Kathrin Sohst

The Power of HIGH Sensitivity

Take Advantage of Your Strengths

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Introduction

This is a book for the sensitive and not-so-sensitive alike. Empathetic yet provocative, emotionally insightful yet matter-of-fact, it sets out to inform, inspire and encourage. It aims to embolden its readers to find new paths. It calls for us to accept ourselves and others – irrespective of whether we’re emotional or objective. The subject: high sensitivity and strength.

This book does not purport to be a depth psychology workbook - quite the opposite, in fact. It is intended partially as source of factual information and partially as an emotional reference book and a collection of empowering mantras for everyday life. A book that aims to accompany you on the path to highly sensitive living, to give you practical inspiration and open your eyes to new perspectives. You can read the book from front to back, back to front, dip in and out – or you can simply let your gut decide what you want to explore today.

In this book, you'll find love, sensitivity, empathy and reflection - and plenty of encouragement to consider things from a different perspective. Black-and-white photographs from my body of work as a photographer accompany the words – the motifs are at times tranquil and relaxing, at times inspiring or thought-provoking. This book is not the work of a psychologist and is not intended as a substitute for therapy or coaching. If you find yourself feeling that you cannot cope alone, I recommend you seek professional help. I write as a highly sensitive person and an ambassador for high sensitivity. It’s important to me that I empower you to live authentically, be open with yourself and others and take responsibility for your wellbeing. I want to share my knowledge and experiences and inspire you to look critically at social conventions. My aim is to raise awareness of the phenomenon of high sensitivity and, in doing so, to open up new possibilities for both highly sensitive and less sensitive individuals to engage more powerfully with the subject.
Getting Started: Messages of High Sensitivity

Sensitivity and strength? They sound as different as fire and water, sweet and salty, dark and light – so how can they possibly go together? And who would readily admit to being highly sensitive in today’s world, one that places such high value on the culture of 24-hour availability? Showing weakness? Not a good idea. Let’s be honest: being sensitive is not exactly sexy, right? “Thin skin” is seen as unprofessional – and too many emotions irritate others, especially at work. Life is no walk in the park. Only the strong survive. We can sleep when we’re dead. Yep, that’s just how it is. If it wasn’t, the less emotional amongst us would likely never have thought to fire verbal bullets like these:

*Don’t take everything so much to heart.*

*No need to be like that!*

*You’re far too sensitive.*

*Everything’s always so difficult with you.*

*You need thicker skin.*

*Pull yourself together!*

*Do you always have to cry?*

*Don’t take things so seriously.*

*My goodness, you’re uptight!*

*Big girls don’t cry.*

*Just relax!*

*It’s all in your imagination.*

*Don’t be so soft!*
Have you ever been on the receiving end of such sentiments? Or repeated them to someone else? Some of these phrases are ones I‘ve been told myself; others I‘ve heard about from fellow sensitive and highly sensitive people during interviews. Words are powerful – and in my case, they can truly act like weapons. They leave wounds. When we regularly hear these phrases as children, they have a lasting effect. And sensitive children can recognise that their needs differ from those of their peers:

*It is carnival day at the kindergarten. Arthur clings to the skirt of his favourite teacher. He needs a foothold, because today, everything is different. It is loud; the rest of the children are excited, and scurry around. When a red balloon bursts, the little boy with the big, watchful eyes gets a shock and begins to cry. His little child’s world has been catapulted into disarray. He cannot grasp why the other kids love the carnival so much; he would rather be at home.*

This story portrays a typical experience for highly sensitive children. When we get older, this behaviour is met with the incredulous reactions and “verbal bullets” of others. And at some point, the feeling of being different is joined by another and altogether nastier bedfellow - a niggling sensation we know as “self-doubt”.

*Am I normal? Or is there something wrong?*

Many highly sensitive people feel alone in their way of perceiving the world - after all, everyone else appears to cope far better with life. Once this sense of isolation sets in, the inevitable changes take their course: the sensitive person’s self-esteem begins to crumble. And it never really gets a chance to heal, even when they set and achieve goals at school, in their studies and in their job (albeit usually via a roundabout route) - and certainly not when they feel that they have failed. Even when the recognition of others is present, a
stale aftertaste remains. I've often thought that people we meet would be surprised to catch a glimpse of our inner worlds – for while highly sensitive people might sometimes appear shy, they can also come across as impressively self-assured. Many have good manners and are strong and interesting conversational partners in 1-1 scenarios or small teams. They are ambitious, insightful and excellent listeners. Always correct in their conduct towards others, their rules of communication are simple: avoid negative attention, keep the peace at any cost and never instigate conflict. Alternatively, exactly the opposite can apply, since very high sensitivity will often result in an enduring state of overstimulation. In that situation - and contrary to what we might expect - a highly sensitive person will frequently make themselves the centre of unwanted attention. Many of the people we perceive as loud or aggressive might very well have a sensitive, delicate core that is simply permanently overwrought.

The path from childhood to adulthood is littered with countless situations seemingly designed to expose the “otherness” of sensitive people. Primary school brings with it the eternal struggle of nasty, boisterous classmates, those who live to annoy others. As teenagers, sensitive characters are let down and teased by their peers. The protective wall that many go on to build is frequently interpreted as “arrogance”. And because of our empathy and preference for surrounding ourselves with respectful people, we make allies not only of our few good friends, but also our teachers.

What follows is the time of parties. Out every weekend, loud music, nightclubs, alcohol or even drugs, which are even less well-tolerated by sensitive people than their normally sensitive peers. On the one hand, our partying days are a time in which we can learn to deal better with intensive stimuli; to simply let go, celebrate, discover and prove to ourselves – with all the accompanying benefits - that no drugs are needed to enable us to dance. On the other, it costs us considerable amounts of
strength to keep up with the party-loving moods of our friends. Once again, familiar questions rear their heads: why am I lacking energy while others are having fun? And why do I find fun in different things than most of my contemporaries?

