

The Highly Sensitive Person: Introductory Guide

- ▶ Are you driven by fair and equitable treatment for individuals more than personal gain?
- ▶ Do you build alignments and encourage collaboration more than you seek to gain power?
- ▶ Do you recoil from conflict but lean deeply into creativity?
- ▶ Has your natural, gentle openness been mistaken for weakness?
- ▶ Do you have a strong intuition?
- ▶ Have you been called too sensitive?

You may be a Highly Sensitive Person! (20% of the population are.) This guide explores what High Sensitivity is, and almost more importantly, what it is not. You may be surprised to learn that High Sensitivity is not a weakness, but a source of tremendous yet often unrecognized strengths.

This guide will help you understand if you are Highly Sensitive, and if you are, how to uncover your strengths and use those strengths and to create a positive impact on the world.

This guide is a generalized introduction to High Sensitivity. As everyone is different, some of this guide may apply to you and some of it may not. It is our desire that this guide will inspire you to learn more about yourself, your sensitivity, and your own unique gifts.

This guide explores:

- What High Sensitivity is
- What High Sensitivity is not
- Self-assessment to see if you are Highly Sensitive
- Common physical traits of Highly Sensitive People
- Common heart/mind traits of Highly Sensitive People
- Difficulties faced by Highly Sensitive People
- A few famous Highly Sensitive People
- Sensory overload
- Techniques for coping with overload
- Next steps



About your authors:

I am Colleen O'Rourke and I am a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP). I am a coach, an adventurer, and a creative force for change. I am on a mission to bring the gifts of HSPs to the world and I can only accomplish this through you, other sensitives. This guide was created along with Elizabeth Walsh, also an HSP, who is an extraordinary integrated body worker working in Santa Rosa, California. We hope that our work will enlighten and inspire you. You can find out more about us at the end of the guide.

What High Sensitivity Is



While the term “Highly Sensitive Person” (HSP) is new, coined by Dr. Aron in 1992, the concept has been studied for some time. Jung referred to this group as “people of innate sensitiveness.”

High Sensitivity, also called **Sensory Perception Sensitivity**, refers to people who process internal and external stimuli much more thoroughly due to a biological difference in their central nervous system. Essentially, as information is received in the brain it is processed through filters that provide insight and awareness to the environment around us. HSPs simply have far more filters than other people. This provides greater insight and awareness, yet it also consumes energy and takes time to process and decide on a course of action. And, although everyone can refine their abilities, HSPs cannot simply turn-off this trait anymore than someone else can turn it on.

HSPs may notice higher than average awareness of and sensitivity to:

- The 5 standard senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell)
- Medications, caffeine, alcohol, etc.
- Emotions, both their own as well those of others
- Subtle changes in the environment
- Intuition or extra-sensory information

This doesn't mean HSPs have more acute senses, but that their brain refines the data into much more detail than other brains. (HSPs don't see better, they just register *more* of what they see.)

It is important to realize that this is a natural trait, occurring in about 15-20% of the population.

Because of this trait, the mind of the Highly Sensitive Person works differently. HSPs tend to:

- Demonstrate better than average ability to spot errors or differences
- Be highly conscientious
- Be highly creative
- Concentrate deeply with a high degree of focus
- Be aware of even small changes in the environment (and can be easily distracted by them)
- Process material to a deeper level
- Be specialists at fine motor movements
- Posses deep awareness of their own thoughts and body condition
- Be drawn to be of service to others

According to Dr. Aron, in most cases High Sensitivity is inherited. However, it is also true that sensitivity can be impacted through certain life experiences. Traumas at an early age may push a child with mild sensitivity to demonstrate traits of High Sensitivity, while exposure to certain stimuli over a long time can decrease someone's sensitivity to that stimuli.

What High Sensitivity is Not.....



