

HIGHLY  
SENSITIVE  
PEOPLE

IN AN  
INSENSITIVE  
WORLD

*How to Create a Happy Life*

ILSE SAND



HIGHLY  
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INSENSITIVE  
WORLD

*by the same author*

**The Emotional Compass**  
**How to Think Better about Your Feelings**

*Ilse Sand*

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TRANSLATED BY ELISABETH SVANHOLMER



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## PREFACE

This book is written for highly sensitive people and other delicate souls. It is also relevant for friends, relatives, employers and therapists and anyone else living with, caring for or working with a highly sensitive person.

During my years working as a priest and later on as a therapist, I have spoken to many people. Over and over it has been my experience that highly sensitive people find it especially helpful to hear about the trait. When giving lectures and providing training for highly sensitive people, I have seen how much they appreciate and benefit from listening to other sensitive souls and sharing experiences and knowledge.

Therefore I have chosen to make space in this book for clients and participants in courses to give statements about their experiences of living today in Denmark as a highly sensitive person. Those who share their thoughts and experiences in this book are all highly sensitive, but other people will also be able to recognise themselves in some of the examples.

I have often seen people make peace with their sensitivity and find new confidence and courage to be themselves. With this book I hope to further inspire highly sensitive people and others.

The first chapter looks at the trait of being highly sensitive. Human beings are all very different and so are highly sensitive people. It is likely that you will be able to recognise yourself in some parts whereas other parts will seem unfamiliar. If you are a delicate soul who only recognises yourself in a small part of the description, you may still benefit from looking at and following some of the guidelines in the book.

You do not need to read the chapters chronologically. If you find some of the chapters too theoretical or too elementary, you can just skip them.

At the end of the book there is a questionnaire recently developed in Denmark that can help you test your own sensitivity. If you are a delicate soul, you can also find a list of ideas for activities that might help bring you a greater sense of joy and wellbeing. In this list are suggestions for things to do when you need inspiration or want to challenge yourself as well as things you can do to look after yourself when you are feeling overwhelmed.

*Ilse Sand*

*Randers, 9 June 2010*

## English language edition of the book

Welcome to the English language edition of *Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World*.

As I am writing this, more than 6000 copies of the book have been sold in Denmark and it has been translated into 16 different languages.

*Ilse Sand*

*Hald Hovedgaard, May 2016*



# INTRODUCTION

To be a delicate soul or a highly sensitive person brings with it possibilities as well as limitations. For many years I was mostly aware of the limitations. I was aware that in some contexts I was unable to endure as much as many other people could. Before I learned about the trait of being highly sensitive, I regarded myself as an introvert.

When I delivered training at the Open University and in other settings, I informed the participants that during breaks I would need to turn my attention inwards and rest. This was always met with respect. And there would always be participants who came up to me and shared that they had the same need and were grateful to hear someone being so open about this.

Although there are limitations like this to face, I also experience abundance in other areas. I have a very productive inner life. I have never experienced a shortage of inspiration or ideas for training. This has made me able to make things interesting and attract people to my lectures and courses year after year.

Many sensitive people experience low self-esteem. We are shaped by a culture that values traits and behaviours very different to ours. Some highly sensitive people say that all their lives they have had to struggle to be as 'lively' as

others seem to expect. And only when they retire do they feel it is acceptable to be slow and meditative.

It is likely that you have experienced being told not to worry so much, to toughen up and learn to enjoy the same things as people around you. And when you are continually encouraged to be different, it becomes difficult to learn to love yourself as a highly sensitive being. You may have attempted to change yourself in order to meet other people's expectations. If this is the case, you will need to learn to appreciate yourself just as you are. One step in that direction would be to measure yourself in terms of quality rather than quantity. You may not be as productive or efficient as others, but it is very likely that the quality of what you do is high. You may lose out in breadth, but you are likely to make up for it in depth.

For many years I kept comparing myself with others and felt that I was never quite enough, and I felt ashamed. I have had to work with myself in order to learn to move my focus from the things I cannot do to an awareness of all my resources.

You may know this state of being preoccupied with areas where you fall short. Often this is what is most visible to you. Maybe you are only able to be sociable for short periods of time. You notice this and so do others: 'Are you leaving already?' You forget to notice and appreciate how you were able to connect and make new contacts. It is likely that in a couple of hours you accomplished just as much as someone more resilient would have done over the course of a whole night.

I hope this book can help highly sensitive people and other delicate souls to become more aware of the things we already have and what we are capable of.



*This excessive sensitiveness very often brings an enrichment of the personality. . . Only, when difficult and unusual situations arise, the advantage frequently turns into a very great disadvantage, since calm consideration is then disturbed by untimely affects.*

*Nothing could be more mistaken, though, than to regard this excessive sensitiveness as in itself a pathological character component. If that were really so, we should have to rate about one quarter of humanity as pathological.*

C.G. Jung, 1955 [1913], para. 398

# THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING HIGHLY SENSITIVE

Two types within the same species

It has been estimated that one in every five people is highly sensitive. Not just among human beings but also other higher animals, it is possible to distinguish between two types: the highly sensitive and the more resilient – the latter taking more chances and being more self-assertive.

As well as distinguishing between two different genders, we can also divide human beings into these two types. It seems that the difference between the two types sometimes is greater than the difference between the two genders.

The highly sensitive trait is not a new discovery. It has just been called other things – introversion, for example. The American psychologist and researcher Elaine Aron (1997) has introduced and described the idea of the ‘highly sensitive person’. She talks about how she herself believed being introverted and being highly sensitive were the same thing until she realised that 30 per cent of highly sensitive people are socially extroverted.

The trait has also been called inhibited, anxious or shy. Words like these only describe how the trait appears to others when the highly sensitive person feels unsupported and unsafe. Describing the trait in such ways does not take into account that even though highly sensitive people may experience more problems and challenges than others when under pressure, they are also capable of deep happiness when their surroundings are peaceful.

The fact that we can be unhappy, if the right circumstances are not in place, but at the same time also can flourish wonderfully under the right circumstances is supported by research findings. One study showed that children with strong reactions (measured by heart rate and immune response) in challenging situations (i.e. sensitive children) became ill more often and had more accidents than other children when put under pressure (Boyce *et al.* 1995). But these children were less ill and had fewer accidents than others when in their normal and familiar surroundings.

We receive more inputs and  
think deeply about them

Highly sensitive people have a very delicate nervous system. We register more nuances, and overall the inputs we receive go deeper into our system. We have a great imagination and lively inner world, which means that the inputs and impressions we receive from the outside can trigger a multitude of concepts, associations and thoughts. In this way our 'hard drive' is quickly filled and we will feel over-stimulated.

My own experience of this is that when I am on the verge of having too many inputs, I feel as if there is no space in my head for more information. If I am with strangers, this may occur in as little as 30 minutes or an hour. I can pull myself together, stay present and even pretend that I am still enjoying myself. But I will be spending a lot of energy on this and afterwards will be exhausted.

Nobody likes being over-stimulated and overwhelmed. If you are a delicate soul, you will reach your limit of what feels like pleasant stimulation a lot faster than other people. You will then need to withdraw when too many things are happening around you.

You may recognise what Erik describes in the example below; when you try to steal a break for yourself, you fear that others will perceive you as sickly, hypersensitive, aloof or unsociable.

.....

'When I attend big birthday parties in my family, I go to the bathroom fairly often to look at myself in the mirror and massage my hands with hot water and soap. When several people have tried to open the locked door, I feel obliged to leave the bathroom even though I have not had enough peace and quiet. Once I tried to hide behind a newspaper. I went and sat in a corner and held up the paper to hide my face. Behind the newspaper I closed my eyes and tried to find some inner calm. My uncle, who loves a bit of fun, sneaked up on me, tore the paper out of my hands and shouted, "So here you are, trying to hide!" and everybody laughed. For me it felt extremely unpleasant.'

*Erik, 48*

.....

It is not just difficult inputs and impressions that will over-stimulate you. The good inputs – such as a party where you are enjoying yourself – will also at some point become too much for you and you may have to withdraw when the party is at its height.

This is where we suffer the most from the limitations of being highly sensitive. Most of us want to be able to keep at it for as long as everybody else. In part it is uncomfortable to have to disappoint the host who would want us to stay. In part it feels like a loss not being able to join in for the rest of the party. And we fear that other people may perceive us as boring, antisocial or rude when we leave the party before it is over.

Our delicate nervous systems, which often force us to withdraw from things we enjoy, are also what enable us to experience great joy.

Pleasant inputs such as fine art, listening to music or birdsong, smelling flowers, tasting something delicious or experiencing magnificent scenery – all of this can bring us great joy. We take it deeply into our selves and it fills us with delight.

### Sensitive to sensory inputs

If you are highly sensitive, you probably already know how difficult it can be to distract yourself from unpleasant sounds, sights or scents. You may experience being disturbed and irritated by things you have not chosen and cannot filter out. Sounds that other people may experience as normal you will experience as highly intrusive noise that throws your nervous system off balance.

One example is New Year's Eve. As a highly sensitive person, you can take great pleasure in the beautiful sight of fireworks across the sky. But you may struggle to cope with the loud explosions. They seem to penetrate and shake your nervous system, and you are likely to feel quite unnerved by this in the days around New Year.

When I give seminars on being highly sensitive or talk to people one to one in therapy sessions, I ask everyone to look at the best and the worst experiences of being highly sensitive. Often New Year's Eve is among people's worst experiences. The sounds of the explosions make for a living hell of infernal noise.

Seemingly more innocent noise such as neighbours moving about can also be a problem for the highly sensitive person as he or she often sleeps lightly and is woken by even small sounds.

It may be that there are surroundings and places you have to avoid. Many highly sensitive people are very affected by cold weather and draughts and have to decline invitations to garden parties. If you go to the hairdresser and somebody else is getting a perm, the smell from the chemicals may be an issue. It can be difficult to visit people who smoke; even if they agree not to smoke while you visit them, the odour from clothes and furniture may be overwhelming to your sensitive nose. I have met sensitive people who had to leave their workplace because the radio was on constantly and they were unable to shut out the noise.

Cafés with loud music, which you may not like, can present a problem. And many highly sensitive people find it distressing to be in cramped places.

Actually, it can be quite difficult to find cafés that suit the highly sensitive person. And this can be annoying for you and your companions – especially if you are all feeling tired and hungry.

.....

'I often get really frustrated with myself because I am so difficult to please. I wish I could let things affect me less, like other people do.'

*Susanne, 23*

.....

Being highly sensitive, we find it hard to take things lightly; our threshold for pain is low and we suffer more than others when our surroundings are difficult for us.

Easily affected by the moods of other people

Many highly sensitive people report that they detect when there is conflict in their surroundings. To witness a row can be exhausting – even just being in a place with tension in the air.

The upside to this receptiveness is that we can be deeply compassionate. We are able to offer empathic listening. Many highly sensitive people find jobs in care work and are valued in this area by the people they look after.

Highly sensitive people who work full-time helping and caring for others often say that they have very little energy left at the end of a working day. Our susceptibility makes us vulnerable to other people's moods and we are affected by them. We are not very good at detaching

from other people's suffering and we find it hard to leave our work behind when we come home.

It is important that you learn to look after yourself if you work with people. There will be a great risk of burning out.

People often ask me if it is possible to learn to not be so susceptible. As a highly sensitive person, you are equipped with very receptive antennae so that you will clearly experience what is happening around you. Sometimes I have wished I was able to tie a knot in those antennae to stop the inputs going into my system, that I could somehow be deaf, blind and numb. But I do not think this is possible. What you can do is become more aware of the way you think about the things you experience and feel.

It is good to look at the way you think if, for instance, you experience tension in a relationship. You may think to yourself, 'This person is probably angry with me; what am I doing wrong?' or you may think, 'This person seems frustrated; maybe he needs to look after himself more.' If you tend to think things similar to the first example, difficult situations may become more painful than they need to be. You can read more about how feelings and thoughts are closely related in Chapter 8.