And that brings us neatly to our next topic, relationships: for highly sensitive people, a rocky and hard-to-navigate terrain. There will always be people who find us fascinating – after all, many sensitive individuals are highly empathetic, with the gift of sensing their partner’s every need before they themselves are aware of it and can express it. People like to feel taken seriously and understood. But sensitive characters also have a tendency to which many less-sensitive people are averse: with our preference for deep commitment, and the depth of our emotions and thoughts, we can quickly overwhelm the object of our affections. We give ourselves completely to the world of the other, often to the extent that we forget ourselves. If both parties in a relationship take it seriously, the feelings between them can gradually begin to come into balance. Who communicates, wins. But in pressured, stormy periods of life – those in which “casual” affairs and liaisons might come into play – the tendency for intensity can be highly debilitating, robbing a sensitive person of energy for other important things in life (training, studies or work, for example, all of which are important for securing a decent existence). Can you recall situations in which you excitedly began a new job or project, used your skills to their fullest and inspired those around you with your capabilities – until one day, something snapped? Suddenly, you were frequently ill and began to make mistakes. Why? The list of potential reasons is long: an open-plan office, a lack of ability to determine your break times, time pressure, the atmosphere of the workplace, questions about the higher purpose of targets or tasks, your own demands for perfectionism, a lack of appreciation from those around you, or colleagues who drain your energy. And the twists, turns and challenges of your private life in the background.
What goes wrong in such situations? Why do so many highly sensitive people have similar stories to tell? The reason is simple: until very recently, the concept of high sensitivity was neither known as such nor recognised. Today, we have the chance to help change that. There is a name for the phenomenon of high sensibility and depth of emotion. In the 1990s, a book called *The Highly Sensitive Person – How To Thrive When the World Overwhelms You* was published by Elaine N. Aron, the godmother of modern high sensitivity research. This acknowledgement of high sensitivity marked a turning point. Today, I know that many highly sensitive people react the same upon hearing of the phenomenon for the first time. Many recognise themselves immediately and feel a sense of belonging – though this realisation is often significantly easier for women than it is men. “Sensitive men?” they might think. “What are the implications of that, then?” But the plain fact is that men can be highly sensitive too – this is one area in which nature makes no exceptions.

Although research into high sensitivity is still in its infancy, its resonance with highly sensitive individuals demonstrates the value of Elaine Aron’s work. For people who identify as highly sensitive, the relief begins from the very first moment, for such a classification means they are no longer alone; that there are others who think and feel in the same way. In the second stage, any number of questions, doubts and unpleasant feelings can arise – at least, that’s how it was for me and other sensitive people to whom I’ve spoken. Suddenly, there is much to be processed and understood. For me, self-development was always about examining where I was “hurting” and allowing myself to speak about the things I was finding difficult - and according to happiness researcher Ed Diener, examining our suffering seems to be the right way to go. Happy people don’t suppress their suffering, but rather confront it head on: “The way to happiness does not lead around one’s suffering, but rather directly through it.” If we fail to observe this, we risk repeatedly assigning the blame for our
unhappiness to external circumstances – and laying a very poor foundation for overcoming challenging experiences.

This appears to be more crucial for sensitive people than for their normally sensitive counterparts, regardless of the challenge at hand. Whether we’re processing a past experience or simply confronting a person whose character or attitude has burdened us, we must learn what we’ve fought a lifelong battle to avoid: the art of conflict. And even if, for the sensitive-hearted amongst us, conflicts remain a challenge, it’s worth facing up to them and seeing them through. When all things are considered, the challenge of avoiding conflicts is even greater. If we attempt to do so, a conflict black hole lurks daily on every corner – and what could be a greater stress than that!

Eleanore Roosevelt - human rights activist, diplomat and wife of US president Roosevelt – said the following: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Confronting our high sensitivity also means looking closely at which sensitivity-related challenges might be hindering our development, since only when we recognise these challenges can we roll up our sleeves and tackle them. It becomes easier to address ourselves and others head-on. The right attitude is critical to our success: “I’m okay, you’re okay – regardless of whether or not you’re sensitive like me.”

Eleanore Roosevelt has another quote that moves me deeply: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

And there’s one more statement that has left its mark on me in the recent past. When I interviewed Dr. Karin Uphoff, entrepreneur and founder of the network heartleaders, one message in particular managed to lodge itself in my heart: “Regardless of what you do and how you do it, there will
always be people who criticise you. So do what you want and be yourself."

Easier said than done – since (most) people are social beings and have a desire to belong. So long as we are unable to identify and reflect on the exact nature of our “otherness”, we naturally attempt to align ourselves with the mainstream and keep up with “normal” approaches to life. For highly sensitive people, these approaches are largely unsuitable. Feelings of being overwhelmed increase in frequency, as do the number of times in which we feel affronted by others. But a word of caution: the world doesn’t revolve around the sensitive beings amongst us. There are doubtless a great many people who feel equally as affronted by our idiosyncrasies - managers who have scratched their heads about great commitment and amazing results that suddenly turned to repeated sick notes (and perhaps even dismissal); people to whom we’ve got too close without even realising it; friends from whom we simply turn away because we cannot face a conflict and wish to avoid negative emotions. We are masters at circumnavigating potentially painful situations before they even arise.

It is one thing to know that you are sensitive. The other, equally as important realisation is this: those who are matter-of-fact in their mindset exhibit a normal level of sensitivity. We cannot expect these normally sensitive souls to know how it is to smell and taste more, to perceive more and feel things more intensely. They have no concept of how abruptly a normal workday can trigger feelings of complete sensory overload, even though everything might have felt great just a moment before. “Normally sensitive” people are simply as they are – they’re not idiots, they’re not coarse and they’re not inconsiderate. They simply don’t know how it is to be sensitive – just as we have little concept of what it means to go through life with normal sensitivity.

