

The Highly Sensitive Person Summary

By Elaine Aron

Have you heard of particular children being described as, 'too sensitive for their own good'? Are you an adult who has a rich inner world, and a keen ability to pick up subtle cues? Are you drawn to music, the arts, and spirituality?

Elaine Aron's *The Highly Sensitive Person*, explores what it means to be a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) and how to handle a finely tuned nervous system. More importantly, we're shown how to use the traits of an HSP to our advantage, so that we can thrive in a world that tends not to be particularly sensitive.

Perhaps you're easily overwhelmed by noise, bright lights, and busy days, and you've had these feelings since early childhood. Recognizing these traits in a friend or family member, could indicate that you or someone you know is what Elaine Aron terms a "highly sensitive person," or an HSP.

Elaine Aron is a professor, psychotherapist, and novelist. It took a very personal journey and a lot of research to realize she isn't flawed, but has an abundance of unique gifts. As an HSP, Elaine Aron is happy to be part of this minority. Growing up, Aron battled with her family's chaos. And although she found school and college to be academically easy, she found student life overwhelmingly difficult. Aron found herself crying a lot, and tried desperately to protect herself from the world.

With this aim, we'll briefly be guided through what it means to be an HSP.

Aron helps us understand our inherent trait of sensitivity, and how early childhood attachments either supported or exacerbated this. HSPs have to be quite purposeful in reframing the past, rebuilding self-esteem, and recovering from the inevitable hurts encountered growing up. HSPs also have to learn the skills of being fully involved in the world, but knowing when to take a break. She provides guidelines to help us manage our work, and social and intimate relationships, in an affirming way.

What Characterizes an HSP?

HSPs take in a lot, which means that we can be overwhelmed by lights, loud noises, smells, and clutter. We get subtleties that others don't - possible friendships, feelings of hostility, stale air, and others' moods. But this also gives HSPs a remarkable talent for creativity, insight, and caring—all the traits our society needs.

Aron does differentiate HSP traits from introversion, inhibition, and shyness. She also goes through great pains to point out that this doesn't mean non-HSPs are not sensitive or open to nuance. Furthermore, the myth that it's more likely for girls to be HSPs is debunked, because it definitely seems to be equally distributed across the sexes. Interestingly, 15-20% of the population also reveals these characteristics in many animal species. It makes sense to have a few of your species on the alert, and responding to subtleties, instead of charging off into novel situations or unexpected danger.

It's important to note that this trait comes with particular gifts, but also definite challenges in negotiating a world that's predominantly non-HSP. Depending on the situation, being an HSP is either an advantage or a disadvantage.

There's a self-test that helps us identify this trait. This test includes rating ourselves on statements like, 'Other people's moods affect me' and, 'I feel bombarded and anxious when a lot is going on around me.' It's estimated that about 20% of all people are extremely sensitive, and 27% are moderately sensitive. These figures are significant, but they're still too small to change the status quo. Predominantly non-HSP cultures, which most Western cultures are, cater to the hype, the hustle and bustle, and are generally very overwhelming.

Let's look at a typical HSP, Kristen. Kristen illustrates numerous traits in the self-test questionnaire. Kristen is a college student who wondered if she was going crazy because she felt so different from everyone else. Her mother described her as a grumpy baby, and her teachers said she was "spacy" and had difficulty screening out stimuli. She was also regarded as gifted. She found college overwhelming for several reasons. Firstly she found the demands of her studies very intense, and she entered into a relationship where she fell in love quickly and dramatically. Kristen felt isolated and alone, and the author's insights helped her. Ultimately she needed someone to explain what was going on with herself, and the HSP's inner workings. Kristen is an HSP who was facing a stressful life experience, and battling with an over-stimulated nervous system, leading to a dramatic drop in self-confidence.

However, most people don't share this trait, so it's easy for HSPs to be labeled as timid, weak, or withdrawn. Furthermore, if we have stressful experiences, our self-esteem is knocked, then we're inclined to feelings

of vulnerability. By learning to work with these feelings, we can unpack past experiences and adapt to the present.

To understand the present, it's necessary to look at what happened in the past. And to do this, we need to go on a bit of a journey of self-discovery, and look at various aspects of our lives. Looking into the past means examining our temperaments, the nature of our early attachments with caregivers, the effects of schooling, our teenage years, and finally, the cultural messages we've been exposed to.

Let's explore this further.

Temperament

Generally, sensitivity is inherited. This means that as sensitive babies, we're primed to respond to everything coming at us from birth. Our nervous systems are on the go, taking in every detail of what's happening around us. These feelings stay with us throughout life.

