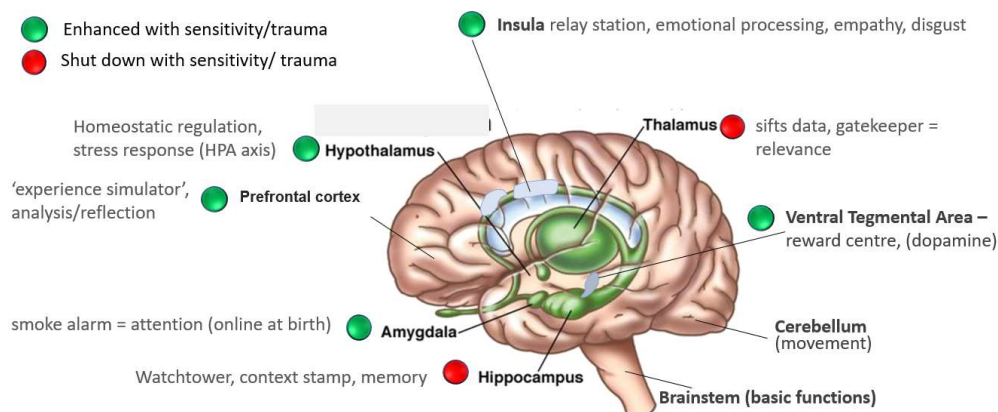
High sensitivity as the main cause of anxiety and fatigue disorders

You may have heard the term Highly Sensitive Person. You may wonder if you are one or perhaps already know because you've done the test at highlysensitive.com and come out with a high score.

Definitions and Prevalence

What is high sensitivity? It's a personality predisposition or trait that at least 20% of people have that is caused by changes in how their brains process sensory information. It is NOT a condition or illness!

It's all to do with changes in the Limbic System (emotional brain centre) which make certain areas wire differently:



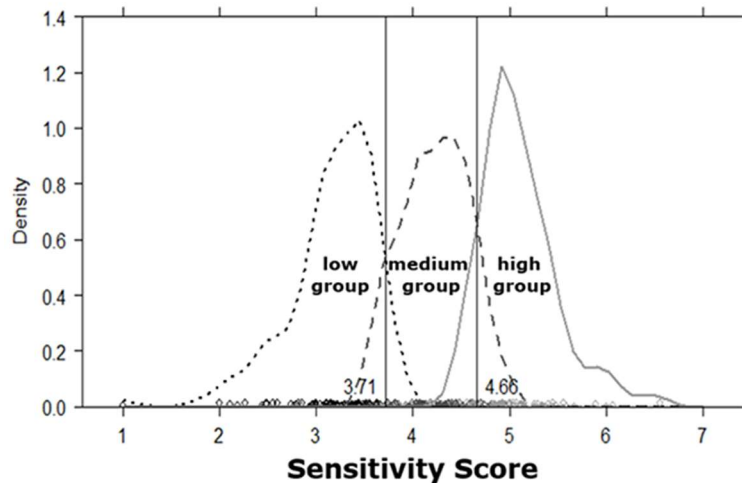
Certain areas increase their functioning (have more blood flow):

- **Amygdala**- fire alarm /smoke detector (& procedural/body memory).
- **VTA** - reward centre, the dopaminergic response – the basis of addictions.
- **Hypothalamus** - threat evaluator (is it safe?). Always on the lookout for danger – hypervigilance.
- **Prefrontal cortex** – experience simulator (analysis of actions – can make us ruminate and over-analyse).

Those areas that decrease in size or connectivity:

- **Thalamus** - relay station (data sifting from all the senses). Can't determine what's relevant or not. Obsess about things.
- **Hippocampus** - date stamp and normal memory processing - lose context and ability to process experiences without memory loss or distortion.

Sensitivity as a trait is not evenly distributed in the population. Instead, **sensory processing sensitivity (SPS)** is more like a group of 3 different peaks across the spectrum of the population (a mountain range rather than the mountain). If we plot sensitivity (x axis) to the number of people with that score we would see this:



Highly sensitive people show much more of a response to stressful events, even when young.

Common problems like fussy eating, difficulties tolerating change, loud noises or bright lights are likely due to SPS (if they are not autistic or ADHD – there is much overlap in different disorders).

