

OVERVIEW OF THE TRAIT OF “HIGH SENSITIVITY” & HELPFUL RESOURCES

The genetic trait of what is commonly referred to as high sensitivity but more formally known as Sensory Processing Sensitivity, occurs in about 20% of the population and over 100 species.

Recognized and researched by Dr. Elaine Aron in the mid-90s, it has been the subject of further investigation globally since then. Despite that, the trait remains relatively unknown compared to other neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, and autism which affect far fewer numbers.

It is a positive distinction that SPS is considered a trait and not a “disorder” (though there is debate about whether the term disorder is fair for other conditions as well). It means that while high sensitivity is considered a normal neural state, the accommodations which might be helpful, and which are available to other disorders are not readily offered to the highly sensitive.

To understand how the trait shows up, I draw on Dr. Aron’s descriptions but reorganize them slightly for simplicity and ease of memorability. The acronym SEED stands for four elements in a positive analogy suggesting that rich goodness lies within: Sensitivity, Empathy, Emotional Responsiveness, and Depth of Processing. Let’s dive into each one and the positive and challenging aspects.

When expressed positively, we have superpowers 🧐 at our disposal, but there is a chance that we can struggle 😞 instead, especially if we are depleted in any way and not able to effectively self-regulate.

Sensitivity

🧐 Our ability to be sensitive to subtle stimuli makes us great “noticers”. We can pick up on facial expressions, turns of phrase, and body language. Our abundance of mirror neurons means we are more apt to naturally mimic a person with whom we are engaging and subconsciously build rapport. HSPs have an innate ability to put others at ease.

😞 With our nervous systems being “always on”, we tire more easily. In loud, bright, or crowded spaces, our senses may be overwhelmed. This can lead us to avoiding or opting out. We need more rest and recovery options built into our days. Naps for the win!

Empathy

🧐 We have an innate ability to understand what others are feeling. This can invite them to feel comfortable with us, and lead to compassionate action. It can make us stronger leaders; empathy is now being widely recognized as a key leadership skill. You’ll want HSPs on your team.

😞 Sensing others’ suffering can leave us feeling emotionally exhausted and limit our effectiveness. It can be important to limit the amount of toxicity and pain we choose to experience. “Blinders on!” can be an effective strategy.



Emotional Responsiveness

👉 Increased brain activation in response to stimuli confirms that we receive robust cues to help process information. This arousal means our highs are definitely higher. This is worth celebrating.

😞 Conversely, our lows can be lower. Receiving strong signals without having the time available, intent, or ability to process them can lead to potentially offensive outbursts. Self-regulation skills are your friend. Insert pauses into your day to stay grounded.

Deep Processing

👉 Our intense thinking can lead to rich, creative solutions. Research shows that even the HSP brain “at rest” (in the absence of stimuli) is actively processing. No wonder we’re often mentally tired.

😞 If left unchecked, our conscientious natures and desires for quality outcomes can mean that we suffer from perfectionism and end up spinning. We mull over option after option and can end up stuck in analysis paralysis. You’ll want strategies to simplify decision making to support moving forward.

RESOURCES

Aron, Dr. Elaine. *The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You*, 25th Anniversary Edition. New York, Citadel, June 2020. (First published in 1996)

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ABOUT CLARE KUMAR

Productivity catalyst and highly sensitive executive coach, Clare Kumar, helps professionals improve productivity and well-being while avoiding exhaustion and burnout. She delivers keynotes, workshops, coaching, and connection through her online community, the *Happy Space Pod*. Kumar is a sought-after brand ambassador and media contributor for products and services contributing to productivity and well-being. To request an interview, please email clare@clarekumar.com.