Under nurturing circumstances your sensitivity to the atmosphere around you can be a resource. Here is what psychologist and expert in the nervous system, Susan Hart, says:

Infants who respond sensitively to their surroundings will be more sensitive to outside stimuli... In children raised in a safe and caring environment it could lead to



involvement, empathy, joy, interest and attunement with the environment. (Hart 2008, p.112)

Sensitive children who grow up in supportive and nurturing surroundings will mainly experience their sensitivity as an asset. And even if you have not received the loving care you needed as a child, you can learn to give it to yourself now in your adult life. You can support yourself and arrange your life in ways that give your sensitivity an opportunity to fulfil all its potential and become a resource to you.

## Conscientious

A study has shown that inhibited (sensitive) children around the age of four were less likely to cheat, break the rules or act selfishly even when they could be sure nobody was watching them. Furthermore, they gave socially competent answers when confronted with moral dilemmas (Kochanska and Thompson 1998).

Many highly sensitive people are very conscientious and tend to feel responsible for the entire world. From a young age, many of us have often sensed unease around us and tried to respond to it.

.....  
'When I sensed my mother's unhappiness, I did everything I could to avoid being a nuisance. I thought a lot about how I could help make her life better. One day I decided to smile at everyone I met. I imagined that other people would then admire my mother because she was so good at raising children.'

*Hanne, 57*

.....

When you experience unease or tension around you, it is likely that you feel an urge to step in and take responsibility for it and immediately make an effort to change things for the better.

You may listen to the frustrations of everyone involved, make positive comments and try to come up with solutions. Afterwards you will probably feel very tired and need to leave the party to go home while others seem to recover quickly from the strife and continue with the festivities.

Whether it is a good idea to step in and take responsibility will depend on the specific situation. The problem is that it is difficult not to be affected by the unease once it has occurred and it unbalances your nervous system.

No one person can take responsibility for the whole world. Also, when you take responsibility for something, you are actually taking responsibility away from somebody else. And in some situations it is better to let others be responsible and learn from their mistakes.

.....

'After I learned to mostly not take responsibility for other people, I found I had more energy to be in the world.'

*Egon, 62*

.....

Highly sensitive people try very hard not to cause other people pain or discomfort. We therefore put a lot of effort into how we relate with others. Other people, who may be more robust, seem to think less about what they are going to say or do. This may come as quite a surprise to a highly sensitive person.

I have often heard from highly sensitive people who have been shocked by hurtful or inconsiderate remarks. It seems that they expect others to think things through and take as much care in interactions as they do themselves. But other people don't do that. And we are better off if we prepare ourselves for this rather than being shocked by it over and over again.

Taking as much care as highly sensitive people tend to do is obviously going to make your responses slow and less spontaneous when you relate to others. You have probably experienced losing arguments because it is only the next day that you realise what would have been the right thing for you to say or do.

It is important for me to emphasise that highly sensitive people are not always conscientious, careful and empathic. When we become over-stimulated or overwhelmed, we can become very inconsiderate and sometimes very difficult to be around.

### A rich inner life

Many highly sensitive people talk about having a rich dream life, productive inner world and a lively imagination. Personally, I am rarely bored when I am on my own and I find that a great advantage. I am not reliant on others to entertain me, which gives me freedom to be myself.

Although many people who live busy lives full of activities seem to run into a crisis if they lose their job or retire, what I hear from highly sensitive people is that they welcome their new-found freedom. They may see it as a chance to spend time expressing themselves

creatively or they may decide to just enjoy life at a slower pace.

It does not take much to inspire us. Some highly sensitive people talk about how they feel scared of inspiration because it can feel like an intense demand from inside of them – a call to get started straight away which can be difficult to ignore.

.....

'I love painting. But sometimes it can almost become a burden; when I see a new image in my mind, I get over-aroused and I experience a pressure from the inside to put the painting on the canvas as quickly as possible.'

*Lise, 30*

.....

Experiencing inspiration this strongly can obviously be very valuable if you know how to manage it. Many highly sensitive people create art within many different genres. For myself, I make an effort to disconnect from my sources of inspiration after 10 p.m. Having new ideas at this time in the evening could easily cause me to lose a night's sleep.

Highly sensitive people have a thinner partition wall between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. This gives easier access to subconscious material which becomes visible in creative expression and in dreaming.

### A natural spiritual curiosity

Many highly sensitive people believe that human beings are only part of a larger whole. Typically, a highly sensitive person will have a deep respect for nature and

feel a connection with animals and plants. Some decide to explore different religious faiths and institutions such as churches, self-development centres or spiritual communities. But most will create their own system of beliefs and take what feels right for them from many different places.

Our relationship with God, the divine, our guardian angel or whatever we prefer to call it is often a very private one. We establish our own connection with the divine and do not need a priest, religious leader or spiritual master to guide us. To converse with something that we experience as greater than ourselves feels natural to most sensitive people, but we might not feel an urge to talk about it with others.

### A different strategy

When you find yourself in a situation that is new to you, there are two ways to try to manage it. You can explore it straight away and try different things out. Or you can wait, observe and give the situation some careful consideration before taking any action.

Some people (and animals) will use the first strategy. They are quick to respond, impulsive, daring and adventurous. Others will choose the second strategy. They are vigilant, careful and will observe for quite some time before doing something.

Each of these strategies is useful in its own way in different situations. If a colony of rabbits arrives at a new meadow where there is only a little grass and very few predators, the rabbits using the first strategy will have the best chance of survival. They will quickly get

to the grass and maybe eat everything before the more careful animals dare to venture into the meadow. If the situation is reversed, meaning a lot of grass and also a lot of predators, strategy number two is likely to prove the most appropriate. The quick and brave rabbits that make it out into the field first might be killed and eaten. The cautious will realise the danger before it is too late.

It is useful for the survival of the species to have two types, each employing their preferred strategy. Sometimes only the quicker individuals will survive because the more careful will starve to death. At other times the cautious ones will alert the rest of the group and everybody has a higher chance of survival. But either way there will be enough left to ensure the survival of the species.

The second strategy is quite typical of highly sensitive people. They observe and reflect before they speak or take action. You might be familiar with situations where you have been thinking several steps ahead before starting a conversation: 'In case he says no, I will do such-and-such. And if he is happy about it, I will...' And before you begin a new project you have probably thought through all possible consequences.

Highly sensitive people are often really good at imagining all kinds of new possibilities, but also good at anticipating what could go wrong. You are probably well equipped to consider all the details of a situation before entering it. This will help you avoid making mistakes. The downside is that it makes you slow to take action or take up new ideas, and you can spend much time worrying about possible risks.

When I am facilitating a training day, I go over every detail in advance. I try to imagine all kinds of accidents and make a plan B for how to deal with them. A more robust person does not need to make such careful preparations. He will not be thrown so easily if things don't go according to plan.

A full day of training takes up all my energy. I don't have any reserves to draw from if unforeseen incidents or problems occur. Therefore it feels sensible for me to think everything through very carefully beforehand.

The ability to predict problems and take them into account is useful to have. Not everybody can do that. And those who can't tend to get into sticky situations more often. The drawback is that you risk becoming chronically worried. Maybe you recognise the feeling of being constantly tense. If that is the case, you might benefit from learning how to switch this ability off. Relaxation techniques and meditation can be helpful.

You have probably been encouraged to try to worry less and take things as they come. But to take time to reflect before you speak or act is wise when you are a highly sensitive person. Often you do not have energy to spare for conflicts or mistakes, because your energy levels may be limited. Unnecessary arguments are well worth avoiding because they can destabilise your nervous system for a long time afterwards. Also, avoiding hunger, thirst and cold may be worthwhile because these can affect you more than other people.

## Slow and judicious

Highly sensitive people will often be able to see all sides to a story. This is one of the reasons you feel a need to spend more time than others thinking things through thoroughly. The positive aspect to this is that when you do say or do something, it will be well considered and original. Many authors, artists and free thinkers are highly sensitive.

.....

'I struggle to understand how some people can make decisions in the blink of an eye. When we have meetings at work, I can find it hard to figure out what I think and feel and which course of action I prefer. It is best if I can sleep on it and mull things over on my own for a while.

In the beginning I felt awful about slowing decision-making down at work. But everybody has got used to my way of doing things. When I get back to my colleagues, I find that they have a lot of respect for my views and ideas as they are thoroughly thought through and well articulated.'

*Jens, 55*

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Being highly sensitive is the opposite of being impulsive. However, some highly sensitive people, when they become over-stimulated and are not able to withdraw, may reach a point of desperation that can make them explode with rage. They may do something impulsive to help them retreat from a situation in which they feel unable to cope. An impulsive act could be quitting your job, ending a friendship, going on a binge, eating or drinking too much, or calling up your elderly parents to vent your feelings.



In such circumstances a highly sensitive person can be misinterpreted as someone with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). The difference would be that the highly sensitive person will very quickly regret his or her actions, especially if they have caused other people pain or upset. And whereas people diagnosed with BPD are more prone to angry and defensive reactions, the highly sensitive person is more predisposed to experiencing feelings of shame and guilt. As a highly sensitive person, you really want to avoid doing anything wrong. If you do hurt people or animals in any way, you will probably feel a lot of grief and blame yourself for a long time.

### Sensation-seeking sensitive people

Most highly sensitive people prefer the cautious strategy. They prioritise safety over excitement and they enjoy familiarity. But some highly sensitive people are adventurous and enjoy exploring new things. If you experience yourself as someone who gets bored easily and at the same time also gets over-stimulated, you might be a sensation-seeking sensitive person. Here the big challenge will be to find a way to balance things.

As a sensation-seeking sensitive person, you get bored by repetition and become restless if you have too much routine in your life. You will be on the lookout for interesting experiences. You may be eager to travel, especially to places where you have not already been.

It may look as though sensation-seeking sensitive people end up creating a lot of problems for themselves. Even though they are easily stimulated and overwhelmed, they continue to seek out new experiences and get

exhausted. Afterwards many sensation-seeking sensitive people beat themselves up about their behaviours. But this is not necessary: their desire for new experiences is not their fault and it is something very difficult to balance. It is a bit like trying to drive a car with one foot on the accelerator and the other foot on the brake.

### Introvert or extrovert

Around 70 per cent of highly sensitive people are introverts but about 30 per cent are extroverts. When I tell a client that I think he or she may be an introverted person, they will often argue against this: 'No, I can't be because I am not someone who just sits around and prefers to be on their own.'

The word 'introvert' has almost become insulting; people associate it with someone who is unapproachable and does not care about others, but prefers to sit alone navel-gazing or lost in cyberspace.

According to C.G. Jung (1976), an introverted person is someone who is more interested in the inner life than in the material world. This does not mean that they are exclusively interested in their own inner world; they may also be interested in the inner life of others.

If you are an introvert, you will probably get bored quickly if people are talking about superficial and material things. You may find small talk exhausting but are happy to take a conversation to a deeper level, preferably one to one or in a smaller group of people where there are shared interests. You are not keen on big groups but will choose smaller gatherings that feel less demanding.

If you are an extroverted highly sensitive person, you will not spend all your time socialising. You will need time to withdraw and process inputs just like the introverted highly sensitive person.

Being highly sensitive is easily confused with introversion because the two traits do have some things in common. A rich inner life and a tendency to reflect deeply are things that C.G. Jung described as part of being introverted (Jung 1976). Neither introverts nor sensitive people have a need for a lot of external stimuli. They have a rich inner life and are nourished by their own thought processes and fantasies. They spend much energy reflecting on and digesting inputs and experiences.

It is apparent that some highly sensitive people can encompass the depth of introversion but also be extroverted and feel comfortable in big groups. They are often people who have been raised as part of a big family or been used to communal living at school or in alternative lifestyles; having many people around feels safe and familiar to them. Some highly sensitive people may become socially extroverted as a result of pressure from their surroundings. If you grew up in a family where you were only accepted when you were perky and outgoing, you would have found it necessary to adopt this behaviour.

It is easy to understand why 70 per cent of highly sensitive people are introverts; small groups are more accommodating to deep reflection and you are not so easily overwhelmed in smaller contexts.

To be highly sensitive and extroverted can be particularly challenging. It can be painfully frustrating for

the sensitive extrovert when they are in the mood for much more socialising than their nervous system can handle. This is true for the sensitive introvert as well, though to a lesser degree.