High sensitivity is NOT a psychological disorder. It is not being shy or neurotic, nor does it necessarily indicate introversion. To clarify the differences, let's look at these conditions more closely:

- **Shyness** is a feeling of timidity, apprehension, or discomfort in at least some social situations. Shyness is a learned behavior. Because HSPs prefer to look before entering new situations, they are often incorrectly labeled as “shy.” It is natural for an HSP to “hang back” and observe new situations. It is not aversion; it is simply time to deeply process new sensory data.
- **Neurosis** is a functional behavior disorder with no apparent underlying cause for the feelings of ill-health it engenders. Neuroses include a number of affective disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive states. When an HSP approaches stimuli overload (more on this state later), their shutdown behaviors, which may include anxiety, depression, or anger, may appear to others to have no apparent underlying cause and thus be a neurosis. Rather, the state has a very real and physiological cause to the HSP.
- **Introverts** are deeply concerned with the inner world of the mind. They enjoy thinking, exploring their thoughts and feelings. Being around people drains the energy of an introvert, while time spent alone re-energizes them. About 25-40% of the general population is introverted, while about 70% of HSPs are introverts. So while there is a high correlation between being Highly Sensitive and being introverted, they are not the same thing.

High Sensitivity is a normal, natural, and healthy condition of the nervous system.

Think of being Highly Sensitive as similar to being left-handed:

- Both are a result of the makeup of the brain.
- Both occur in a minority of the population.
- Both have suffered stigmas due to their differences.
- Both have beneficial traits that come as a direct result from this different makeup of the brain.

There is nothing *wrong* about being Highly Sensitive.

There is only something *uncommon* about being Highly Sensitive.

Self Assessment



Check the box next to each statement that you agree is true for you:

- I am easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input.
- I seem to be aware of subtleties in my environment or work.
- Other people's moods affect me.
- I tend to be very sensitive to pain and medications.
- 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.
- I am particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine and sugar.
- I am easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or loud sirens.
- I have a rich, complex inner life.
- I am made uncomfortable by loud noises.
- I am deeply moved by the arts or music.
- My nervous system sometimes feels so frazzled that I just have to go off by myself.
- I am conscientious.
- I startle easily.
- I get rattled when I have a lot to do in a short amount of time.
- 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).
- I am annoyed when people try to get me to take on too many activities/responsibilities at once.
- I try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things.
- I make a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows.
- I become unpleasantly aroused or uncomfortable when in a busy or chaotic environment.
- Being very hungry creates a strong reaction in me, disrupting my concentration or mood.
- Changes in my life shake me up.
- I notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, or touches.
- I make it a high priority to arrange my life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.
- 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.
- When I was a child, my parents or teachers seemed to see me as sensitive or shy.
- I am deeply touched by nature.

If you answered more than fourteen of the questions as true of yourself, or you answered fewer than 14 but they were extremely true, you are probably highly sensitive. * This is just a broad sweep of the topic and is not conclusive. It is purely to gauge yourself against general HSP sensitivities.

Physical Traits of Highly Sensitive People



The physical body of the Highly Sensitive Person also carries traits which reveal their sensitive nature. These traits can include:

- Being especially aware of body signs and symptoms
- Refined sensory details
 - ▶ Touch — skin rashes, redness, reactive to chemicals, touch sensitivity
 - ▶ Hearing — sensitivity to loud or constant noises, and can become distracted or disturbed by sounds that others don't even notice such as a fan in the room or traffic
 - ▶ Sight — subtle details stand out easily, they find lost things, are sensitive to strong light, need natural light rather than artificial
 - ▶ Smell — subtle details stand out easily, overwhelmed by unpleasant smells, need fresh air
 - ▶ Taste — subtle details stand out easily
- More acute reactions to pain and pleasure
- More acute reactions to medications
- More affected by stimulants like coffee, sugar as well as depressants like wine, alcohol
- More aroused by intense environments such as hospitals, concerts, or large stores
- Chemical sensitivity—such as fuel, food additives, dyes, perfumes, cleaning products
- Specialists in fine motor movements
- Lagging immune systems (often due to stress)
- Require more sleep than other people
- Have greater awareness of changes in the natural world — from a shift in barometric pressure to phase of the moon, HSPs will often sense the natural world in a far greater detail than non-sensitives.

The nervous system of an HSP is designed to pick up on and interact with subtle experiences. Like a tracker following almost imperceptible sign of their prey, HSPs have the ability to experience their world, beginning with their own bodies, to a very high degree of perception and accuracy.

While giving your body clean, clear food, water, air and exercise is important for everyone, it is especially important for HSPs. Reactions to chemicals will impede an HSP more than a non-sensitive, and having a healthy, rested body is an important step in being able to bring forth your gifts with the greatest power and impact.