Being sensitive is just as okay as being matter-of-fact. Naturally, it takes a certain amount of courage to own up to
one’s sensitivity – but the end result is worth it. The first step towards breaking the cycle of good times interspersed with recurring periods of overstimulation, stress or even illness is simply to recognise that your high sensitivity actually exists. When this recognition is “seasoned” with a little reflection, sadness, anger, the desire to make a change and a pinch of life-affirming optimism, the passing of weeks, months or years – depending on age and origin – will give way to the formation of a wonderful seed of self-esteem. And because life is always ready to throw us curveballs – events that force even the toughest of sensitive souls to fall back into old habits – we eventually develop a desire for a more enduring sensitive strength. For ourselves, for our children and partners, for our jobs and friends and for everything else that makes up our lives.

In the long-term, adjusting our behaviour and self-abnegating do not make any sense. In doing these things, we prevent both ourselves and our less sensitive counterparts from understanding more about how we are. Let’s stop hiding ourselves. Let’s start showing ourselves who we really are – not by focusing on the things we find difficult, but by discovering our strengths and presenting them on the stage of life. How does that work in practice, and what can help us to do so? In this book, I aim to give concrete answers from the everyday lives of highly sensitive individuals – those who have chosen to lay the focus on the beauty and strength that life has to offer for people like us.

A word of caution: this book does not contain the ultimate recipe for highly sensitive souls to be happy. My aim is to embolden you and awaken the desire for change. Give more space to the beneficial aspects of your high sensitivity. Reflect on your strengths and be conscious of what makes you strong – even when you’re facing a situation that temporarily and unexpectedly sweeps the rug from under your feet. For me, one thing remains constant: the belief that my high sensitivity
is good, just as it is, and does me good – just as I benefit from having the courage to seek out new ways of loving myself. As a self-employed mother of two small children, that’s not always a walk in the park. I achieve my goals only when I’m honest with myself, accept myself and am mindful of what I need to be and stay strong.

The goal of this book is to provide the information, stories and positive mantras that will clear the way for you to live a strong life as a highly sensitive person. I wish you plenty of enjoyment as you read, discover and find your strength.
Am I highly sensitive?

High sensitivity: what actually is it? Am I highly sensitive? What does it mean to be this way? How can I deal with it? Is there a “diagnosis” of high sensitivity? How does high sensitivity influence our lives? Are some of the people around me more sensitive than others?

Question after question - all of whose answers are of huge significance. For one thing is certain: only once you know the phenomenon exists can you find out where you (and those around you) lie on the sensitivity scale. This is the first step in a sensitive yet strong life, whether you're simply dealing with yourself or striving for better cooperation in your partnership, family, business or society. Though research into the subject is still in its infancy, one thing is irrefutable: the phenomenon of high sensitivity affects all of us to some degree. If we want to treat each other in a way that shows appreciation and encourages potential, we need to be aware of our individual sensitivities – irrespective of whether we're emotional or objective in the way we think.

Aren’t We All A Little Sensitive?

Once we begin to think about this topic, questions quickly arise as to whether we can even afford to be “sensitive”: in a society in which the conventional notions of discipline and performance guarantee survival and a lack of ability to perform is equated with failure and social exclusion, is sensitivity even compatible with staying alive? The indisputable answer seems to be that sensitivity has no place in today’s world. Or does it? Let’s put the topic of confidence and peace of mind to one
side for moment and view it from another perspective: according to the dictionary, the medical world defines sensibility as the sensitivity to stimuli and pain experienced by an organism and particular parts of the nervous system. Wikipedia informs us that in the fields of physiology and perception psychology, “sensibility” refers to the so-called “five senses” – those that make it possible for us to feel, hear and see things and have thus guaranteed our ability to survive throughout the ages. Without them, the human species wouldn’t be around today – so it makes absolute sense for us to preserve our sensibility (and various sensibilities) and take to time to regularly be introspective. What is causing me pain? Where does it hurt? Why am I irritated? If we’re honest, we’re all a little sensitive - some of us more than a little. If, like me, you belong to this latter group of people or have contact with highly sensitive people in your daily life, you have no choice but to look closer and address the thoughts, feelings and sensations you find. The less our sensitive sides are heard, the louder they begin to scream and run wild. We’re all familiar with the symptoms of our time: for some years now, chronic stress, tiredness, exhaustion, insomnia, mental illness and burnouts have done the rounds not just through the media, but through our circles of friends and acquaintances. Perhaps you can speak from personal experience about how it feels when one’s mind and body become temporarily unfit for purpose? Year on year, studies of health insurers provide evidence of the mounting numbers of people no longer able to cope with the often sensitivity-incompatible demands placed on them at work and in society. It’s time to turn to our softer side and finally give our health some space to breathe.
The Phenomenon of High Sensitivity

Current definitions of the term are attributable to psychotherapist and university professor Dr. Elaine N. Aron, the pioneer of high sensitivity research. She found that highly sensitive people are born with a nervous system that enables them to perceive and process internal and external stimuli more intensively than others – a hereditary and changeable trait that is found in 15-20 per cent of the population. If one is internally predisposed to high sensitivity, they may or may not become more sensitive over the course of their life. There is no difference in the distribution of sensitivity amongst the male and female population.

Thus far, there is no generally accepted scientific definition. Since high sensitivity is a trait and not an illness, you will never receive a “diagnosis” of high sensitivity from a doctor or psychologist. Incidentally, Dr. Aron was the not the first person to encounter the phenomenon – many years beforehand, a Russian scientist named Pawlow had carried out experiments with acoustic stimuli with the aim of finding out when his test subjects would reach their pain thresholds. What he found was not the normal distribution for psychological phenomena; instead, he, too, determined that 15-20 of his subjects reached their pain thresholds much earlier than the rest.

Terms + Definitions

Thus far, researchers and authors have failed to reach an agreement on the vocabulary: high sensibility, hypersensitivity and high sensitivity are used in parallel by a number of authors, coaches and psychologists and are, to some extent, understood differently. “High sensitivity” is the most widespread term, and the one under which the Wikipedia entry on the subject is filed. “Hypersensitivity” appears frequently in the media and is associated with an undeniable hint of attention-grabbing sensationalism. American psychologist Elaine Aron, the godmother of modern high sensitivity research, coined the terms “sensory-processing sensitivity” and “highly sensitive person”, although these terms are still occasionally misunderstood. Some authors and coaches incorrectly use “high sensitivity” to refer to a “high alertness” of the senses and deploy the term as a catch-all way to refer to all extra-sensory perceptions – known in spiritual circles as clairsentience, clairaudience and clairvoyance.
Test: How Sensitive Am I?