### Pros and cons of typology

It is unlikely that anybody will be able to find a category into which they fit 100 per cent. It would take as many categories as there are human beings. If you try to fit yourself into a specific category, you may end up excluding parts of your personality from your consciousness. When you identify with one specific type, you may confine yourself to a certain role and forget that you are also capable of growth and change.

To describe people in terms of different types can help us realise how different human beings actually are. If we are not aware of this, it is easy to convince ourselves that everybody is like us. But then, when they do something in a different way to us, we think that something is wrong. Before I became aware of different types, I often thought to myself that people who have a lot of energy and lead busy lives must be afraid of getting in touch with themselves. I thought they must be running away from something. Now I realise that they just function in ways that are very different to my ways of functioning.

Extroverts who are not aware of differences in personality and traits may believe that introverts are reserved and self-absorbed, lacking interest in – and not having time for – others. If an introverted person prefers to sit alone one evening instead of spending it with an

extroverted partner, that partner may start thinking that something is wrong because he is unable to understand how being on your own for a long time can be a pleasant thing to do. Being more aware of different types can be useful for many couples to help them understand each other.

## Chapter 2

# HIGH STANDARDS AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM

### Personal maxims

We are not always aware of the rules we set for ourselves. These rules might have been set by our parents. Or we may have created them ourselves at certain points in our lives. Maxims are a bit like eating with a spoon. At first when you are learning how to use a spoon, you have to think about it, practise holding it, turning it the right way round to make sure the food reaches your mouth. But when you've got it, it becomes more natural and in the end you don't have to think about it at all.

Maybe you automatically live your life according to certain rules you once learned, without being conscious of them. The problem with this is that those rules may be long out of date and no longer appropriate for you.

For highly sensitive people, it can be very challenging to be sociable for long periods of time. If as well as being sociable you feel you also have to live up to old, rigid maxims, you will very quickly exhaust yourself. It is likely that you are much stricter with yourself than you are with others. Below are some examples of problematic personal maxims that I have encountered when speaking to highly sensitive people.

- ~ 'In all situations I must do my best – and preferably a bit more.'
- ~ 'I must make sure that other people do not see my weaknesses.'
- ~ 'I am not allowed to be selfish.'
- ~ 'At all times I must pay careful attention to others and make sure they are all right.'
- ~ 'It is rude to look after your own needs when other people are present.'
- ~ 'I am not allowed to make mistakes.'

### High standards

Typically, highly sensitive people will have set themselves very high standards by which to judge their own behaviour. You can have high standards in different areas such as:

- ~ being helpful
- ~ being hospitable
- ~ being considerate
- ~ paying attention
- ~ being thoughtful
- ~ being responsible and reliable
- ~ taking an interest in others.

Maybe you have certain students that demand that you must perform 100 per cent in all the areas above to be acceptable to yourself. If this is the case, you might find it really difficult to relax and set boundaries, because every time you set a boundary you will find yourself in conflict with your maxims and your self-image.

### Self-esteem or self-confidence

You can differentiate between self-esteem and self-confidence in the following ways:

- ~ Self-confidence is confidence in your own abilities and actions.
- ~ Self-esteem is having a sense of your own core and knowing deeply your own worthiness.

You seldom see a person who has a lot of self-esteem and very little self-confidence. People who have a healthy sense of themselves will find challenges that suit them, which will lead to success.

A more common combination would be to have a lot of self-confidence and low self-esteem. People with low self-esteem will often try to compensate by working harder than others and excelling in a specific area. Someone who is an excellent colleague at work may be very aware of their own abilities and perform with confidence in their area of expertise. But that person can, at the same time, be very insecure and question whether he or she is good enough to be truly liked by others.



## Why highly sensitive people often lack faith in their own worth

To have high standards is often linked to low self-esteem. High standards may have occurred as a way to compensate for this low self-esteem. The more you think you are not worth loving, the more you try to find compensating strategies.

There may be many different factors contributing to low self-esteem in highly sensitive people:

- ~ We have been raised in a culture where we do not fit in to the ideal of how people should behave. As children, some highly sensitive people may have been accused of having shortcomings.

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'My mother told me I was much too sensitive.'

*Inger, 50*

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- ~ Since birth some of us may have been a bit of a handful for our parents and they may have complained about us. This will not have passed us by unnoticed. Things that might not have affected a more resilient child can linger in the mind of a highly sensitive child as an experience of having caused somebody else to feel exhausted or distressed.
- ~ We are particularly good at looking to ourselves for the root of any problem. One of our preferred strategies is to try to predict what can go wrong, but in doing so we often try to examine our own behaviour for faults. We would much rather blame

ourselves than have the unpleasant experience of being criticised unexpectedly by others.

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'If somebody criticises me, I think about it for a long time. Even when the criticism is unjust I keep asking myself whether it might be true and whether I just can't handle hearing it.'

*Janne, 31*

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~ We often feel responsible for other people's burdens. We may have been soaking things up since we were children. Here is one example:

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'I always felt that it was my fault that my mother wasn't happy. I was ashamed that I couldn't make her depressive states go away and I thought that I wasn't good enough.'

*Ida, 52*

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How low self-esteem and high standards maintain each other

Maybe you have had more or less conscious thoughts such as:

~ 'I am difficult to be around, but if I do my best to please others, they might not abandon me.'  
Implicitly: *'If I do not do my best, I will be alone.'*

Or:

~ ‘Essentially, I am someone that no one will be able to love, but if I make an effort, I might be accepted in the community.’ Implicitly: *‘If I do not make an effort, everybody will abandon me.’*

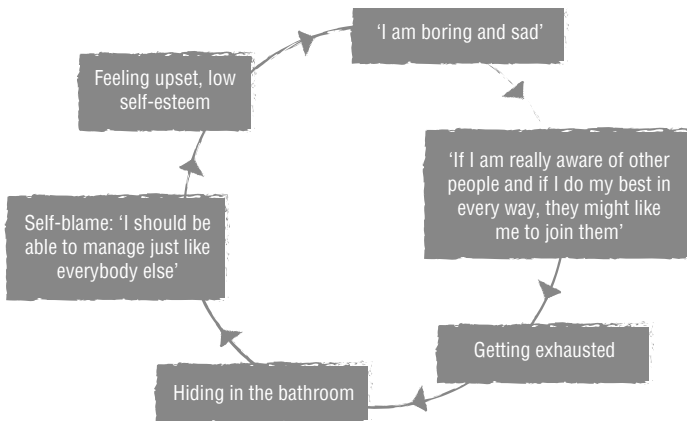
If you think of yourself as unlovable but do not create compensating strategies, you will eventually meet people who like you just as you are. Reality will prove your assumptions wrong. However, low self-esteem and high standards can maintain and reinforce each other. If you keep behaving according to your high standards, creating compensating strategies, and you find that people like you, you never really know if it is because they like you for yourself or whether it’s just your helpfulness they appreciate.

In this way the assumption that you are unlovable can be kept alive. Even when you experience over and over that people love you, you may be telling yourself that this love only happens because of your high standards and not because of who you are. As a client responded when I asked her if she thought I found her likeable, ‘Yes, but I am paying you for it.’ Clients often tell me, ‘It is such a good feeling that I have to pay you to be here because I don’t have to worry about pleasing you or being interesting.’

Many people pay to be included in a community. To be extraordinarily attentive and helpful can be a form of payment. If you are someone who pays in one way or another to be part of a community, you can never really be sure whether it is you or your services that people

like. In this way low self-esteem can thrive in spite of positive experiences.

High standards can also have a negative effect on your sense of self if you keep disappointing yourself. You become exhausted with the high demands you make of yourself. And if you are also prone to self-judgement and self-blaming, you can easily end up in a vicious circle.



*The vicious circle*

If you have very high standards, it is vital to find a way to lower them. Otherwise you will end up overburdening yourself. The simple act of giving your personal maxims attention can initiate a process of change. Then you just need to keep practising. If you are willing to try to act against your maxims, you will find that the catastrophes you were expecting do not happen. And every time you experience that feeling of being all right – even without living up to your own high standards – the less perfectionist and more relaxed part of you will be strengthened.

To act against your personal maxims by lowering your standards will bring good experiences – in spite of what your anxieties will tell you – and you will find that people like you even when you don't perform perfectly according to your own high standards. Some people might even tell you that you have become more easygoing, easier to relate to and more pleasant to spend time with.

The experience of it being okay just to be yourself without constantly providing for others will have a positive effect on your sense of self. To lower your standards will also give you more energy to be with others. You are entering a more constructive circle.

When lowering your standards proves difficult

If you have spent most of your life doing things at a high cost to yourself, it will be very anxiety-provoking to stop this way of engaging. You can practise in small ways. If you are used to always saying yes when somebody asks for your help, you can try saying no once in a while. You can also try limiting the help you agree to offer: 'Yes, I am happy to look after your kids this evening, but only till 9 p.m. as I have something else I want to do too.'

If you fear being excluded or abandoned as a result of lowering your standards, this might not be completely unrealistic. Some of your friends may have chosen you because it is very convenient for them to have someone around who is as considerate, accommodating and helpful as you are. They might lose interest if you don't provide the services they have become used to.

It is a good idea to consider carefully if you are willing to risk losing some of your friendships. It might also be good to question whether it is worth your while to fight to keep people in your life who may only be interested in you because you are easy to be around. Or will it be worthwhile to take a risk and find out if there is more to your friendships? It is not very likely that all of your friends will leave you. But some might. This will free you up and give you time to have a look around for true friends who will appreciate you for who you are and not for the things you do for them.

### The fear of abandonment

For a highly sensitive child with a delicate nervous system, the experience of being abandoned or left in the care of strangers is much more catastrophic than it would be for a more robust child. This could increase the levels of anxiety in the child.

Sometimes you may not have fully realised that you are an adult now. You may still be afraid of being abandoned just like when you were young, as if you are still small and powerless and unable to survive on your own.

All small children need a certain amount of loving care. Otherwise they will die. But adults are actually capable of surviving for decades alone on deserted islands. It might reduce your anxiety to be reminded that your childhood is in the past, you survived and life is not as dangerous for you any more. Still your fears may be so deeply rooted in your body that only new experiences

can penetrate your system and shift things. When words don't make a difference, we need personal experiences.

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'I had decided to stop being such a pleaser in my workplace. One small step towards this was to tell my office colleague that I found it highly disruptive when she was having loud phone conversations. I had been lying awake all night; many different scenarios had been played out in my mind. I had imagined how she would get up angrily and go straight to our manager and demand a different office colleague.

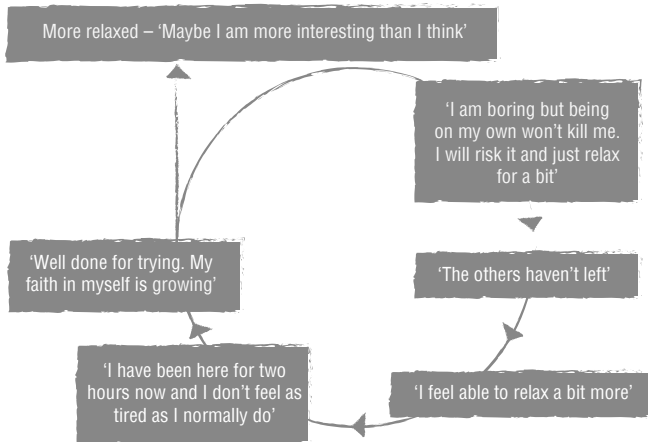
All morning I sat and waited for an opportunity to talk to my colleague, but every time there was a pause my courage failed me.

I went for a walk during the lunch break and when I came back I drew a deep breath and told her what I had planned to say. My heart was beating hard and I struggled to breathe. Everything went very quiet and I was too anxious to look up. The seconds were drawn out. Then she said: "I wish you had told me this sooner. But I am glad you have said something now." We figured things out together and found a solution. It ended up being a positive experience. Afterwards I realised that I liked her a lot better and I think she felt the same way about me. We started sharing more thoughts than we had earlier.

This experience really encouraged me. I went back home and told my husband how much it affects me when he turns on the light when he gets up in the night.'

*Line, 43*

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*The constructive circle*

Working on those of your personal maxims that hinder and limit you will help you find more space to be yourself. You will have more options and you will no longer let yourself be limited by rigid rules.