Heart-Mind Traits of Highly Sensitive People



Just like left-handed people have greater access to their creativity due to the dominance of their right-brain, Highly Sensitive People also have traits that occur naturally due to the makeup of their nervous system. These traits can include:

- Compassion
- Empathy
- Creativity
- Thoughtfulness
- Loyalty
- Attention to detail
- Awareness of subtleties
- Focus
- Sense of Calm
- Contemplation
- Diplomacy
- Intuition
- Sense of Justice
- Harmony
- Purpose-Oriented
- Idealistic
- Innovative
- Collaborative
- Wise
- Gentle Strength
- Peaceful
- Insightful
- Conscientious
- Reverence for Nature / Beauty
- Spirituality

In addition to the traits listed above, Highly Sensitive People differ from the general public in some interesting behaviors as well.

Highly Sensitive People (15%-20% of population)	General Public (80%-85% of population)
Build alignments	Subjugate with authority
Rely on quiet observations	Rely on quick assumptions
Trust and elicit other opinions	Other opinions are unimportant
Innovators, bored by status quo	Distrust change
Motivated by meaning & purpose	Motivated by power & success
Hold to high ideals	Support existing power structures
Resolve differences through connection	Resolve differences through conflict
Need to create	Need credit and recognition

Difficulties Faced by Highly Sensitive People



Along with the gifts of being Highly Sensitive come the difficulties of it that may include:

- Focus more on what is needed for others than yourself
- Difficulty setting boundaries
- Difficulty dealing with conflict
- Easily distracted (noise, interests)
- Perfectionism
- Being in the spotlight / being watched
- Easily hurt feelings
- Feeling misunderstood or out of place
- Being “Out of Synch”
 - ▶ You are either ahead of others because of your intuition, or behind others because you’re still processing
 - ▶ Western culture values a “leap first, ask questions later” “Just go for it” mentality, and HSPs prefer to look first, observe, think about ramifications before we commit to action
- Needing time with little or no stimulation as well as additional sleep
- Reaching sensory overload faster than other people around you (more on this later!)
- Cultural bias against sensitivity (a few examples below)

Notice how derogatory the very definition of “sensitive” is represented and how sensitivity is recognized as a basis for exclusion in the workplace.

Definition of “sensitive” from MacMillanDictionary.com:

1. reacting quickly or strongly to something
 - a. likely to become angry or upset easily
2. needing to be protected
 - a. needing to be kept secret
 - b. needing to be dealt with carefully
3. showing that you care about someone or something and do not want to cause offense

Article from Harvard Business Review quoting a study which concludes the “glass ceiling” is actually about excluding people with the quality of “sensitivity” more than a specific gender:

"Sensitive Men: It's Your Glass Ceiling Too"

<http://blogs.hbr.org/research/2010/09/sensitive-men-its-your-glass-c.html>

A few Famous Highly Sensitive People



The traits we have described in the pages above are of course a generalization. Everyone falls somewhere on the sensitivity range and will have a unique combination of traits. Additionally, there are subsets of HSPs who are extroverts or High Sensation Seekers who will exhibit a slightly different set of traits, including things such as:

- a higher than average need to for novelty or stimulation
- a thrill to be in the spotlight
- a high degree of decision making
- a craving for, rather than aversion to, change.

These traits do not indicate that these people are not Highly Sensitive, just that they are a minority within the minority.

You may or may not recognize these traits in yourself. The goal of this guide is to inform you that due to your physiological makeup you probably have many of these traits available to you and that they are **STRENGTHS**. To reiterate, being Highly Sensitive carries with it tremendous strengths, and we hope that you have already discovered many of yours. If you have not, we hope that these pages will serve as a guide to help you seek out your own strengths and start to use them as you move through a sometimes insensitive world.

In looking to access your strengths and how to use them think about a few famous people thought to be HSP, and how they used their gifts:

Actors/Actresses:

Woody Allen, Glen Close, Greta Garbo, Andy Kaufman, Anthony Hopkins, Judy Garland

Writers:

Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickenson, W.B. Yeats, E.E. Cummings, D.H. Lawrence, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Deepak Chopra, Joseph Campbell

Musicians:

Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, John Lennon, Janis Joplin, Leonard Cohen

Artists:

Leonardo Da Vinci, Georgia O'Keefe, Salvador Dali, Picasso, Frank Llyod Wright, Steven Spielberg, Frida Kahlo, Ingmar Bergman

Sensory Overload



The volume of data being processed by the brain of Highly Sensitive People can easily put us into an *overload* or *overwhelm* condition where the stimulus that we need to process exceeds our immediate capacity to do so. Overload in HSPs may be triggered by a variety of stimuli depending on the individual, but it may include large gatherings (parties, conferences), noisy environments (supermarkets, concerts), conflict (arguments, violence even on tv or movies), new or unfamiliar environments (hospitals, courthouses), injustice (unfair treatment of self or others), overwhelming sensory situations (airplanes, subways), unrealistic expectations from others or more.