The phenomenon of high sensitivity is increasingly well known – yet many people view me curiously, a large question mark above their heads, when I tell them that I am a researcher in the field. This questioning look usually followed by a demand for information: High sensitivity? What exactly is that? If I have only a brief time to introduce myself, people usually seek me out afterwards. Often, these are the sensitive souls who, up until that point, had no idea that they themselves are highly sensitive. They feel magically drawn to the concept – because they have long been searching for answers.

More and more often, I speak to people who are not highly sensitive themselves, yet are open to learning more about the topic. This is a positive sign, since it is not enough only for highly sensitive people to be informed about the subject: it is also deeply significant for employee representatives, entrepreneurs, managers, psychologists, doctors, medical practitioners, teachers, educators, coaches, trainers and more. It is about appreciation, a focus on strengths, resources, recruiting and health – topics whose relevance to business and society is increasing on a daily basis.

15-20 per cent of the population – undeniably a significant minority. Despite the fact that research is in its early stages, one fact is indisputable: the moment that highly sensitive people read, hear or see the expression “high sensitivity” (or a similar term) for the first time, their reality changes instantly – while their normally sensitive counterparts remain unaffected. For me, this makes it clear that the researchers must be onto something. Michael Jack, president of a German high sensitivity research association, refers to the moment of realisation as a “mountain-sized chain effect”. It’s not just a weight that’s lifted from the person’s shoulders, but a whole mountain that’s set into motion: the fog lifts and pathways appear where previously there was nothing but barren wilderness. The neighbouring summit is seen in a new light.
and the mountain ranges that are left behind arrange themselves anew. Here and there, an avalanche cascades into the valley. The ground rumbles violently and the entire landscape is transformed. Relief, realignment, a reawakening of curiosity…

The desire to learn more about oneself, find explanations and be able to classify oneself is great. Anyone who felt “different” as a child is bound to carry this desire within them - the desire to come to terms with themselves and the world. Structures can be very helpful in doing so. Drawers and categories act as signposts in the information jungle of our everyday lives and help us orient ourselves in the hustle and bustle of life. High sensitivity is one of these categories – one that has the power to explain a lot. It’s about belonging; the feeling of not being alone. And it matters little that the research landscape in the field has thus far received (scarcely) any scientific recognition or that the research is still in its early stages.

**Test: How sensitive am I?**

The following test will help you locate where you are on the sensitivity spectrum and determine whether or not you are a highly sensitive person.

Tick the statements that are true for you.

- 1) I hear, see, smell, taste and/or feel intensely and am often overwhelmed by my sensory impressions.
- 2) I prefer to work autonomously and in a quiet environment.
- 3) It’s important to me to find and pursue my calling.
- 4) My thinking is interconnected, solution-oriented and holistic.
5) Even when I am in the mood to attend a big event or a party, the many stimuli and people quickly tire me out.

6) I had “flourishing imagination” as a child and even today have access to a world that seems to be closed off to others.

7) Just as I am able to gain intense enjoyment from the beautiful, fine and delicate things in life, I feel very overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, tight clothing and large groups of people.

8) When I feel overwrought or worked up, I prefer to retreat to a quiet place where I can be alone.

9) Feeling valued is very important to me, as is having a work environment that is compatible with my values.

10) I have rather few, but very good and close friends and I enjoy meaningful conversations.

11) I often begin to feel exhausted at exactly the point when others are coming into their own.

12) I react strongly to medication, caffeine, theine and / or alcohol.

13) I am predisposed to allergic reactions.

14) I pick up on other people's moods and it often occurs that the boundary between my own and others' feelings gets blurred.

15) I need time to process intense experiences. I am sometimes struck by the memory of a past situation, which I then spend time “reworking”.

16) Working in an open plan office is something I find terrifying or even impossible.

17) I avoid negative news and movies in which violence, death and aggression are shown.
18) I can only feel fully happy in a job if I perceive my work as meaningful and am able to apply my strengths.

19) Fairness, faith, a sense of meaning, values and ethics and/or spirituality play a major role in my life.

20) My soul and my body react more quickly to stress, a poor diet, lack of exercise and a stressful environment than I perceive to be the case with other people.

21) The constant stimulation provided by the media and the flood of information and emails to which we are subjected has a negative impact on my wellbeing.

22) Others appreciate my refined view of the world and/or my keen sense of perception.

23) A balance between nearness and distance is important to me, even in my closest relationships.

24) My strengths include empathy, intuition and creativity.

25) I often sense that a person is saying something other than what he/she really thinks and feels, which is usually confirmed at a later point during the relationship/situation.

26) I am quick to take responsibility and I have to be careful only to accept tasks or requests when I have the capacity for them.

27) If people do not act in accordance with my values or expectations, I have to remind myself not to pass judgment.

28) Since my childhood, I have tended to perceive many of the people I meet as insensitive and/or indiscriminate.

29) In unexpected crisis situations, I remain able to act and am quick to take the lead.
30) Sometimes I sense tell in advance and / or from far away when unpleasant things happen to the people who are closest to me.

What's your result?

Analysis

The statements all describe characteristics of highly sensitive people. The more statements ticked, the stronger the indication that you belong to the 15-20 per cent of highly sensitive people who perceive more stimuli and information - and perceive and process stimuli more intensively - than people with normal levels of sensitivity.

Each statement touches on a sensitivity-related aspect of your life. Even if you have answered only one statement with “does apply”, it may mean that you are highly sensitive in this regard. Give this point some attention. Look closer. What does this high sensitivity indicate? What can you do to ensure that your “sensitive” point is catered for? Reflect on the extent to which your increased perception challenges or rewards you.