### Seize the opportunity

Many people will wait their whole life to gain enough confidence in themselves to risk abandonment, often paying a high personal price. A quicker way could be to risk it before you have gained the confidence. Then the confidence will come afterwards. But it can feel like taking a leap into the void.

If you constantly do your utmost to be worth loving, your assignment is to stop. If you always put a lot of effort into hiding parts of you that you think other people will dislike, your assignment is the same.



Deep inside, you have probably been dreaming about being loved just as you are, without having to prove you deserve it. The first condition for this dream to come true is that you pluck up the courage to show people who you are. You will have to give up this façade even though you are terrified that everybody will run away screaming. It is true that you will make yourself vulnerable and expose yourself to the things you fear. You will be taking a chance. You will have to wait to see whether people will run away or not. Some people might just come closer.

When you stop making an effort to be what you think other people expect you to be and instead start showing more of yourself, you are on your way to receiving new, life-affirming experiences. You will discover that you are not excluded from groups and communities, and that people continue to care about you even when you are showing your less than perfect side. This will be like an antidote to your fears and will increase your courage to be just as you are. At the same time you will probably find you have more energy when you are around others and you will be able to be sociable for longer periods.

## Chapter 3

# HOW TO ORGANISE YOUR LIFE ACCORDING TO YOUR TYPE

### Creating space

To get the most enjoyment out of being highly sensitive, you need to realise the importance of creating space for your sensitivity. Having to say no to something you would really like to do is a painful loss. And if you do not create enough space in your life to relish the benefits of being sensitive, those losses will become unbearable.

Depending on your individual preferences, some of the things listed below could be what you need to create more space for:

- ~ spending time enjoying nature
- ~ being creative
- ~ taking time to sit and philosophise
- ~ doing something beneficial for your body – running, dancing, having a massage, swimming, having a bath or a footbath

- ~ doing something pleasant for your senses – buying yourself some beautiful and aromatic flowers, eating something tasty and delicious, listening to music you like, having things around you that you enjoy looking at
- ~ spending time with animals
- ~ writing a book, diary or poetry
- ~ appreciating – or making – art
- ~ nourishing relationships that feel meaningful and have depth.

There is a list at the end of the book where you can find more inspiration for pursuits that can enrich you as well as ideas for wellbeing for highly sensitive people.

In order to make space for things that are good for you, there are things you will have to say no to.

### Setting boundaries

It is important to become good at saying no. If you struggle to set boundaries, you need to learn how to do this. Otherwise you end up walking around feeling over-stimulated more or less all the time. When highly sensitive people struggle to set boundaries, it is often because our tolerance thresholds are lower than other people's. What will be quite easy for a more resilient person to handle can become problematic for us.

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'Every two months I meet up with a peer supervision partner who lives 200 kilometres away. We always meet at my place. If I had to drive all that way, I would be too exhausted on my arrival. She, on the other hand, finds it relaxing to drive and is happy to make the journey. We always meet for three hours. I need a break halfway through where we spend time on our own. But I don't always remember to say this. She doesn't need the break, even when she has been up early in the morning to drive to our meeting. And then I tell myself that I shouldn't need it either. The only problem is that if I don't make sure that we have a break, I end up not being able to pay attention in the last half-hour because I have become too over-stimulated.'

*Lise, 45*

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You may often find yourself caught in a dilemma: on the one hand you do not want to bother other people, but on the other hand you do need to consider your sensitivity; otherwise you may end up becoming even more bothersome because you get over-stimulated or even ill.

It can be a good idea to communicate your dilemma to others:

- ~ 'I do not mean to be unkind but it would be good if you could leave soon. I am getting so tired that I will struggle to pay proper attention to our conversation.'
- ~ 'I wish I could stay but I also realise I am getting exhausted, and if I don't go home and rest, I will not be able to do my chores tomorrow.'

~ 'I really don't want to end our exciting conversation but I think we will both get more out of it if we continue when I am feeling less tired.'

Maybe you are familiar with dilemmas where you spend a lot of energy thinking about the best solution that will please everybody. You end up too exhausted to be considerate and have to storm out of the room without explanation or sneak out of the back, hoping no one will notice.

When you articulate your dilemma, it may well sort itself out and other people will feel they have been part of the decision-making.

### When guests linger

In our culture we are raised to be hospitable and continue to offer refreshments until our guests decide to leave. And since most people enjoy social events for much longer than highly sensitive people do, we can end up feeling trapped. Some highly sensitive people simply decide never to invite people round, fearing that guests may linger too long and they themselves will end up overly exhausted.

After some years of practice I have got used to making clear arrangements about how long a visit is expected to last. People who know me well know that I get easily over-stimulated and it is natural for us to spend a bit of time in separate rooms if we are going to be together for longer periods of time. Even so, I still sometimes have to pull myself together to communicate my needs. And sometimes – especially if I am tired – I can become

avoidant and convince myself and others that I don't need a break. Later I will pay the price for this lack of self-care: either I will become less present near the end of the visit or I will be much more exhausted the next day than I would otherwise.

If you can find the courage to tell people that you easily tire, but that you love being with them for shorter periods of time and with breaks instead of for hours on end, you are well on your way.

### When you have to say no to something you like

This is where it can get particularly hard to be a delicate soul. You may have been beating yourself up for years about how you are unable to do things other people do. Maybe you have been so angry with yourself that you pushed yourself to stay at events that were putting your nervous system out of balance. You just did not want to accept your limitations and kept thinking you would find a way to do things like everybody else.

.....  
'Sometimes I agree to do things which I already know are going to be too much for me. I just can't tolerate the fact that I can't do what other people do. And I feel really guilty if I have to cancel something, so I often turn up completely grey in the face from exhaustion and unable to make any real connections with others because I am so busy pretending everything is okay. Afterwards I feel tired and unhappy for days.'

*Helle, 31*

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When you are angry – either with yourself or with others – you are still caught in a fight for something. The day you accept that there is only so much you can do, this anger turns into grief – grief for all the things you would love to do but which you have to let go of.

Some sensitive people explain how they can feel very alone at times.

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'I am saying no to more and more things and excluding myself from different contexts because I know it is all too much for me. I have felt a lot better since I started doing this. But then I can also feel very alone. For example, when I am at work and I pass an office where some of my colleagues are chatting and laughing, I feel a twinge of loss. I would love to be able to take part in it.'

*Martin, 40*

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After becoming more aware of your sensitivity, you can experience a period of exhaustion and grief. It may take some time to let go of dreams of one day being as resilient as other people.

Often when one door closes, another door or many more doors will open. When you let go of trying to be as robust and perky as the majority of people are, you can start to allow yourself to be delicate and arrange your life to suit your needs. You will begin to realise that you can be happy without having to cope continuously with constant pressure, fast-paced lifestyles and inhospitable surroundings. When highly sensitive people find themselves in nourishing contexts, they flourish.

## Good advice and ideas for dealing with being overwhelmed

Stimulation can be internal as well as external. You can become over-stimulated by your own thoughts and dreams. But I will begin with saying a bit about external stimulation. Eighty per cent of all inputs are received through the eyes. Much stimulation can be avoided simply by closing your eyes. Schedule specific times during the day where you can close your eyes and take a break from visual stimulation. For instance, you can practise closing your eyes when you are travelling on a bus or a train, or when you are in front of a TV but unable to turn it off because other people are watching it. If you do not like closing your eyes, you can find something neutral to look at, something that doesn't move. Another way to limit the amount of input received through your eyes is to wear a hat or sunglasses or use a big umbrella.

Auditory stimulation from the outside can be limited by using earplugs or listening to music in headphones. I think the iPod is a marvellous invention. I always bring mine with me and use it to shut out any sounds that would otherwise annoy me. If somebody starts a phone conversation near me, I can just shut it out by listening to music.

When I give talks, I have a piece of music that I always listen to for five minutes just before I begin. I surrender completely to the music and find rest in it. I use it to connect with myself deep inside. Once when I had forgotten my headphones, I realised the difference that listening to the music makes to me. During the talk and afterwards I felt unable to be as present as I



would normally. Snippets of conversation had entered my consciousness in the five minutes before the talk and were interrupting my attention, and I was not able to connect deeply with myself.

We are not always aware how much sounds affect us. Sometimes we only realise afterwards. For instance, when I am at a busy café, I can actually feel okay, be able to shut out the noise and give my full attention to the person I am with. But as soon as I step out into fresh air I can feel as if something inside has been really tense and only now able to relax, and I will be very tired afterwards.

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'I haven't given it much thought before, but since I started wearing sunglasses and using headphones I can spend hours walking around town and not be as tired afterwards as I used to be.'

*Hans, 33*

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## Some advice about sleep

When you are feeling over-stimulated, which can be very uncomfortable, it is quite tempting to just hide in bed and escape into sleep. You can end up wasting precious life in that way. Sleep is good if you have a sleep debt. But it doesn't help with over-stimulation. On the contrary, it can actually stimulate you even more – if you are having intense dreams, for example.

Many highly sensitive people talk about how their sleep is disturbed if they go to bed feeling over-stimulated. It is important to find some inner peace before falling asleep.

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'Almost every evening before I lie down, I will sit for a while to write and draw. This helps me to feel more settled about my day and myself. When I do this it gives me better sleep.'

*Rita, 70*

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Staying upright will support your inner processes of sorting inputs and impressions, whereas lying down or being half asleep does not. To sit quietly without doing much is beneficial if you are feeling over-stimulated or overwhelmed.

I call this time, which you spend on regrouping with yourself, vegetative time. Typically, it will be time you want to get through quickly. It is not necessarily very pleasant and it may only be the next day when you feel its positive effects on your entire system.

During this vegetative time you do not have to be completely passive. The important thing is to let your attention have a rest. Try not to take in anything more, but let your energy turn inwards so it can be spent on sorting the input you've already received and supporting you to get settled in yourself. This could happen while you do some of your daily chores such as doing the dishes or when you exercise. You may feel as if you are not getting much done during this time. But this is not true because there will be a lot happening on inner, deeper levels. And afterwards you will feel able to be present with renewed energy.

Many highly sensitive or delicate people will also have a need for vegetative time when they have a demanding day ahead of them. When I am to lead a training day,

I need to have a quiet evening the day before. It is necessary for me to clear my head so that it will not be full of unprocessed inputs from the previous day.

Even though sleep can feel like wasting life away, a power nap can be refreshing. But if you sleep for more than half an hour, you will enter a deeper sleep, which is not advisable during the day. You will feel fuzzy and disoriented when you wake up and may struggle to become properly clear-headed again. So remember to set the alarm clock if you do nap during the day.

### The beneficial effects of water, exercise and physical contact

Many highly sensitive people feel drawn to water. And it is beneficial for us whether we drink it, stroll along beside it, bathe or swim in it. I make myself a footbath nearly every day. My feet love it. Afterwards I massage them with oil. It is relaxing and aids wellbeing and better sleep, especially if it is done just before bedtime.

The better your contact with your body is, the less anxiety and over-stimulation you will experience. If you are feeling nervous, you can massage your feet. You can gain good contact with your body in many ways. Some people run or dance; other people practise relaxation techniques or visualisations. Exercises where you consciously coordinate your breath with your movements are particularly beneficial.

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'When I feel too over-stimulated to socialise, I have started spending my time exercising instead. Sometimes I just do stuff on the floor in my living

room. Apart from helping me be more in tune with my body, it also makes me feel like I am not just wasting my time – and my upper arms are looking great.’

*Jens, 42*



## Expressing yourself prevents over-stimulation

Where receiving impressions can stimulate you, expressing yourself can have the opposite effect. If you listen and hold too many things in without making yourself heard, you are likely to become exhausted much more quickly. It is good to express yourself. And it is important to be discerning about who you spend time with and to make sure you do not spend more time listening to others than you do expressing yourself. Many delicate souls benefit from expressing themselves in a diary or through music or art.

### When you are stimulated from within

If you are prone to negative thought patterns, you are likely to stimulate and overwhelm yourself with dark thoughts and self-recrimination. If this is the case, you could benefit from using certain cognitive techniques to gain more control over your thoughts. You can read more about cognitive techniques in Chapter 8.

All in all, it can be useful to practise keeping an eye on what preoccupies your thoughts. If I notice that I am busy thinking in ways that burden me without being constructive, I will actively stop the chain of thought.