Once in the overload state HSPs are often characterized as reactive, irritable, impatient or withdrawn. This is the state that most people associate with being “sensitive,” when more accurately it is overloaded sensitivity.

Simply put, overload is a stress reaction, so let’s look at stress more closely.

Stress is any internal or external stimulus that requires a change or response so as to prevent an imbalance in the internal environment of the body, mind, or emotions. In other words, stress may be any activity that makes demands on our mental and emotional resources.

- The Stress Response System of the body is the link between the Central Nervous System and the Endocrine System that allows humans to respond to short-term and long-term stressors.
 - ▶ A trigger event (or compounded events) activate the flight/fight response
 - ▶ Adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released
 - ▶ Heart rate, breathing, and perspiration increase, glucose is released for energy, blood flow is diverted to muscles and brain, immune system is suppressed
 - ▶ This state will continue until the stress or removed
- Under normal circumstances the response system allows reactions that are appropriately gauged to the circumstances, thus allowing the stressor to be removed and the body to return to homeostasis.
- When overloaded (no break in the stress response, no return to homeostasis), the stress chemicals/hormones can lead to stress-related diseases.

In today’s world, where even non-HSPs are finding themselves in a state of overload, many HSPs live in an almost constant state of stress as they try to fit into what is perceived as “normal.”

Coping Techniques for Sensory Overload



Each individual's perception of stress is significant—anything perceived as a threat, real or imagined arouses fear & anxiety. HOW a person responds is key to managing stress.

- HSP's need to balance being “Out too Much” and “In too Much” in the world, neither over stimulated nor bored — *“Know your limits, and limit your no's”*
- Like an infant, our sensitive bodies require that basic needs be satisfied, namely for food and sleep, in order for our Nervous Systems to function appropriately.
 - ▶ **Hunger** arouses the intensity of any distress, & limits the biochemical substances necessary for calm function of Nervous System. Keep water and healthy snacks close by.
 - ▶ When **tired** or exhausted, we can become largely helpless to correct our own systems. Known when to ask for help!
 - ▶ Calming **touch** & soothing **quiet** time are necessary for the Parasympathetic system to reset. Do this yourself, or, for additional fun, engage with someone else! (Of course, we are referring to a masseuse or other body professional.)
- Check your perspectives—anything that can change the perception of threat to a perception of safety, or can reduce the intensity of the physical stress response is important
- Like a tuning fork, you have learned - unconsciously - to resonate (or not) to the frequency of the masses. After all, the “tone” of the masses is overwhelming (esp with technology and instant demand/accessibility). But we can change our own frequency despite what might be going on around us, and gain access to stillness as a way of being. This requires focus and practice.
- Effective sleep, exercise, diet, pain reduction, sense of affiliation/social contact all contribute to a reduction of stress. (For further interest, read about Maslow's hierarchy of needs.)
- Eat foods that are alkalinizing & more easily digested :
 - Green, yellow, orange leafy veggies
 - Soups, fish, fruit
 - Vitamins/Minerals: B Complex, E, Manganese, Sellenium, Zinc
 - Calming herbs: Kava Kava, Valerian, Passion Flower, St. Johns Wort, Hops, Scullcap, Catnip, Chamomile, Rhodiola, Bach Flower Rescue Remedy
 - Avoid: caffeine/soda, heavy dairy, meats, fats

Coping Techniques for Sensory Overload (continued)



- Incorporate Massage, Yoga, Deep Breathing, & Stillness into your life
 - Massage has been shown to reduce cortisol levels (stress hormones) & decrease the arousal level of the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in reestablishment of homeostasis. Massage is based on the premise of safe touch that delivers balanced sensory stimulation which supports good health.
 - Cortisol levels are decreased in meditator's brains, and leads them to a sense of security & available inner resources.
- Obtain a coach, mentor, or support team
 - Decrease the personal and societal stress triggers such as judgements, conflict, & pressure to be like others.
 - Learn to set boundaries and be strong in asking for you need to take of yourself.
 - Make changes in your perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors that support and reinforce your sensitive nature.
 - Explore the gifts of your sensitivity in a framework that acknowledges its benefits.