The important thing: No matter how sensitive you are - and in which regards - it makes no sense to pretend that you are not. In doing so, you reject a part of yourself, the stimulus intensity increases, and your stress level rises. In contrast, by acknowledging your sensitivities, you can stay healthy, stay productive and feel at ease with yourself.
Women Are Sensitive – And So Are Men

The trait of high sensitivity is equally distributed amongst the male and female population. Despite this, sensitivity, emotionality and empathy are characteristics that still tend to be ascribed to women. This, in turn, means that it tends to be easier for women to deal with the issue of high sensitivity and to embrace their own heightened perception and emotions.

But highly sensitive men? How can society ever accept that? Even at a time when the image of men is changing considerably and increasing numbers of men are assuming new, non-conventional roles, the majority of men in our society still occupy highly important, traditionally “male” positions – those associated with hard work, power, assertiveness, productivity, financial success and ruthless objectivity.

And what if you don’t fit the mould? “What? That’s not for you? Don’t be soft? And you have a family?! Be responsible!” Yet those who proclaim these things rarely believe them. Most know exactly what you achieve on a daily basis and that you are neither a failure nor a person lacking in responsibility. The “old” image of masculinity from decades past has nothing to with how you are, how you feel and how you sense and perceive things. You have other qualities – and you’re all the better for it!

To all the (highly sensitive) men out there: accept your enhanced emotionality, your feelings and your sensitive, alternative brand of masculinity. Business is on the hunt for new solutions – and not only for patterns of work time and attendance. Approaches are becoming increasingly more flexible. The business challenges of our time require unconventional thinkers, deep feelers, peace keepers and fine-tuners. It’s an ideal time to establish new values and rid the world of its illogical obsession with “higher-better-faster-cheaper” and the misguided belief that long-term growth is the solution to humanity’s problems – before it’s too late. A new beginning for all, including women!
For even women must contend with the “pain-is-for-the-weak”-style expectations placed upon men. In general, women (and in particular, highly sensitive women) are not interested in combative macho characters who know better at everything and fail to take us seriously or give credit to our projects, ideas and sense for what the world needs. Women are willing to take on increased responsibility and want to develop as professionals. Yet when children enter the picture, we are lost without our partners. If my husband had been away working a sixty-hour-per-week job while this book was being written, it wouldn’t have landed in your hands until a year from now.

Alongside being cared for, children also require family, security, physical closeness and a family community.

The reconciliation of career and children... Yes, it can work. But we are always led to question how and whether it can actually work well for people. If it’s already more difficult for women to combine children and career (or simply just “work”) than they want or are able to admit, then it’s even harder for highly sensitive types: stopping breastfeeding abruptly after just three months, returning to an open-plan office full time and leaving the (probably also) highly-sensitive child in the cot? Highly sensitive women and children who are able to follow such a pattern long-term and remain generally physically and mentally healthy tend to be an exception. Whether a person is highly sensitive or not - in the end, they will always need a personal solution. Each family is different, as is each stage of life. Let’s set out to find flexible solutions and seize the freedom to rethink and adjust our decisions and methods depending on the situation. And let’s do it regardless of whether the neighbours look at us funny, or our relatives purport to know what’s good for us better than we do.

Men and women are currently going through the process of redefining their roles. For highly sensitive men, in particular, this is a huge opportunity. All the men to whom I’ve spoken have, since childhood, felt caught in the discrepancy between
family and societal expectations and their sensitive temperaments. Each one has found his own unique method of dealing with the male tussle for power and has managed, more or less, to find his way. An everyday battle - and a battle that has afforded the “soft” guys a great deal of inner strength. This strength can now unfold – sensitive and raw, tender yet tough – without the familiar pressure to perform at work, in bed and in relationships.

Features and Characteristics of Highly Sensitive People

What exactly does it mean to be highly sensitive? What characteristics distinguish highly sensitive types from others? Since high sensitivity is a relatively young field of research, there is not yet a definitive psychological definition. From a scientific perspective, there is still some uncertainty regarding which characteristics and types of behaviour are associated with high sensitivity and which are considered separately. Empathy, for example, while not being a defining quality of highly sensitive people, is expressed strongly in many – (though not all).

Brigitte Kuester (formerley Schorr), author and director of the Institute for High Sensitivity in Switzerland, gives the three distinguishing criteria as follows:

• narrow comfort zone;
• tendency to become quickly overstimulated; and
• tendency for stimuli and information to resonate internally for long periods of time

Yet there are a number of characteristics, challenges and strengths that are repeatedly observed by coaches and therapists in the course of their work and that they have documented in their books. In addition to being borne out by convincing scientific findings, this book also draws on the
diverse experiences of real-life people from the HS community.

If HSP people know what makes them tick, they can understand themselves and others better – and more and more frequently, their frustration with their way of thinking and feeling can be transformed into a heartily enjoyed life. The attributes associated with high sensitivity bring both benefits and stress to our lives. If we lack the ability to reflect on our particular situation, we are usually left with nothing but passive frustration. Imagine you have treated your senses to a concert of a classical music, but board the train afterwards to find a group of drunk youths making coarse remarks. It stinks of alcohol; the bass booms from your neighbour’s headphones. A woman - whose daughter’s dress is so garish that it forces you to look the other way – telephones her boyfriend and talks at such volume you learn intimate details of the relationship you’d rather have been spared. It doesn’t take more than five minutes for the revitalising effects of the concert to be gone. Stress kicks in. If we’d known where our challenges lie, we’d have known that on such occasions, it’s better to simply take the car.

**Highly Perceptive People**

Our sensory organs enable us to experience the world around us. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and our sixth sense – all of these can transform our lives into a magic feast of the senses that moves us deeply and triggers the subtle flow of happiness through our veins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How We See</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>😊 Nature, art, photography, design, colours and shapes afford us strength and relax us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>😊 We have a good understanding of colours, shapes and harmony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
as well as a strong sense of aesthetics and an accurate eye for detail

 Disorder, dirt, the “wrong” colours and shapes and too-garish light can quickly lead to overstimulation and disrupt our focus.