HSPs are very sensitive to external stimuli. We react strongly to external cues, such as bright lights, crowded restaurants, and loud noises. However, we also feel internal cues like pain, hunger, and memories very acutely. With too little in the way of stimulation, we can also feel bored, while too much could cause us to feel out of control. Furthermore, what's comfortable for one person, isn't necessarily comfortable for another. What's moderately arousing for most people can be disturbingly arousing for HSPs.

Sensitivity is all of this ongoing subtle sensory information processing, that researchers believe emerge from two systems in the brain. The one

system is the behavioral action, or approach system, and it's designed to move us towards things and make us bold. The other is the behavioral inhibition, or avoidance system, which makes us watchful, and on the lookout for danger. There's a preference towards calling this the "automatic pause-to-check system," which is particularly strong in HSPs.

From a psychological point of view, our internal tendencies meet up with our early environment in the form of attachment. And depending on this attachment, two things may have happened. If we weren't calmed down, our sensitivity became heightened, and this caused stressful long-term stimulation. This may have increased our cortisol and depleted our serotonin. On the other hand, if we were soothed appropriately, we realized that the world wasn't as overwhelming as our arousal system was telling us, and our arousal was short-lived.

How Attachment Affects Us

We've all heard the phrase nature vs. nurture. So, how do you feel about your formative years, and the nurturing that you received?

For some people, this can be difficult to answer, but it's a good idea to think about our attachment to our caregivers when we were young. We need to do this to identify what our early environments taught us about the world. Was it unsafe, were we over-aroused, or were we helped to control our arousal response?

All of us, HSPs included, carry the effects of how we were cared for in the early years of our lives. It's estimated that only 50 - 60% of the population enjoyed a secure attachment with their early caregivers. This secure attachment to a parent or caregiver, means that the child feels

safe and confident enough to start exploring the world, and trying out their independence. The child is also intuitive enough to know that the caregiver is a watchful presence, and ready to step in when needed.

Sometimes, for various reasons that may date back to a caregiver's own childhood, this attachment is insecure. The child might get the message that the caregiver is preoccupied and vulnerable, making the child anxious about the attachment and separating from this person. The other extreme is a caregiver that's threatening or not wanting the child to attach. Such behavior leads to an avoidant attachment. It's essential to try to understand what was, or wasn't done so that we start to parent ourselves differently. Otherwise, we just continue to repeat these patterns. We may overwhelm ourselves with too much work, take risks, and explore more than our bodies can handle. On the other hand, we may protect ourselves too much when we need to be out in the world. We're either too in the world, or too out of it.

Then We Went to School

With our built-in traits and the early attachments we had formed, we ventured out into the world: busy school environments. Our school journey was divided into a series of stages, most notably turbulent adolescence, with all of its biological changes. Novel situations then followed quickly, learning how to drive, dating, and choosing a career. Some HSPs may have tried to avoid these challenges by marrying young, or joining groups that offer security. Sometimes, if the steps felt too big during these years, we felt like withdrawing or dropping out.

Exposure to Cultural Influences

In an insightful study, Chen and Rubin explored the traits that make children popular in China vs. Canada. In China, shy and sensitive children were most often chosen as friends, whereas shy and sensitive children were picked the least in Canada. Gender differences can also add to the dilemma of HSP's, sometimes being out of sync with society.

Contrary to what we would think, there seems to be an equal distribution across the sexes, but some differences do exist. Boys often seem more introverted, and later on, may not follow the usual timing of milestones such as getting married, settling in a career, and having children. Women HSPs may be more inclined to abide by traditional norms before eventually plucking up the courage to trust their instincts and pursue their independence.

On the positive side, we can also draw on cultural stories to reframe who we are. We need to be reminded that centuries ago, many cultures tended to divide people into two classes, one being the formidable warriors and kings, and the other the thoughtful priests and royal advisors. You can probably guess which of these paths HSPs would naturally be drawn to? In our social relationships and careers, we tend to adopt the thoughtful royal-advisor role, which is just as necessary for our society to thrive.

We carry all of this into adulthood, with some unfinished business that may need inner work.

Reframing the Past Can Help HSPs

Here the suggestion is to "re-parent" ourselves. The care we received as babies also shaped how we now take care of our bodies. So, the advice

is for HSPs to treat their bodies as they would an infant. An infant doesn't want to feel bored, but also doesn't want to experience overarousal. If your attachment was insecure, you may either be neglecting your body, or be over-fussy.

We also need to start taking care of our bodies in a way that our caregivers may have been unable to do. If unfamiliar situations have always been upsetting, we may tend to avoid these now and stay in our own worlds too much. We may need a step-by-step strategy. Here are some suggestions: in a novel situation: we can take someone we know with us; we can talk to the fearful part of ourselves, telling this part that it'll be okay when it's adjusted to the situation; we can go home if we need to, but also remind ourselves to listen to our brave parts too.