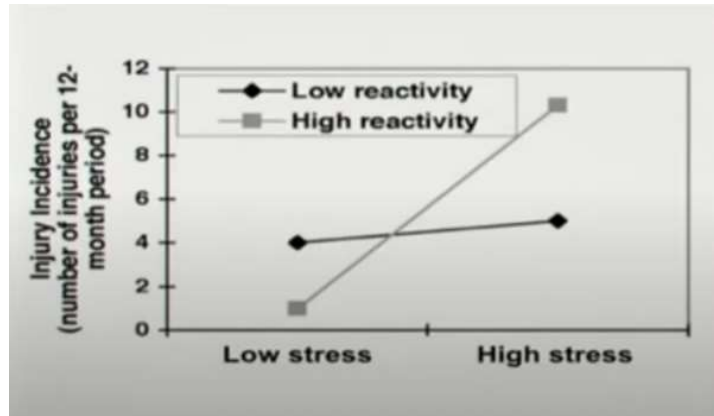
Features:

It is characterised by four main features captured by the mnemonic DOES:

- Depth of processing
- Overstimulated/Overaroused easily
- Emotionally reactive/Empathy
- Sensitive to Subtle Stimuli

- Depth of processing – we take longer to process information and things are thought about very deeply.
- Overstimulated/aroused – this is very commonly seen in both child and adult HSPs as a need for quiet, non-stimulating environments.
- Emotionally reactive/empathic – this is seen as feeling not only your own feelings deeply but feeling others as well!
- Sensitive to Subtle Stimuli – sounds, smells and textures are perceived by us much more than the average person. Stone in your shoe? Scratchy clothing? You can't ignore it.

It's usually present from birth (and there's some evidence it even begins in the womb), but it certainly becomes apparent in children aged one to in their play, the way that they interact with other people and so it's very clearly not developmental like autism or ADHD. As a trait it can be positive or negative depending on the quality of childhood support which matters more for highly sensitive people than for neurotypical children. This is called **Differential Susceptibility**. See the graph below and notice for HSPs *if the environment is stressful they do much worse than neurotypical children*. But if the environment is supportive they do way better! So a supportive environment acts as a buffer for sensitive children.



This allows for HS children to thrive if given more emotional support. But that takes emotionally attuned parents (some of whom may be SPS themselves and possibly struggling with their own emotional regulation from childhood experiences!). We are seeing an epidemic of anxiety in children currently as trauma perpetuates down the generations and society heaps so much stress on them from an early age.

Interestingly, it is not the same as shyness or introversion (some HSPs are extraverts), it is more about how their brain processes sensory information. The person that first discovered this was research psychologist Elaine Aaron when she began to measure reactivity to different stimuli. She found that there as a distinct group of people who show high heightened reactivity that was consistent across cultures. So, it's not something you're making up or something you're using to get attention, it actually translates biologically to the way you process your senses is different. Hence, why we now prefer to call this sensory processing sensitivity SPS or more simply environmental sensitivity because that more or less describes the *adaptation* rather than the person themselves (as HSP did).

Following on from Elaine's work there has been fantastic research by Thomas W Boyce that categorized children now in in this high group as 'Orchid children' because these children need to be hotheaded more than other children. Regular kids are called Dandelion because they will thrive more adaptively anywhere¹ (and a middle group of Tulips has recently been added).



Gender differences

Are women more sensitive than men?

No! It turns out that the research shows us that 50% of Highly Sensitive are men and boys but the difficulty is that they often don't self-report - they wouldn't recognise it as culturally they are taught to repress their emotions and have a 'stiff upper lip' and believe that 'big boys don't cry'. So, this

¹ Do see his wonderful TED talk and catch the research by Michael Ploess from Queen Mary University London and Dr Bianca Acevedo who's in the Neuroscience Research Institute in California.

cultural bias keeps men in the dark really about their own sensitivity and indeed it *crushes it* so that the body then has to express it for them in various ways like heart disease, anxiety and chronic pain.

Girls tend to model themselves more on others and minimize their own needs - it therefore can mask the fact that they aren't coping under the surface until it bursts out in strange ways like eating disorders, cutting or sudden onset gender dysphoria.² It masks the issue about what they're really feeling underneath and indeed some of these strategies do help to calm the nervous system temporarily!

SPS and Longterm Health

I sometimes term it 'Outsider syndrome' because you just feel outside of things, but it's quite a sizable minority - 20 to 35 percent and it's interesting that it also occurs in other animals: dogs, cats, horses etc that have a higher sensitivity than the majority. But as a minority state it's often misunderstood by a mainstream world, it's pilloried or ignored and it leaves children and the adults they become feeling that they don't belong anywhere.