My imagination is very lively and I can easily have a whole film rolling internally.

For instance, if I hear an unfamiliar sound from the basement, I will instantly start to imagine going down there and meeting a burglar. And this can set off a whole series of images depicting how I handle the situation. Suddenly, I will notice what is happening in my mind and realise that my body is tense. This is especially unfortunate if I was taking time out to rest. When I become aware of this internal activity, which is stimulating without being useful, I stop the fantasies by thanking my consciousness for creating those images and for trying to save me from a possible burglary. Sometimes I have to imagine a quick ending before I can turn my thoughts to something more relevant and constructive.

### Telling other people about your sensitivity

Whom should I tell that I am highly sensitive? It is a question I get asked often when I give talks.

Generally, I believe it is beneficial to tell people who you are close to what it means to be highly sensitive. Some people have had good experiences of telling people in the workplace. They have found that their manager became more understanding and thoughtful. But others experience not being taken seriously, and their sensitivity is perceived as something pathological and a way of avoiding doing their share of the workload.

I very seldom use the term 'highly sensitive' to describe myself. I tell people what I need, what I am good

at and what doesn't work for me. It is not important that people know that my particular talents and limitations are part of being highly sensitive. What is important is that *I* know it – and that I know that other people have similar experiences to me. Knowing this gives me the courage to be myself – even among people who may perceive my way of functioning as strange.

## Chapter 4

# HOW TO BENEFIT FROM YOUR ABILITY TO RELATE TO OTHERS AND BE PRESENT

Highly sensitive people prefer  
high-quality interactions

Highly sensitive people and other delicate souls can easily find themselves caught in a conversation that actually feels draining and over-stimulating. You will probably try to be kind, attentive and receptive. And your natural attitude is probably to try to empathise with the other person's situation. This ability, which is very common in highly sensitive people, will make it seem as if people who need to offload are magically drawn to you. And after a while your social energy reserves for the day will be spent, which is a shame. It is important to be discerning – both in regard to how much time you spend listening to others and with what kind of people or in which conversations you engage. Your energy is likely to be limited, and therefore it would be good to spend it on people or interactions that either feel meaningful or give you something in return.

Highly sensitive people are skilled at connecting with others in a deep and intense way. We sense more than other people do. And when two sensitive people are together, the connection between them can become intimate and deep beyond what other people are able to hear or see. This kind of contact does not drain us; on the contrary, it can energise us – even for introverts who prefer to recharge on their own.

In the following sections I will go through different strategies that can help you to become better at leading conversations and setting boundaries with people who drain you.

### Take breaks

Sometimes I feel as if I am drowning in the stream of words gushing from the other person. And if I forget to ask for breaks, I end up being unable to take in what they are saying. I will struggle to stay afloat and just get through it.

Maybe you have experienced feeling so overwhelmed that you can't even try to find a way out. You are stuck. And in order to find a solution, you need a break, to have some time to tune in to yourself and figure out what will be the best thing for you to say or do.

It can be useful to think through certain strategies beforehand. This means you don't need to spend as much energy coming up with them on the spot. Here are some suggestions:

- ~ Tell the other person, 'Just a moment', kindly but authoritatively. You can try to raise your hand and



lower your eyes. This way your body language will be signalling that you are turning your focus inwards. Take all the time you need. If the other person starts talking again, you can just raise your hand and once again say, 'Just hang on a moment.' You can add something like 'I need some time to think about what you have told me' or 'It's taking me a little while to gather my thoughts, but I will let you know as soon as I feel able to listen to you again.'

- ~ Say, 'Sorry but I can feel my attention slipping.'
- ~ If you start feeling uncomfortable, you can say, 'I am sensing something happening between us, which feels uncomfortable and I am hoping you can help me figure out what it might be.' (This is a bit more advanced and probably only works when you are speaking with someone you know well and who also likes to explore the field of interactions between you.)
- ~ Set the alarm clock on your phone in advance to go off at a time when you expect yourself to be tired. When it rings, you can tell the other person that you will have to leave soon.

Make sure you are part of a dialogue  
rather than a monologue

When you have given voice to your thoughts and feelings, you may need some feedback in order to know

how the other person received what has just been said. This is especially important if you have a tendency to spend a lot of time thinking about what others might be thinking. It is also essential as it accommodates exchange. Otherwise, you might as well just be writing your thoughts in your diary. If you express yourself without getting anything back, it can create an empty sensation and make you feel as if you are spending your energy without knowing whether it has been worthwhile.

It works the other way around as well; when you have been listening to someone, it is essential that you also give something back. This is particularly important for sensitive people who often find themselves in the role of the listener. Expressing yourself prevents becoming overstimulated. When you have been listening to someone, you might need a little pause and also an opportunity to give voice to your thoughts and explain how what you have heard has affected you. If you just keep listening and listening without expressing anything, you may start to feel backlogged.

### Figure out what kind of responses you want to give or receive

If the things you express are very personal, your need for a response becomes more urgent. Imagine you have just told someone that you are feeling tired and sad at the moment. Maybe you would like to know how the other person sees you. It would be helpful if he or she said something like 'You do look tired' or 'You are very

open about yourself.' But if the other person does not say anything, you can ask, 'How do I come across to you?' Or if the situation is reversed and you are listening to somebody telling you how they are feeling, you can ask, 'Would you like to know how you come across to me?'

On some of my courses I ask the participants to go back home and ask three people, 'What is your impression of me?' Typically, they will come back and tell stories about what an amazing experience it has been. They are often quite affected by it. And many of them have been energised by it and feel happier about themselves. One participant said that it had been the best experience he had had in a very long time. Some people get worried about things they've been told and decide to work more with it. The more our own ideas about how others perceive us are in line with reality, the easier it becomes to navigate in the world. And many of us have been deprived of feedback from others, maybe because we worry that others will find us too self-absorbed if we ask. It could make it easier if you say, 'My teacher has told me to ask three people, so what do you think?'

Another kind of response that you might want is empathy. Maybe you would like to know whether the other person can relate to your situation. It can be a relief when somebody else is able to describe what is going on inside you. It feels good, for instance, when somebody says, 'It must be really difficult to feel that way,' or 'If I was feeling like that, I would be really impatient and wanting to get better quickly.' And you might reply, 'Yes,

that's exactly how I feel,' and give a sigh of relief – the sense of recognition is comforting. Or you might say, 'That is not exactly how I feel – it is more like...' But still it is nice that someone is trying to empathise with you, even when they don't get it exactly right. If the other person is not initiating an exchange, you could ask them, 'What do you think it is like to be me at the moment?' If you want to empathise with somebody, you can say, 'It must be very...to be you.'

The third kind of response you might be hoping for is to know what kind of thoughts or feelings the other person is having because of what you have said – whether he or she is feeling happy or upset on your behalf. If the response doesn't come naturally, you can ask something like 'Did the things I told you make you think of something specific?' or 'How did what I just told you affect you?'

A fourth response that you might want could be to be asked to elaborate. Then it is nice if the other person asks, 'Can you tell me more about this?' But if that doesn't happen, you can say, 'It would be really helpful for me if you ask me questions about the things I am talking about.' If the situation is reversed, you can ask, 'Would you like me to ask you questions or would you rather not have any interruptions while you talk?'

A fifth need you might have, which may seem small but is actually very important, is to know that you've been heard. Sometimes you might wonder whether the other person listened to what you said or how they might have perceived it. To clarify this, you can make a request such as 'Can you reflect back to me what you just

heard me say?’ Or if you are the one listening, you can say, ‘Would it be helpful if I just told you what I heard you say and we can check out whether I understood you correctly?’

One of the ingredients in most kinds of therapy for couples is to get both partners to practise repeating back what they have heard the other person say. It might not sound like much but it can have a big impact. To hear the other person reflect back the things that are most important to you can break a cycle of endless repetitions. Now you know that the other person has heard you. When I have clients in therapy, I often repeat back to them what they tell me several times. It is also a way to slow down conversations. And it is helpful when you are talking about very difficult things and there is a need for diligence.

When you know the type of question you want to ask, you can practise noticing what kind of response you would like in different situations. And then practise asking for it. You can also practise asking for space to give people feedback. This way you can actively prevent getting stuck listening to a lecture or a monologue, which can be intensely strenuous for a delicate soul in the long run. Instead, you can co-create something that looks more like a dialogue, and you may be able to receive as much as you give.

If you are finding this difficult to do, you are not the only one. It takes a lot of practice to master this and it will not be possible to use it in all relationships.

## RESPONSES YOU WANT TO GIVE AND RECEIVE

## To know how others see you

- ~ 'How do you see me?'
- ~ 'Would you like me to feed back my impression of you?'

## Empathy

- ~ 'What do you think it is like to be me?'
- ~ 'It must be really...to be you.'

## Sharing thoughts and feelings

- ~ 'How does it affect you to hear what I just said?'
- ~ 'Would you like to hear my thoughts and feelings about this?'

## To be encouraged to elaborate

- ~ 'It would be really helpful for me if you can ask me questions about the things I tell you.'
- ~ 'Would you like me to ask you questions about what you just told me or would you rather I didn't interrupt you?'

## To know you have been heard

- ~ 'If you can reflect back to me what you heard me say, that would be really good.'
- ~ 'Would you like me to tell you what I just heard you say and we can make sure I understood it correctly?'

## How to deepen a conversation – and lighten it again

As a highly sensitive person, you need to be able to deepen a conversation. If a conversation is very superficial, you will struggle to stay present for more than just a short time. You might begin to spend your energy on appearing interested because you think that is appropriate.

It is also good to know how to bring a conversation back to the surface so you can end it on a lighter note and move on to other things you might need to do. Or maybe you need to avoid going into a deeper conversation because you are already feeling tired and have reached the limit of what you can take on board.

### To deepen the conversation

The simplest way to deepen the conversation is to keep quiet and just listen. Silence creates room for depth. In therapy sessions with clients I often find that if we just sit quietly together for a while, what is said next will come from a deeper place. But some people feel very uncomfortable with silence and may begin to speak a lot faster if there is a pause in the conversation. In such cases silence does not bring depth. It might actually make things even more disjointed and superficial.

You can also just ask someone, ‘Can you tell me more about this?’ If the other person still continues to stay on the surface, you can ask questions about the actual events they are referring to. When things become more concrete, it can bring up the feelings involved. For example, if I say, ‘Everybody seems so brusque,’ and the

other person replies, 'Can you tell me what happened to make you think that?' then I will have to become more concrete. I might say, 'I think it was yesterday, when I called up my friend and she didn't seem at all interested in me or what I was up to.' This will help me get in touch with the feelings I had when I was met with this lack of interest. As long as we keep generalising, we can keep our emotions at bay. But when we have to become specific, this is no longer possible.

So when you want to deepen a conversation, you need to move from generalising statements into more specific and personal experiences. And when you want to make a conversation more superficial again, you can move back to the general.

### Back to the surface

Generalisations and explanations are good ways to interrupt a conversation that you do not want to get too deep. If I say, 'I am feeling a bit tired and sad,' and the other person responds with a generalisation, such as 'I think everybody feels that way this time of year,' it makes it hard for me to elaborate on how I am feeling. The same happens with explanations – for example, if the response is 'You probably went to bed too late last night.' Both responses make it difficult for me to find an opening so that I can bring my personal experience to the table. This is not necessarily bad. I might be relieved that other people are feeling tired too. It means that there is nothing particularly wrong with me. And also it works nicely when you want to avoid going any deeper.



I have used this when I was working as a priest and when teaching psychology. When I went to speak to people about a funeral, there would be many things that needed to be sorted out, such as planning the funeral and choosing psalms. I would also need to collect some information about the deceased for me to be able to go back home and write a speech for the service. So it would be necessary for me to avoid getting into deep conversations with the relatives about their grief or anger. Often it would seem more polite and gentle to use generalisations or explanations rather than saying, 'This is not something we can talk about now.' But when I made my visits after the funeral, it would be time to go deeper.

As a teacher in psychology at the Open University, I also wanted to avoid participants sharing too much. It is not appropriate to share deeply private material in a teaching situation with large groups. Here I could also use generalisations and explanations to bring a conversation back to the surface if I felt it was becoming too personal.