How We Hear

 😊 We find good music, beautiful sounds, etc. to be a fulfilling experience.

 😊 We have a good or even a very highly developed sense of hearing, a good sense of rhythm, a high degree of musicality and highly developed speech comprehension.

 😆 Background noise can disrupt our concentration, even if it’s quiet. Loud music and loud sounds quickly lead to overstimulation.

How We Smell + Taste

 😊 Pleasant smells are an intoxicating experience

 😊 Good food is pure enjoyment - fireworks for the taste buds.

 😆 If smells or tastes are too intense or unpleasant, feelings of disgust or aversion can quickly arise.

How We Sense, Feel and Perceive Our Bodies

 😊 Light touches speak to our finely-tuned senses and our perception of our bodies is highly considered and refined.

 😊 Our sense of workmanship, coordination, spatial orientation, fine motor skills and motion intelligence are strongly expressed.

 😆 Our perception of pain, heat and cold is enhanced. Hunger, thirst and tiredness impact our wellbeing more quickly.

 😆 Scratchy or tight clothing feels unpleasant on our bodies.

How We “Perceive” More

 😊 We can listen well, have a strong gut instinct and sense intuitively what is right. Logical connections are made as if by magic.

 😊 Our high intuition (also known as the “sixth sense”) allows us to
perceive things that remain hidden to others. We pick up on non-verbal signals intuitively.

Learning to trust our own intuition is a process.

As the overview in the boxes shows, highly sensitive senses have the power to trigger an instant “back-home-in-bed-under-the-covers-and-lights-out” impulse, or to present us with other challenges. People who make us happy might also overload us due to habits or behaviours that quickly overwhelm our finely-tuned senses. New opportunities at work can simultaneously enrich our lives and demand from us that we’re in bed by 9pm every night - otherwise, we won’t wake up refreshed and with the strength to achieve our goals. We might finally get chance to travel to our dream destination – but realise when we’re there that while new sights and sounds are fascinating, the truly relaxing moments are rare. Though we return home with a wealth of intense, unprocessed experiences, there’s been little or no relaxation to speak of.

For all these reasons, high sensory perception is equally capable of bringing about pure, deep enjoyment as it is of producing the most profound disgust, preoccupation or feelings of overload. If you have a finely-tuned, highly developed sensory perception, it’s vital to acknowledge it! We might have a spontaneous moment of happiness because a bird unexpectedly sings over the noise of the city – but our high perception might also ensure that we spontaneously react in revulsion when boarding the underground. We may even find ourselves overcome with nausea to see an unkempt homeless person who has made the underground his place of refuge from the hunger and cold. However much we try to control our sensory perception and not to perceive this person as “bad”: the unpleasant, all-pervasive smell will cause most smell-sensitive people to feel overwhelmed within seconds. This anecdote makes clear how rapidly HSP can find themselves in stress-causing situations.
If you are frequently required to be in an environment that causes you to quickly feel overstimulated, this can eventually lead to long-term stress-related illness. If, however, you are good at recognising and acknowledging what does you good and what doesn’t, you have the chance to alter your day-to-day life accordingly and reduce your stress.

**Perception and Processing of Information**

Fine antennae don’t just enable HSPs to perceive things more intensely – they also have more stimuli to process, including noises, visual impressions, smells, tastes and all other stimuli that affect the skin or the body: heat, cold, vibrations, pressure, touch and drafts. All impulses triggered through contact with others or the consumption of media are also classified in the “external” category. In the age of digital communication and social media, this last factor is particularly critical, since moments of relaxation without media or communicative stimuli are becoming ever more seldom. For highly sensitive people, the voices of those around them can also act as a stimulus. Here, empathy and sensitivity come into play, often requiring us to stop and examine whether we’re reacting to our own feeling or the feelings and voices of others.

It’s not only external stimuli that play a role in the intensively perceived world of highly sensitive people, but rather everything internal as well: emotions, thoughts and signals from the body are all classified are stimuli and must constantly be perceived by our senses.

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**Detect Energy Vampires – Reduce Stress**

Be aware of which of your senses are particularly sensitive, when you give them due consideration ad when you tend simply to “adapt” (leading to long-term stress).

- Which sensory impressions are good for me?
- Which experiences stress me out?
- Are there days on which I’m more exhausted than others? What have I done on these days?
But the phenomenon of high sensitivity doesn’t refer only to the larger-than-average quantity of stimuli to be processed: it also refers to the profound depth of processing. Sometimes, an experience will unexpectedly revisit our heads and hearts weeks, months or even years after it happens. Often, it offers information that has thus far been of little relevance but could be interesting for a current project or situation. Establishing links is a particular strength of HSPs. Sometimes, these revisited experiences are things that have challenged us subtly, perhaps a disturbing thought triggered by a short exchange with a stranger at the checkout: a situation that logically has no relevance but as nevertheless been “stored” as relevant and must be processed as such. How exactly these perceptions are processed is something that high sensitivity researchers are currently trying to find out.

I came across an incisive, heavily simplified model of how “data processing” in highly sensitive people might work when I attended an evening seminar on the subject. The coach and advisor, Reimar Luengen, is a specialist in high sensitivity. Inspired by Christa und Dirk Lueling and their German-language book “Lastentragen, die verkannte Gabe” ( Bearing

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**D O E S – Formula**

Dr. Elaine Aron, a pioneer of high sensitivity research, summarised the main characteristics of highly sensitive people in a short acronym.

**D** stands for “Depth of Processing” and refers to how deeply we examine things that happen to us.

**O** stands for “easily overstimulated”, which means that highly sensitive people can become overwhelmed more quickly than people with a normal level of sensitivity.

**E** stands for “Emotional Reactivity and High Empathy”. This refers to how easily we are touched in an emotional sense. Highly sensitive people react more strongly to positive stimuli and more intensely to negative stimuli.