Dr Gabor Mate wrote a beautiful book recently called *The Myth of Normal* which describes how our culture is pretty dysfunctional and it ignores our needs both emotional and physical and we're supposed to accept that. For HSPs that has even larger consequences than averagely sensitive people. In adult life they tend to fill the doctor's surgeries with their various symptoms that come and go and then settle into chronic pain or fatigue syndromes.

This usually starts with a virus, difficult emotional experience or some other trigger which simply doesn't resolve. You find all your strategies to recover, move on, etc are failing. Particularly when illness strikes it creates a downward spiral because basically you've already felt like you were wrong and to blame for things that happened to you and now this thing has come along and taken away your health which generates a huge amount of anxiety. You wonder 'Is it me is it me, what have I done to deserve this?' and then you feel really displaced, like you've lost your meaning and your identity because you're no longer maybe working or perhaps you can't maintain your social life anymore, you lose your friends and so on. It's a downward spiral from which many people never recover.

So how can we thrive as a HSP with SPS?

So given it's innate and intrinsic to a person and not something you can wish away, how can we embrace our sensitivity and make a life worth living? Here is Elaine Aron's Five to Thrive:

- Understand the trait is real
- Design a life that is compatible
- Reframe the past in light of that understanding
- Heal from past trauma
- Know and be supported by other sensitive people

² Here I'm not talking about children who know from an early age that they are the wrong gender. I'm talking about girls who decide (or are persuaded by well meaning experts or online influencers) as they hit puberty that they are in the wrong body because of body shame. Puberty is always harder for girls than boys as it introduces a vulnerability (periods) and visible difference (breast enlargement) that simply doesn't happen for boys that may cause girls to disown their female bodies by binding breasts or asking for puberty blockers. This is a highly controversial area that is currently the subject of legal and social battles and likely a swing back away from simple affirmation to more of a protective stance is likely. But undoubtedly it is largely an adolescent female problem (about 70%).

These five points are the basis of how you can transform what has maybe been your Achilles heel into your 'superpower'.

You have to learn to put your own needs centre stage, setting boundaries and learning to say 'no' to things that don't interest you or make you feel good. This may seem selfish to some of us, but if you are to learn to thrive you have to acknowledge your strengths and weaknesses and create a life that works with you instead of against you.

So, for example, if your job makes you feel like a square peg in a round hole then maybe it's time to change it. If your relationship creates huge stress, then perhaps you can tackle that so that your partner can learn what your needs are, and you can be less reactive (a win-win for both of you!). Be aware the highly sensitive people (sometimes also called empaths as adults) can be targets for narcissists so be aware that you are very vulnerable to people who seek to control you and erect stronger boundaries.

Take care of your home environment – use natural materials and scents rather than chemical ones, be aware that you may only need half doses of medications and that sensitivity to certain foods and supplements means you just have to take things more incrementally than most people

Give yourself downtime to process changes, and get support from other sensitive people who understand you. b certain foods will trigger me and other people will be absolutely fine having eaten the same thing we can we can detect atmospheres or unspoken feeling in a room or a situation you know we just feel it we just know something's off and we're reacting to that of course

Don't forget that having SPS also has its positives: we have a finely tuned aesthetic sensitivity so we have appreciation of art, music, the finery things in life. We're highly imaginative and full of wonder and awe about the world. If we are allowed to be, we are highly creative but of course we may have actually ditched that in order to survive – allow that to be rekindled in some way.

Accept that we have an incredible ability to empathize and attune to others so make sure you incorporate animals and nature into your life as well as good supportive relationships.

First of all, design a life that is compatible to that understanding - know what gives you joy on a daily basis and do more of it. Refuse to sacrifice your own needs for a 'quiet life' / to blend in. Accept yourself for who you are and honour it.

Know that you have a higher need for support than perhaps your family were aware of and allow them to know more about this trait so they can understand you better. If you do have past trauma, please contact me or someone else who works with trauma to help you to heal and calm your nervous system. It is now very possible and not as difficult or traumatic as you would imagine - it's actually a gentle process that changes your life.

And finally know and be supported by other sensitive people is vital to 'thrival'. If you struggle to find other sensitive people who have had chronic conditions of any kind, join my Community Sessions group which runs monthly get together session which incorporate informal learning (present a short slideshow at the beginning) and discussion. [Book on my website](#) and find out more info on courses and somatic therapy.

Refuse to squeeze yourself anymore into a life that no longer works for you!