### Interacting on four levels

We can divide the kind of interaction we have with each other into four different layers or levels. We will go through them one by one.

#### Level 1: Small talk and superficial interactions

At this level you keep changing the subject. It is like a butterfly that flutters from flower to flower, sits a bit

here and a bit there. The advantage is that it is easy to enter and leave a conversation. Small talk is quite an art.

Extroverted people actually enjoy this as a kind of carefree game. This is also where you can make fun of each other. But a lot of people can run into problems here and find it really tricky. In that case it can be helpful to know some basic principles regarding small talk. It is pretty simple. You can just say what is happening here and now – for example, ‘It is cold here,’ ‘It is raining,’ ‘This is delicious,’ ‘Those are very pretty shoes,’ ‘What is that smell?’ and so on. Many highly sensitive people can feel frustrated if this continues for too long. It can feel like having your hard drive filling up with meaningless stuff and you are probably longing to get to something more nourishing.

But it is useful to be able to make small talk, especially when you want to connect with someone you don’t know. A bit of small talk can be like an opening. It is not necessarily what is being said but the tone of voice that can say much more. You are building a bridge to the other person. Small talk can create a sense of safety when you are in an unfamiliar situation. It can be a way to connect with someone while you explore possible shared interests. Otherwise it may be tempting to leave the conversation quickly if you feel dissatisfied by making small talk. If you struggle with small talk, it might be a good idea to rehearse doing it.

### Level 2: The interesting layer

At this level we have established shared interests. We are exchanging opinions and information or maybe

discussing politics, parenting or something else we both find interesting. Maybe we reach agreements and make decisions. Some people are like fish in water at this level. It might be that they enjoy gaining new knowledge or they might feel energised by debating with others. Highly sensitive people often like exchanging ideas about a shared interest, but if it turns into a heated discussion with aggressive undertones, they might not feel comfortable any more.

This layer is also called the *role layer*, which means that this is where we talk about our job, where we live, our marital status and so on. We express ourselves according to a certain position or role. In her role as a mother, a woman can give advice to the staff at a kindergarten, a nurse can give advice about medication or a painter can give advice about colours.

Sometimes this level can be dominated by those who are self-confident and talkative. If you find this frustrating, you can practise taking the opportunity to express yourself. In some contexts it can almost feel like a battle to get a word in because everybody wants to say their piece. This can be especially hard for a highly sensitive person: they might be a bit too slow to grab the chance to speak up or maybe they feel it is impolite to interrupt others.

You probably feel more at ease in situations where there is a mutual desire to listen to each other. In some places it is possible to introduce a culture of listening. Some people might not have given much thought to how a group is affected when certain people dominate the discussion and how it can be a problem for others.

If you bring it up, it might be possible to bring about some changes.

At this level you do not talk about emotions. This happens at the third level.

### Level 3: The private sphere

At this level we can talk about our feelings and experiences regarding things and other people (if we start talking about feelings we have for the person we are with, we are moving into the fourth layer). In the third layer of interaction you are letting someone into your private sphere. You might talk about your childhood, your marriage, your relationships with colleagues or your family. You may exchange gossip and talk about rumours. Or you might help each other figure out how you feel about something, as a step towards expressing your feelings about someone to them personally.

This can be a layer where the atmosphere between you can be very intense and lively. You might realise that you have a lot in common with someone and that your inner life might not be as different to other people's as you thought. It can feel really good to share your private inner life with somebody. You will probably recognise the sensation of having offloaded and feeling much lighter afterwards.

If you struggle with this level, it could be because there are parts of you and your inner life that you feel embarrassed about and are anxious about sharing with others. And sometimes being on the receiving end of

private confessions can be uncomfortable too, especially if the other person seems to expect you to be close allies after this confession. It can also be challenging to listen to someone who is very angry. If you are feeling overstimulated or overwhelmed, it can become difficult to listen to somebody else's confessions.

#### Level 4: Direct connections

At this level we talk about what is happening here and now between the two of us: me and you, here and now. What are we feeling and sensing about each other? This kind of direct connection can be very intense. This is where you realise what you mean to somebody else. It nurtures your soul.

When somebody in love says, 'I love you' to the person they love, it takes place in this layer of interaction. The husband who says to his wife, 'When you look at me like you are doing right now, it makes me want to leave you,' is also connecting at this level.

Some people almost never move into this layer. Some people only do it a few times during their lives. But those are often moments that are remembered and revisited over and over. To connect at this level can feel both terrifying and invigorating. Maybe you have fears about hurting someone if you are so direct. Or you fear being hurt yourself. But if you avoid this layer, your relationship might suffer and become boring and lifeless.

### Moving on to the first level

You move on to the first level of interaction by saying out loud what you are feeling, sensing, tasting, smelling, hearing or seeing – for example, ‘The sunshine is so lovely.’

### From level 1 to level 2

You linger a bit longer on every subject. A remark about the food may turn into a conversation about recipes, or a comment on the weather may become a discussion about climate change. You can also bring up a completely new topic.

### From level 2 to level 3

You can invite someone into the more personal sphere by sharing some personal experiences. Or you can ask a direct question, such as ‘When you feel so strongly about people taking sick leave, is it because you worry about getting put under more pressure at work?’

### From level 3 to level 4

First, it might be good to check whether the other person actually wants to meet you at this level. This way they also get a chance to prepare themselves. Here are some ideas how to initiate such a conversation:

~ ‘I would like to talk with you about our feelings towards each other. How would you feel about doing that?’

- ~ 'I really want to share how I feel about you right now. Would you like to hear it?'
- ~ 'I would like to know how you feel about me. Do you want to share that with me?'

How this model can be useful for sensitive souls

Becoming more aware of which level a conversation is at can clarify why some interactions are draining you while others nourish you. If you know why certain conversations bore and frustrate you, it is easier to try to change the situation. Initiating a shift from one level to another can make a difference. If you have the courage to move on to the fourth level, it might bring new energy and intensity into a connection that has become lifeless.

This model is a simplified version of reality and it does not take into account the non-verbal interactions that happen between people. Highly sensitive people are often capable of spending time with each other that feels dense with presence and depth – without uttering any words.

## Chapter 5

# HOW TO FACE ANGER: YOUR OWN AND OTHERS'

Highly sensitive people have a different strategy when dealing with anger

Delicate souls are typically not very keen on anger. Anger is a powerful energy. When we blow a fuse, we usually tend to become very black and white and can lose our ability to empathise with others. These are not behaviours that we appreciate – in ourselves or in others. For some people, having a quick row feels refreshing, but for a highly sensitive person it can take a real toll and throw your nervous system off balance. Afterwards you may need a lot of time to regroup and re-balance yourself again.

It is likely that you have not had many good experiences with expressing your anger when it peaks. You will be very affected by it – not only because you sense your own strong emotions but because you also feel the emotions of other people. If you hurt someone, you feel their pain too and will find it hard to ignore this. It touches you deeply and you might have to wrestle with feelings of guilt and shame.



Highly sensitive people are often perceived as having inhibitions when it comes to aggression. We simply do not feel a desire to fight. There is another reason why arguing and fighting is not one of our strengths. People who win those quick altercations are often people who do not worry about codes of ethics. They win because they are not bothered too much about hurting the opposition and they take the attitude that anything goes, even if it means attacking the person rather than sticking to the issue.

If you are a delicate soul, you will feel as if you keep losing arguments, which may be because you are taking many different things into consideration and you have values that you do not want to compromise. It can seem as though you are playing the game with a self-imposed handicap.

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'I have often thought of myself as weak because I am usually the one who ends up backing down from an argument without getting my point across.'

*Helle, 57*

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Although highly sensitive people seem to lose out when it comes to those quick and heated discussions, we can actually deal very well with disagreements when we take our time. You may go quiet and withdraw when you encounter sudden anger, but after a couple of days you can come back and be able to articulate your thoughts and feelings about the matter and let people know what you will and will not put up with.

Highly sensitive people can be very preoccupied with ethics and values, but this does not mean that these things are any less important to other people. Neither does it mean that highly sensitive people necessarily live up to their own standards. But we want the world to be a place worth living in and so it seems a constructive strategy to try to contribute to making the world such a place. We also prefer avoiding angry altercations and we try to make sure we do not annoy others too much with our behaviour.

In my work as a therapist I have spoken to many people who find anger difficult. They have been told – often by other therapists – that it is a problem when you do not feel able to react with strong anger and assert yourself that way. When I try to explore this with my clients, it often turns out that they have a very different strategy.

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'I was part of a support team at a bank. My job was to approve credit agreements which somebody else had written up. It often happened that those who wrote the agreements handed them to me at 3 p.m. and wanted them approved the same day because they had promised the customers a quick response. This was very frustrating for me because I had to work late.

I had to find a solution to this because I was getting very stressed. I had raised the issue without success. And since I am not very comfortable with getting angry and shouting, I chose another strategy. At a morning meeting I announced that in future whenever somebody handed in an urgent case around closing time, they would have to

decide which of my other cases I would have to stop working on, because I wanted to leave work on time. This made a big difference. My colleagues approved of the idea and the number of urgent cases dropped dramatically.'

*Gitte, 54*

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To calmly say 'No' or 'I don't want to do this' or 'This is not okay with me' often works much better than loudly expressed anger. And when it does not work, you can outline consequences the way Gitte did in the example above.

Below is a story from a highly sensitive person in a not-so-sensitive therapeutic situation.

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'A psychotherapist once tried to teach me to get really angry. She believed that I would feel much happier in my life if I was able to be more aggressive and less cautious. I agreed to this because I thought to myself that being able to get angry might make it easier for me to have things my way.

Later I realised that in those situations where saying no calmly doesn't work, angry shouting doesn't work either. It will usually be a situation where something can't be changed because the person I need something from is unable or unwilling to give it to me.

Looking back, I should have refused the therapist and her well-meaning attempt to change me. Even if it had turned out that I would be able to have things my way by shouting louder, I actually do not want my needs met in this way.'

*Henrik, 48*

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The example above is not unique. Many highly sensitive people have encountered those who have made disrespectful and intrusive attempts to make them let go of their intelligent and careful strategies in order to adopt more primitive ones.

It is not healthy for delicate souls to be part of angry altercations. Being involved in a heated debate can be very over-stimulating. And as soon as we become over-stimulated and overwhelmed, we tend to become somewhat powerless and not very constructive. Our connection with ourselves is disrupted and without this connection we are like a ship lost at sea.

As a psychotherapist, I often help couples find strategies they can use when an argument is getting too heated. For instance, they can agree to call for time-outs and arrange when to pick up the conversation again. And in the meantime they might go for a walk or a run separately.

If you are delicate, you probably need to withdraw from the conflict and find enough calm to re-establish your connection with yourself and your feelings of love towards yourself and the other person.

It used to be a common theory that you could release anger by expressing it physically – for example, by hitting a pillow. This is often why some therapists are eager to get their clients to act out their anger. But when you do angry movements with your body, you can actually end up holding on to your anger or even making it more intense. It may be much more beneficial to talk to someone about how you are feeling or do some relaxing exercises.

## Make use of your abilities to empathise and reflect

I have created a model that looks at different root causes of anger. The causes are divided into groups and with each group I make suggestions for strategies. This model is useful if you don't like arguments and conflicts and would like to avoid most of them. I have written about this model in my book *The Emotional Compass* (Sand 2016). I have also written about how you can use your ability to reflect on things in order to find the most simple and effortless strategy in a conflict – or in smaller sources of friction.

You can do a lot with your ability to empathise. Often anger is like a layer of protection and underneath it there may be other and more vulnerable emotions. Highly sensitive people are good at sensing these underlying feelings and it is possible to put this to good use. If you can connect with the more vulnerable emotions, it can shift the energy and create more space for healing processes.

Anger comes along when an expectation or a need is not being met. This goes for your own anger as well. Use your ability to empathise to find out what the unmet need is. Maybe you can ask for what you wish for or value. You can also help the other person to connect with what they need, thereby diminishing the anger. You could ask, 'What is it that you would like me (or someone else) to give you right now?' It is useful to express our wishes and needs – even if other people are unable to give us what we would like. To become more aware of your own wishes and needs and your dependence on others

can be a way out of the anger. It can bring us a more healthy sense of our vulnerabilities and support us to be more present and create more satisfying connections with others.