**S** stands for “Sensitivity to Subtle Stimuli”. Highly sensitive people perceive subtle stimuli and details that may remain hidden to others.
Burdens, The Undervalued Gift), he explains the process as follows:

Each second, millions of bits of information swarm our sensory organs. We, as humans, can only process a tiny fraction of these. The first filter layer is comparable with hardware. It is pre-set, determined by our makeup and expressed differently in each person – at a basic level, “sensitive” or “tough” (though this in no way implies that the sensitive group are weak). Here lies the difference between normal and high sensitivity. The second filter layer is the software in which the individual’s experiences are mapped and the individual is afforded their own unique way of looking at things. The bits that make it through these two filters are divided between three different locations. The smallest number of memories ends up in our conscious thought. Most are immediately deposited in our subconscious, while the rest land in a third repository – let’s call it the clipboard. Everything that lands there is wanted by our system for processing at a later date. In highly sensitive people, this clipboard is filled much more quickly than otherwise – firstly, because we perceive much more deeply and secondly, because more information is pushed to the clipboard by the greater volume of memories and impressions.

What does this mean for highly sensitive people? Quite simply: Be aware that this “clipboard” actually exists. Once the clipboard is full, we are out of spare space to deposit relevant information – and then we are overstimulated on an almost constant basis. One moment enjoying the party; the next fleeing to the safety of home. One minute rocking the meeting; the next barely able to string a logical sentence together. The way out: figure out how it feels just before the clipboard gets

**Recognise Warning Strengths – Stay Sensitive Strong**

Suddenly tired? Feelings of hunger although you’ve just eaten? A moment ago, the party was nice, but now you feel uncomfortable?

Caution – overstimulation warning! Your clipboard is almost full and is in danger of overflowing.

Remain aware and figure out how it feels just before your “clipboard” gets full.

In many situations you can make an excuse and take a short break. Not possible right now? Then hold on and be sure to consciously plan a longer break at a later date.
full. For me, that means a state of social and communicative fatigue. Once my clipboard has announced the onset of “heavy overload”, any direct contact and communication with people brings on sudden exhaustion. Any further stimulation – such as recurring noises, too-loud music or strong smells – is almost too much to bear. In such situations, I’ve learned to discipline myself: sometimes, whether at work or with our family, life leaves us no other choice.

But if we regularly exceed our limits over a longer period of time - without including sufficient breaks - and begin to struggle to do the things we’re supposed to, our body will sooner or later force us to stop due to illness. And who wants a forced break! Far more preferable is some consciously chosen downtime – the kind with which we can actively ensure that we go through life with both sensitivity and strength.

Values & Attitudes

Many HSPs have a strong internal value system. The meaningfulness of the things we do is of great significance. Many HSPs have long been afflicted by an insatiable desire for meaning. Thoughts go round and round, everything is analysed. We find a category for every detail. Those who perceive so much require structure and file each experience automatically within their internal value system. The following list gives an insight into the value world of highly sensitive people:

- Ethics, honesty and fairness
- Environmental awareness, love of nature and respect for other living things
• Commitment to a better world
• Finding and living your calling
• Accuracy, diligence, consistence and logic
• Identifying with tasks and projects, loyalty
• Openness for new things
• Understanding of relationships and backgrounds and the importance of looking behind the scenes
• Awareness of duties and responsibilities
• Reliability and accountability
• Peace, harmony and community

Can you find one or two words in the list that are important to you? Yes? Then it’s all the more important that you’re aware of these three things:

1. Stand up for your values. Create an environment in which you live your values and can pass them on.

2. At the same time, be conscious of the fact that your awareness of values places a high demand on you and those around you.

3. There are many people in the world who do not share these values. It’s worth being able to get along with them rather than judge them.

In today’s society, standing up for your values can present particular challenges.

• We are swimming in a sea of opportunities and can often get excited for several things at once. A word of caution: be careful you don’t get bogged down. Aim for one target at a time and take it step by step.

• If we expect the rest of the world to work in the same way as us, we will frequently be disappointed and feel wronged. High values are good. But those who strive for perfection have a long way to fall. Caution: risk of injury to the soul!
• For us, it's easy to see the truth behind the facade. But be aware that for many others, the truth won't be easy to accept. Tread carefully, since those who say hidden truths out loud must be able to deal with rejection and criticism.

• The quest for purpose and meaning can often lead us down windy mountain roads and valleys. Beware: those who stand up for their values at any cost can often take a little longer to find their place in life.

**Social Behaviours & Emotions**

Highly sensitive people are often highly valued in social interactions, since they are good at perceiving voices in their social environment – not even the smallest change goes unnoticed. Are things getting heated within your team? Does your partner seem exhausted? Does your friend's voice speak volumes, even she though she hasn't told you that she's feeling depressed? It pays to practise addressing problems or topics sensitively and constructively – for only by doing so can we make a valuable contribution to peaceful, harmonious interaction in our work environment, family, friendship or partnership. Likewise, it’s only by doing so that we can help other people to reflect on and solve their problems. Starting in their childhood or youth, many highly sensitive people get used to becoming a favourite conversation partner or having people trust them with intimate details. We might as well wear a sign on our forehead saying, “Good listener, high empathy, compassion and readiness to help”. Because of this, it’s also little wonder that we’re able to open up quickly and that our conversational partner feels they are in good hands.

Highly sensitive people love deep knowledge and insights. Superficial conversation and small talk are not our thing, even if in some contexts, it’s a definite advantage to be able to do them with ease - without the familiar spasms of superficiality-induced embarrassment. This is probably one of the reasons
why we choose our friends carefully and maintain a small number of intense, meaningful friendships rather than several superficial ones. The quality of our friendships is high: often, highly sensitive people are deeply connected with one another and experience their relationship as a connection from which both sides can draw significant amounts of strength and energy.

The high density of emotional experiences that occur within ourselves and as a result of social interaction give rise to intense sensory impressions, encounters and feelings. We are capable of getting great pleasure from the smallest of things and, even without them, have a rich inner life. Emotional interaction is an intense pleasure that needs to be balanced. Highly sensitive people are happy to spend time alone, and value their privacy; even extroverted highly sensitive characters need regular times of retreat to process, reflect on and sort their experiences.