Overarousal can also be mistaken for anxiety, so sometimes we can reframe our arousal simply as a reaction to all that's going on around us. Downtime and rest also help; this obviously includes sleep, healthy eating, and unwinding, but HSPs also benefit from transcendence, which involves meditation, contemplation, or prayer.

It helps to see our stories in the context of our earlier years and re-parent ourselves where necessary. We can view our shyness, perceived failures, and pain, more accurately and compassionately. We can then take these insights into our lives' various domains, whether it's social, work, or intimacy. Let's look at some more suggestions.

Social Relationships

When HSPs struggle with overarousal in social situations, people often label this as shyness, but this isn't necessarily true. Temporary

overarousal, is often misinterpreted as shyness. If you get past the barriers, you can see that HSPs have so much to offer - a sense of a mysterious person who listens well, talks about serious issues, and forms meaningful relationships.

Several social tips may help us to understand HSPs better.

For example, if you're chatting to someone, decide if you'd rather talk or listen. If it's listening, think of some specific questions like, 'So what do you do when you're not at parties?' If you want to talk, you can think about something you enjoy talking about, and then plant the topic. An example here could be, 'I don't like bad weather because my snakes hate it.' Remember names by repeating someone's name immediately, and then use it again within two minutes. And if you have to do public speaking, it's all about putting a significant emphasis on preparation. Use notes, and even if it's just asking a question in a public space, jot down your questions in case your mind goes blank.

If this doesn't work, take breaks, go for a walk, breathe deeply, or adopt a strong posture. One suggestion is to use the metaphor of a container when we feel stressed, which is imagining a safe space, thought, or person we can call to mind— this image can help to soothe us.

We also can understand that shyness and sensitivity are two different things. Sensitivity is a trait, whereas shyness is more the fear that others will not like us, or approve of what we do. HSPs are acutely good at reading the signals of what others are thinking, so it's essential to learn to manage our reactions, and realize that the label of shyness misses who we really are. It ignores the fact that we just have quick arousal, and that we're generally good at picking up subtle social cues. With about 75% of people in the USA being socially outgoing, they have no idea that extra

arousal isn't what we want. This carries through into our work environment.

Thriving at Work

HSPs don't feel great if work hours are long, or work environments are stressful and overstimulating. We also tend to underplay the value of our roles, our quiet conscientiousness, and our potential contribution. We may need to remind ourselves to be practical, not get lost in learning or theory, or the pressure of living up to others' perceived expectations. We need to watch our worry-prone perfectionism, and let go of some of our many creative ideas. We often choose vocations of service, but have to track our possible tendency to exhaust ourselves.

Interestingly, HSPs might be leaving non-HSPs in control of powerful government and corporate positions. Our skills are essential in bringing a more considered view of consequences in these domains.

Close Relationships

HSPs may go along with a "different love song" in intimate relationships, sometimes choosing to be single, or opting for close friendships rather than romance. We can fall in love quicker and harder than non-HSP's, and to choose wisely, we may need to build our self-esteem and then meet the world on our terms, overcoming the fear of being alone. We need to believe that we can be loved because of our sensitivity, not despite it. If we're in a relationship with another HSP, we might encourage each other to face insecurities, explore self-expansion, or do exciting things together. A relationship with a non-HSP might have to accommodate our need for solitude.

There are many tips for handling conflicts, such as time-outs and reflective listening. We also have to bear in mind that we also have parts that can be tough, insensitive, or unloving at times. When it comes to the work we need to do in all these domains, there are pros and cons to various therapies.

What Therapy Might Help?

HSPs who had extreme difficulties during childhood, are at greater risk for anxiety and depression, than those who had a calmer upbringing. Therefore they need to heal old wounds. Fortunately, HSPs have the intuition to be good at this work.

HSPs can consider four approaches to therapy: cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal, physical, and spiritual. We should explore which one might suit us best, and we're also provided with the pros and cons of medication. When dealing with some of the potential struggles of being an HSP, it's imperative to be informed consumers, as all medicines interfere in our brains' daily activity.

In Conclusion

Fortunately, the world needs both non-HSPs, and HSPs. Particularly now. Do you remember the example of the warrior-king versus the royal-advisor?

Let's revisit it. Aron says, 'Yet the times need us. An imbalance between the royal-advisor and warrior-king aspects of society, is always dangerous, but especially when science negates intuition and the "big questions" are being settled without thoughtfulness, but according to what's convenient at the moment. Your contributions are needed in this area more than any other.'

So, if you, or anyone else you know is a Highly Sensitive Person, then realizing what tools you need to thrive, will help you become the best version of yourself.