### When it is unwise to be empathic when facing anger

As a basic rule, you can think of an angry person as someone who is suffering and has an unmet need for love and kindness. But if it does not bring any resolution to the situation, there has to be a limit to how much aggression or abuse you put up with.

Certain people are not good company for delicate souls. And some sensitive people can stay too long in unhealthy relationships because they want to believe the best of others even when they are being repeatedly mistreated. They keep offering empathy and kindness, hoping that one day the other person will start to change.

Try to take a look at this from the outside. Think of someone you care deeply about and imagine them living your life. If they were in the relationships you are in, would you see them being treated with kindness, empathy and respect? If the answer is no, you might need to use your empathic abilities more scarcely, start setting boundaries and make requests for the other person to change their behaviour towards you.

## When you are not letting others know what you dislike

If you find conflicts difficult, it is probably tempting to avoid expressing any negative thoughts and feelings and just pretend that everything is okay. Maybe you tell yourself that it is of no importance. If you experience something you feel uncomfortable with, you need to find the golden middle way. One way to deal with this could be to have a proper go at someone. Another way could be to turn it inwards and blame yourself. The golden middle way would be to express something about yourself at the same time as making an observation – a neutral statement about something you are sensing. Don't say something like 'You have ruined my good mood' or 'I am much too sensitive.'

Below are some examples of neutral statements:

- ~ 'When you look at me like you do right now, my stomach starts to churn.'
- ~ 'I wish you would say something kind to me right now.'
- ~ 'I would prefer to have salad rather than pickles.'
- ~ 'It is important for me that we can stick to the dates we have decided.'

The more precise you are about what you do not like and what you want, the clearer your communication will be. Clear boundaries create a good connection between two people. And the more you feel able to express yourself, the deeper your relationships can become.

In the short term it may seem much better to tell yourself that this or that is unimportant – especially if you prefer to avoid anger and conflict. But in the long term it is a really bad idea. If you fear expressing negative thoughts and feelings, your relationships will become superficial and dissatisfying for you.

When highly sensitive people don't set boundaries in situations where it would be considered appropriate, this might be because of low self-esteem.

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'I have often been told that I need to stop putting up with this and that – that I need to put my foot down and demand some respect. And I have made attempts to do so, but when I tried to shout, my voice would break and get all wheezy and high-pitched.

Now I know that it was about my lack of self-esteem. Deep inside me I doubted whether I was truly worthy of being in this world. I felt like there was something fundamentally wrong with me and that I should be grateful for being included in the community. And so I couldn't really afford to be disagreeable. When I tried to express anger, I simply got terrified. It wasn't because I didn't feel my anger or because I didn't know how to shout.'

*Jens, 45*

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A man like Jens does not need to work on his anger, although that is what many people suggested. He needs to work on his self-esteem.



## When anger protects us from powerlessness and grief

Often when the immediate feeling that arises in us is anger, it can be protecting us from other emotions and it can be helpful to have a look at these. There may be a whole new path hidden in those emotions, which can lead us to a more authentic, joyful and vibrant way of life. Anger has a habit of putting itself on top; a lot of things may be stored up beneath it, but we cannot access them because the anger is taking up all the space.

Inside anger there is a hidden hope that our reality can and will change, anger is a very powerful energy designed for clearing away obstacles, and for fighting against things you want to change. As long as you feel angry, there is something you are fighting for – whether you are aware of it or not.

But sometimes the problem is that you are fighting to change something that cannot be changed. If you are angry at your partner because there are parts of him you do not like, you might think that if you keep correcting him and scolding him he will change. But you are only making life miserable for both of you. And to no avail, because there are parts of our character that very seldom can be changed.

When you continue to be angry with your elderly parents, inside your anger there might be a hope against hope that somehow the past can be changed. That some miracle will provide you with the things that you were denied as a child. That your parents will be transformed and you can all live together happily ever after.

We are often angry until we find the strength to face our losses and embrace reality as it is. The day you manage to give up the hopeless battle, your anger will become grief. And unlike anger, the advantage of grief is that it invites other people's empathy. You can receive support. And grief is a process. Healthy grief will last a while; you go through it, honouring and letting go of the things you have lost, and in your own time you will be ready to dry your tears and start looking for new possibilities. But anger can turn into bitterness and stay with you for the rest of your life.

Hope that is hidden within anger can play itself out in different ways in many of our relationships – for example, with siblings, ex-partners or employers. If you become aware of the hidden hope and the battle you are fighting, it becomes easier to find a way forward. If you manage to realise what you are hoping for, you can either start working towards changing reality – if that is possible – or you can let go of your hope and begin the grieving process in order to find new paths in life.

When you have grieved for the things you did not receive from your parents, or maybe from a previous partner, you will begin to see your parents or ex-partner as people with assets and limitations just like you. And even though you will not be able to turn back time and have the childhood you dreamed of or restart your marriage, your relationships will begin to evolve. New things may become possible when you are not continually trying to wrench from others what they don't hold or trying to change who they are and what has happened.

If you are confronted with anger from your own adult children, you can try to bring in the sense of powerlessness by saying, 'I wish I could have given you a better childhood.' Or to a friend who is accusing you of ruining his birthday because you left early, 'I wish I had done things differently.'

### Avoid moralising

'Should' is a very useful word when we want to moralise. You can use it against yourself or against others. 'I should have had more energy for my children' is an example of morally judging yourself. You turn your anger inwards and start attacking yourself. You can also point your moral finger at someone else: 'You should have considered me,' or, even worse, 'After everything I have done for you, you should be a lot more grateful.' If you feel like getting agitated inside, you can just start thinking moralising thoughts, either about yourself or others. It really works!

If you are a delicate soul, you are probably more prone to morally judging yourself than other people are. When you fall short of living up to your own high standards, it can be a bad habit to start attacking yourself: 'I should have done better – after everything my parents have done for me, I should feel a lot more grateful and happy when they give me a call.' In this way you might be overburdening yourself with negative judgements directed at your sense of self. The result will be over-stimulation and exhaustion.

From 'should' to 'wish' –  
from anger to sorrow

You can distinguish between hoping and wishing. Hoping will preferably be in accordance with reality. If you start hoping for something that can only happen in fairy tales, you can end up wasting much energy and time on something that is essentially lifeless. Like the wife who stays in a loveless marriage hoping that her husband will change dramatically. She would be better off if she could let go of that hope. When the hope that her husband will make a fundamental change is gone, she will be able to face reality. And based on that she can decide whether to accept things as they are or start creating changes for herself.

Wishes are something different. You can wish for something completely unrealistic – for example, for a dead relative to come and be with you for a while. You are not in control of your deepest wishes. Whether you prefer yellow or blue flowers is not your choice and you will have to listen to your inner feelings to find the answer. In a way you could say that you are your wishes. Maybe you are someone who wishes to spend as much time in nature as possible.

Wishes are full of life. It is painful to be aware of your wishes, especially if your life is very different from how you wish it to be. They can reveal your deepest grief. Personally, I prefer being in touch with my grief rather than living with the dull, grey sensation that comes when you keep a lid on the things that hurt.

When you moralise, you are in touch with your anger, whether it is turned inwards or outwards. When

you sense your wishes, you will feel pain if they cannot be fulfilled and joy if they can.

Anger often occurs in a superficial layer. There can be many reasons why people stay in the superficial layers full of anger rather than getting in touch with the vulnerable feelings hiding in deeper layers. Maybe it is difficult to embrace the grief beneath the anger. Maybe it is too unbearable to feel the powerlessness when there is something you cannot have or change. As long as you stay angry, you are fighting for something. And the more you fight, the less you have to feel.

For some people it feels better to be preoccupied with anger and they direct it at their parents, for example, rather than face the things that happened in the past. You cannot change your childhood. The bruises you received cannot be undone and you will have to learn to live with your losses. When you are able to embrace this reality, the anger will turn into grief.

There is healing in grief. It is a process which needs to unfold in its own time. When you are present in your own grief, it can become a lot easier to accept love and care from others. When you are angry, people are often disinclined to approach you with loving kindness, and chances are that you push people away. Anger creates distance where grief invites people to care.

The self-judgement 'I should be able to cope just like other people do' can be changed to 'I wish I could cope the way others do.' This removes the accusations and makes room for grief. And 'You should have been giving me more support' can be changed to 'I wish you had been able to help me more' or, even more simply put, 'I have been missing your support.'

It is my hope that you as a reader can feel how we move into deeper layers and create different vibrations when we express our wishes instead of using 'should' to moralise. You can try with the judgements you usually make about yourself or others and find a way to rephrase them using the words 'I wish' or 'I miss'. Try to see how that affects your sense of yourself. Maybe you will experience a sense of calm inside, although there might be sadness too. This sensation is much better for the sensitive nervous system than angry energies.

## Chapter 6

# GUILT AND SHAME

When we talk about feeling guilt, there are two kinds of guilt to consider:

- ~ relevant (or actual) guilt – a feeling telling you that you have done something that was problematic for someone else, where the feeling is proportionate to the influence you actually had over events
- ~ excessive guilt feelings – when feelings of guilt have become disproportionate and exaggerated.

Guilt and power are two sides of the same coin. The person who is guilty is also in power. If the weather is bad on my mother's birthday, it is not my fault; I cannot control the weather. But I may have been contributing to her loneliness if I did not visit her on her birthday; unless, of course, I was in the hospital with two broken ankles.

### Relevant guilt

If your guilt feelings are proportionate to the amount of influence you have, the guilt is relevant. You have contributed to somebody else's joy or pain. If it is the latter, it might be a good idea to try to make amends. You could ask, 'Is there anything I can do or say to ease

your pain?’ And even if there is nothing you can do, the other person will probably appreciate you asking.

To apologise and offer to try to make things better comes quite naturally for delicate souls. You might find you are inclined to take it too far, have excessive guilt feelings and make too many apologies.

It might be good for you to practise holding back a bit on the apologies. You can try to sit meditatively with your guilty conscience instead. To learn to live with guilt feelings may be the price you have to pay for being true to yourself. Psychotherapist Bent Falk (2010) calls this guilt ‘Existential Value Added Tax’. Let’s say you have disappointed your grandmother by choosing a different career to the one she would have wanted for you. Instead of trying to make things better by explaining, apologising and making all kinds of offerings, you can tell yourself that your guilt feelings – your awareness of having disappointed her – is the price you pay for being true to yourself. And maybe this authenticity is worth the price.

### Excessive guilt feelings

If you feel guilty about something over which you had no actual control, your guilt feelings are excessive. This is also true if you feel guilty about something where you had very limited influence. If you believe that it is solely your fault that there was an uncomfortable atmosphere the last time you had guests, you are expecting yourself to have more power than you actually do.

Some people believe that guilt is actually anger turned inwards. Sometimes this might be the case. To



me it often makes more sense to see guilt feelings as a defence against powerlessness and grief.

For instance, it might seem easier to blame yourself if your marriage is dissatisfying rather than facing the fact that your partner does not love you any more – if that is the case. The person who is guilty also has the power to make changes. If the dissatisfying marriage is your fault, you can try to improve yourself. And while you are busy changing yourself, it can also work as a distraction from facing the truth of how bad things actually have become.

Some people feel guilty if they get sick. They tell themselves that their diet must be too unhealthy, they are not exercising enough or there is something else they could have done to avoid illness. Being guilty means you have the power. You may think that if you are guilty of making yourself ill, you also have the power to make yourself better. You just need to change your lifestyle! But this way of thinking ignores the fact that life is unpredictable, and no matter how healthy you try to be, you cannot guard yourself completely against all illnesses. And death will get you one day no matter what.

If you find the courage to face the uncertainty of life as well as your own powerlessness, you do not have to suffer excessive guilt feelings.

Children are inclined to blame themselves for any tension and upset in the home. It somehow feels safer to know you are the guilty party – and the one with the power to change things – rather than leaving it to parents who might be lacking certain parenting skills. The child who believes that he or she is to blame for the problems in the home will then feel that he or she

can change things by becoming as pleasant and polite as possible. The alternative would be to accept that the parents are imperfect, which can be a terrifying realisation for a child.