“Retreating doesn’t mean giving up, but sowing the psychic seeds of rebirth and rejuvenation.”

For more stress relief resources, please visit www.StressFocus.com.

Conclusion



It is our hope that by recognizing the positive traits you possess and by learning that your condition is a natural, even beneficial one for society, you can see yourself for the amazing and rare gift that you are. If you would like to become a more empowered HSP we recommend the following next steps:

- Reframe yourself as an HSP: accept, learn more about, and *LOVE* your sensitivity
- Uncover the cultural messages that you may be believing in (you are not as effective as others because of your sensitivity, etc.) and unwind yourself from these messages
- Learn and practice your own overload coping strategies
- Find a coach or mentor who understands the unique needs of an HSP
- Find work that respects and calls upon your sensitive nature
- Find and use the gifts in your sensitivity, the ones that make you unique and vital
- Find your creative passion and share your voice with the world

And to truly make a difference in the world, unleash your own brand of HSP leadership!

(See Plum Turtle Coaching at www.PlumTurtle.com for more information on pursuing these learnings)

- Take the Leadership Profile Assessment which will map out your reactive and creative leadership tendencies. This will provide you a direct path to increasing your creative leadership skills!
- Learn leadership techniques that draw upon the strengths of HSPs and develop, not dominate, those that you are leading
- Learn skills to handle conflict that are especially tailored for HSPs
- Learn to be present and confidently grounded in yourself

Our world needs you grounded in your sensitivity, now more than ever.

Helpful resources:

- “The Highly Sensitive Person,” a book by Dr. Elaine N. Aron
- www.PlumTurtle.com
- www.leadership-development-for-sensitive-people.com/
- www.hsperson.com/
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highly_sensitive_person
- www.joyful-work-for-sensitive-people.com/
- www.highlysensitivepower.com
- www.Stressfocus.com

The Authors



Colleen O'Rourke, MBA, CPCC

Colleen is a life and leadership coach working with Highly Sensitive People. As an HSP herself she understands the gifts and difficulties of navigating this culture with high sensitivity. Her gift of creativity is expressed in working with people to bring out their own innate gifts that will empower them to thrive. Prior to becoming a coach she spent 20 years in the software industry moving from engineering into executive management. It was discovering her gift of working with people that lit up her own leadership skills and she is now dedicated to helping other HSPs find their unique talents as well. Visit her website to schedule a free introductory session!

"I feel that the world needs the leadership that Highly Sensitive People offer. We're suffering the destruction of selfish, short-sighted, greed-based authority structures, and Highly Sensitive People offer leadership based in collaboration, wisdom and respect that serves a holistic purpose. We can use our optimistic idealism for healing old wounds and establishing new patterns for others to learn and follow in. I am committed to helping Highly Sensitive People find their path and strength in restoring the balance, harmony, and peace that the world needs."



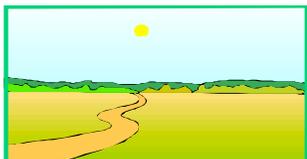
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Elizabeth Walsh, MA, CMT

Elizabeth spent nearly twenty years working in management and training for large and small companies. With a love of teaching and consulting she pursued her Masters in Psychology-Organization Development from Sonoma State University. Her work focused on facilitating people and organizations through transition, and she became a career coach for recently displaced workers. In this capacity, she developed and taught interpersonal and professional courses to assist clients through the change process. Her compassion and ability to listen and help clients focus their energy and strength led her to become more interested in how the body, mind, & spirit can affect people's attitudes & coping strategies. Elizabeth became a Certified Massage Therapist to add to her counseling skills, and found that she has a unique gift for bodywork that combines emotional, energetic and physical healing. She has had a successful private practice in Santa Rosa, CA for many years.

"I have always been drawn to a holistic approach to life and healing. After a serious neck injury healed more quickly by receiving regular massage, I also noticed I felt more grounded emotionally and spiritually after a massage session. I decided then to combine my background in psychology with bodywork to help others find this connection in themselves. As both a certified bodywork professional, and transition coach, I can offer a variety of skills and modalities to effectively address your needs. My goal is to help create pathways for your optimal health and wellness."



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