These are the pleasant sides of high emotionality and perception. But those who are highly sensitive also know how it feels when:

- Feelings take control
- Tears roll easily, whether we want them to or not
- Our peace of mind goes down the drain
- Joint ventures are not possible on account of overstimulation
- All the “right” people are hidden away somewhere, and we feel like we’re on a foreign planet
- Hustle and bustle and conflict force us to retreat
- Overstimulation causes us to become aggressive, which we regret terribly afterwards
- People use us and we only notice afterwards
- Invitations to parties triggers anxiety
- Criticism hits us hard uns trifft wie der Schlag,
- Surprises completely throw us off, because we had prepared for something else
• We feel steamrolled by people’s voices, or
• Our own needs are overlooked in the hustle and bustle of everyday and then make themselves known even more persistently

Life is colourful, intensive and - for many sensitive people - a unique challenge. At the same time, we experience the pleasant sides of life more intensely than the other 80 per cent of the population and enjoy the ability to reflect - the best foundation for developing ourselves further and discovering opportunities that remain hidden to others. Acknowledging our high sensitivity is the most important step. If we can identify the traits and characteristics associated with high perceptive ability, we have all the tools we need to carve our own steering wheel, set sail and guide our yacht through wind and high weather – with a course plotted for sensitive strength.

Types of Highly Sensitive People
Categorisations like “high sensitivity” provide a way for us to understand ourselves and others better. If you are the “other” in this scenario, take a moment to acknowledge the benefits of meeting a person who has had similar experiences and can relate deeply to what you are talking about. My experience has shown me that thanks to their ability to draw much from their own experiences, highly sensitive people also offer a profound understanding of the experiences of others. And in spite of all this: even those who self-identify as highly sensitive cannot simply be lumped together in one box. Within the wider category of high sensitivity, there are many smaller groups and categorisations. Take a look inside – I hope you enjoy discovering!
Difference Between Highly Sensitive People

Psychological advisor and director of the Institute for High Sensitivity in Switzerland, Brigitte Kuester (formerly Schorr), differentiates between four focal areas of high sensitivity:

- Empathy
- Cognition
- Sensory
- Spirituality

Empathetic highly sensitive people have a high degree of empathy for themselves and others. The answer to the question “How are you?” can be longer than for them than for other types of people, since they differentiate very precisely between feelings and perceptions. Those who have high empathetic capabilities are also good at sensing the feelings of the person next to them, the prevailing atmosphere in a room or the defining quality of a relationship between two people. The biggest challenge for them is to maintain an adequate distance between their own feelings and those of others and to set clear boundaries.

Highly sensitive people with strong cognitive assessment skills can carry out quick, accurate analytical and intellectual examinations of topics. In a similar vein, they can detect logical links and find it easy to understand and explain complex relationships. They keep their emotions for themselves and rarely make them known to others. Openly emotional people can cause them to feel very unsettled. When they examine a topic, it is important to them to back up their observations and perceptions using scientific quotes, lists and tables from reputable sources.

People who are highly sensitive from a sensory perspective perceive sensory stimuli particularly intensively. Many experience a true firework of sensory perceptions. They see the smallest details, hear the grass growing, detect the most delicate smells, taste more intensively and have such a finely developed sense of touch that the lightest brushes of
skin can be highly pleasurable. The five senses are not so strongly expressed in all people who identify as highly sensitive – here, too, there is variation.

**Spiritual highly sensitive people** have access to a world that remains locked to many others, even to their fellow sensitive souls. They have premonitions and visions and a mediumistic access to knowledge that is not accessible to others. Many of them feel drawn to esoteric ideas. Those with strong religious beliefs see the teachings of their religion as a kind of spiritual home and find in them a benevolent reality. A few find their place in the community and dedicate themselves devotedly to their duties. Others turn away from the fixed rules of religious institutions to carve their own path with their beliefs.

My observations have shown that in many highly sensitive people, the focus is not just on one area. Usually, it’s a good mix of two, three or even four of the factors mentioned above.

**Introversion + Extroversion**

The concept of introversion and extroversion describes how people interact with their environment and was added to the personality psychology lexicon by C.G. Jung in 1921. Introverted people devote their attention and energy predominantly to their inner world and are frequently calm, reserved and quiet – qualities that are not to be equated with shyness. Extroverted characters devote more of their energy to the world around them and draw energy from exchanges within social groups. They can be talkative, determined, active, energetic, dominant, enthusiastic and adventurous. Important to know is that very few people have exclusively extroverted or introverted traits – mixed types are far more common.

Viewed superficially, introversion and high sensitivity can easily be confused. However, introversion refers predominantly to a person’s social behaviour and a greater need to devote attention to one’s inner world. In highly
sensitive people, the focus lies on enhanced perception of stimuli and the tendency to become quickly overstimulated. On the basis of Aron’s research, we can assume that around 70 per cent of highly sensitive people are introverted; the remaining 30 per cent are extroverted.

Ulrike Hensel, who writes on high sensitivity and works as a coach for highly sensitive people, shared an interesting thought on introversion and extroversion in HSPs in an interview with German newspaper Stuttgarter Zeitung: “Highly sensitive people can be socially extroverted and, at the same time, highly in tune with their inner world when it comes to their thoughts and feelings.” As well as supporting the observation that few people are exclusively “outro” or “intro”, this idea also shows why communicative, outgoing highly sensitive people might sometimes need time to retreat. For extroverted HSPs, in particular, this is a challenge. But it’s not worth getting upset about the fact that in spite of an extroverted personality, we’re not always in the mood to rock the stage. It’s better to make the decision to accept the different parts of ourselves, value our diversity and make the most of both sides.

For readers who tend to be “tougher” in their approach, I want to offer this piece of advice: if someone you know regularly gives great performances in presentations and talks and then – seemingly out of nowhere – requires peace, quiet and space to retreat: don’t question why. This is high sensitivity, plain and simple.