Some people live their entire lives holding on to their idealised images of their perfect parents. And typically their perception of themselves will be equally negative. Often it is the case that the more horrific the childhood, the stronger the need for idealising the parents.

People can find it beneficial to work on their relationship with their parents when they have become adults because they are now in a position to face the reality that might have been too overwhelming for them when they were young.

To revisit childhood as an adult, perhaps with a therapist's support, can help us embrace and express the emotions that were too unbearable when we were small and dependent. Afterwards your perception of your parents might change, as well as your perception of yourself. You can let go of some of those excessive guilt feelings you took on as a child, which can be an immense relief.

### Working with guilt feelings

Sometimes we can get stuck in thinking in terms of either/or. Either everything is our fault or nothing whatsoever is our fault. Reality is often somewhere between the two.

Below you will find an exercise you can try when you are struggling with guilt feelings. It is a way to explore whether your guilt feelings are appropriate or excessive.

You may feel guilty about somebody else's unhappiness – for example, your sister suffering from depression.

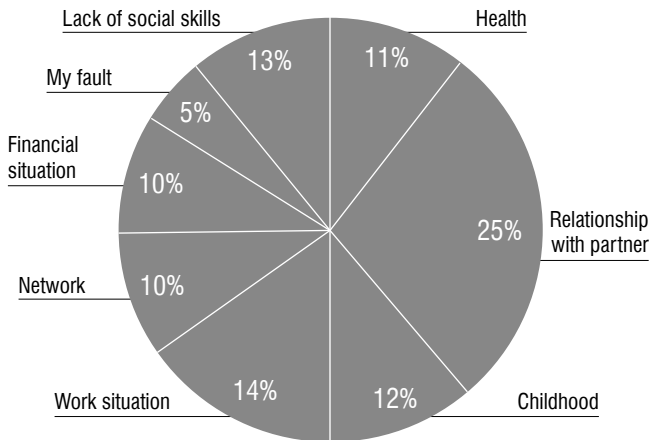
Make a list of all the things that contribute to the other person's wellbeing. A list could look like this:

- ~ her relationship with her partner
- ~ her work situation
- ~ her childhood
- ~ her financial situation
- ~ her social skills or lack thereof
- ~ her health
- ~ her network
- ~ me (her sister).

When you have made a list of contributing factors, I would like you to estimate how much influence each factor has and translate that into percentages. For example, an unhappy childhood 12 per cent, lack of social skills 13 per cent, work 14 per cent, health 11 per cent and so on, and then you can draw a pie chart illustrating the different components.

A pie chart can sometimes be a real eye-opener. Some people feel a great deal of relief when their ideas about a situation move from 'everything is my fault' to '5 per cent is my responsibility'.

But it is not only relief people feel when realising that their guilt feelings have been excessive. For some people, it is very scary to become aware of the limited amount of power they have.



*Responsibility pie chart*

## Feelings of shame

Where guilt is about things you have done, shame is about your entire being. If you have guilt feelings, you will probably be able to name the things you have done or failed to do that are causing you to feel that way. You can offer to make amends if your feelings of guilt are relevant, and you can do some work with your guilt feelings if they are excessive.

It is a different story with shame. You can feel ashamed without having a clear idea why and without being able to put it into words. Usually, it is a vague sense of being wrong – coupled with fear of being exposed. When you feel ashamed, you feel like hiding. You may respond with anger if somebody is getting too close. Shame is a feeling of being fundamentally flawed. It is difficult to talk about. You can be ashamed of feeling ashamed and feel very uncomfortable talking about it.

Shame can be a result of not feeling embraced as a child. Let's imagine you wanted to show your parents something you had made or wanted to give them, and they responded by rejecting, ignoring or even reprimanding you.

Or imagine a little boy who senses that his mother is upset. The boy climbs up on to her knee and tries to hug her, but she gets up and says that she is busy and that she wants the boy to go outside and play. The boy will feel that he has done something wrong. If similar situations keep happening when the boy offers comfort but is rejected, he is likely to end up feeling ashamed about his desire to comfort others. He might stop offering to comfort others. Or, even worse, he might become unable to feel his own desire to comfort.

Another example could be a girl who enjoys sitting alone in her room but is continually told that healthy little children should be outside playing with other children. This girl would start feeling that there was something wrong with her whenever she felt the desire to withdraw and be on her own. She might try to avoid getting noticed when going to her room. And if she got caught being on her own, she would feel ashamed.

Many people go to their graves without ever talking about their feelings of shame. Other people fight their way through all their shame and find ways to be free to be who they truly are.

A way to dissolve feelings of shame may be to have an experience that revokes the previous experiences. We can use the example of the boy who became ashamed of his desire to comfort others. In his adult life he might find the courage to try to offer comfort to someone –

maybe someone has made a request for more comfort and support. At first it might seem awkward and anxiety-provoking, but if the other person willingly receives the comforting gestures, the once rejected boy will have a new experience to draw courage from. And the more he practises, the more natural it will feel and the shame might dissolve altogether.

### If you are ashamed of your sensitivity

Here is a list of things highly sensitive people often feel ashamed about:

- ~ sometimes wishing other people would stay away
- ~ not being good at quick comebacks, or being afraid that others might think you are being dishonest because it takes you a while to come up with a response
- ~ not being able to join in the rat race
- ~ not being able to shrug things off as easily as others
- ~ often finding yourself in social situations where the things that other people enjoy talking about seem superficial and boring to you
- ~ getting tired and exhausted before anyone else.

If many things are tainted with shame and you feel you need to hide them, it can be difficult to have meaningful conversations with others. You cannot just go with the

flow because you have to watch your words. You are spending a lot of energy keeping your secrets safe.

One of the ways that can help highly sensitive people to find the courage to open up about themselves is to hear other sensitive people talk. When I lead a training course for highly sensitive people, I notice how openness and honesty can be contagious. When somebody shares their shortcomings, other people will start sharing too. The joy of recognising oneself in other people's stories can be great.

It can bring relief when you are together with people who know what it is like to be ashamed of the things you are ashamed of in yourself. Afterwards people may return home and begin to find words for the things they used to try to hide away. And this is the beginning of releasing yourself from shame. Many people go back to their lives and begin to gain new experiences that revoke the experiences of the past.

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'I have started making clear arrangements with my mother about her visits; when she is expected to arrive and when she needs to leave. Now I am able to openly tell her, "Mum, you know I very much enjoy being sociable but only when it is for a limited time. Being sociable for too long makes me very tired." At first my mother would comment on how my behaviour had changed. But now she has become used to this way of doing things. I, on the other hand, have started to actually look forward to her visits. It is much easier for me to handle, when I know when she is leaving again.'

*Inger, 50*

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## Chapter 7

# SITUATIONS IN LIFE

### Difficulties in relationships

Many highly sensitive people choose to live alone. It makes it possible for them to get the peace and quiet they need and appreciate in their daily lives. But it can also become lonely at times. This creates a painful dilemma.

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'I would like to find a partner but I know I will struggle if he expects me to come along to all the big birthday parties in his family. I am already feeling guilty about neglecting my own family.'

*Hanne, 45*

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When I speak to highly sensitive people who are in relationships, they often tell me how they struggle to find enough time and space to be on their own.

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'If I do not do at least half of the work around the house and looking after the children, my wife feels very let down and starts making a scene. I hate it when she becomes so emotional. My nervous system is thrown off balance. So I really exert myself to get my share of the chores done. I often feel bullied. When it is at its worst, I get so over-stimulated that I lose touch with myself and with the world around me.'



When that happens, I start longing for that eternal rest.

When I am in my workshop, I sometimes find some peace. I love just pottering about out there on my own. But it is an often short-lived sense of peace. My wife tends to think that it is much more important for me to get things done around the house or that I spend time with the children and take them into the workshop with me.'

*Kasper, 35*

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If you have a resilient and outgoing partner who is able to respect and understand your sensitivity, you can find many advantages in being together. Typically, a more resilient partner will be happy to be the one who drives the car, goes to the supermarket to do the shopping and takes the children to busy events. And since more resilient people tend to be good sleepers, there are no hard feelings if you need to wake them up in the middle of the night and ask for a hug because you are having a restless night.

But if your resilient partner struggles to understand your sensitivity, living together can be hard. Perhaps he or she is aware that it is necessary to show some consideration. But if your partner uses every opportunity he or she gets to point out that, 'You're certainly lucky that I've got so much energy when you are constantly tired,' or if he or she sighs heavily whenever they have to go to an event without you or do more work around the house than you, you are likely to feel upset and fear that you might be a burden. Some people stay in a relationship like this for a long time and end up showing

signs of stress and burnout. Some people decide to separate and divorce. This is a difficult choice.



'My husband had mood swings that affected me deeply. I couldn't continue to cope with it. Finally I decided to divorce him. This was immensely difficult. I have hurt so many people and that is the last thing I want to do.'

*Line, 42*



Some people get together with someone who also is highly sensitive.



'I found my soulmate at my third attempt. To people on the outside it probably looks like a really boring marriage. We spend most of our time at home because neither of us likes to drive. Often we don't talk much when we are together. But we both feel a deep sense of presence in each other's company and I can share parts of my inner world with her which I barely know myself.'

*Egon, 62*



### To be a highly sensitive parent

Some highly sensitive people choose not to have children. Others decide to only have one child. It is difficult being highly sensitive and being a parent.

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'It is tricky to get the breaks I need. If I go to the bathroom to have some time to myself, she immediately starts shouting, "Mum, Mum, where are you?"'

*Maja, 38*  
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Some participants on my courses have talked about how they had to tell their teenager to move out because it became too much with the noise level, chaos and unpredictability that is associated with having children that age.

If you are a delicate soul, you probably have many good qualities as a parent. You might be intuitive, attentive and good at sensing what your child needs. You are probably conscientious and try to do everything you can to be a good parent. You might also have very high standards for the kind of parent you should be. And you may experience shame when you are unable to live up to those standards. The problem is that your energy will run out and you will need to withdraw. If there is no possibility to do so, you get irritated and the empathy you usually have plenty of can suddenly disappear completely.

If there are two of you parenting together, you can support each other and take turns to have breaks. If you are on your own with one or more children, it would be a good idea to get as much support as possible. I have been on my own with two children. It can be done. But I have often felt ashamed that I did not have the capacity to do more. For instance, I did not go to all the parents' meetings at their school. And my children very quickly

learned to get up in the mornings themselves and go to school. When I heard about parents who got up and baked buns for their children in the morning, I felt a twinge of pain. I wish I had been able to do the same for mine. But the stress of getting two children ready for school in the morning, one of them not getting up till the very last minute, was just too much for my system. It would take me a long time to calm down afterwards and be able to focus on my work.

When I started giving myself a peaceful morning by staying in bed, using earplugs and only getting up when the children were out of the house, I was in much better condition to manage the rest of the day. But I received many comments from people in the parish about when I actually did get up in the mornings. And I avoided responding because I felt ashamed. To this day I still feel sad that there were things I could not give my children. I would have liked to have had an abundance of energy but I did not. It was as it was and I am no longer angry with myself. I have two independent adult children who are doing well.

# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## Vulnerability to anxiety and depression

As highly sensitive people, we are vulnerable to anxiety and depression. This is not part of the trait itself and so we are only affected if the conditions under which we grew up were not safe and supportive. That said, it is important to realise that it does not take much for an environment to become unsafe for a highly sensitive child. Experiences that would seem trivial to a resilient child can be traumatic for a sensitive one.

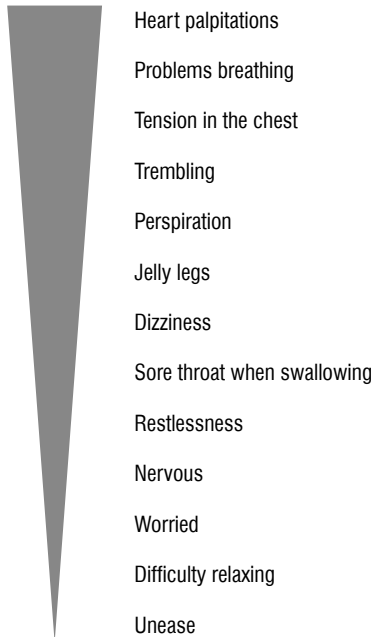
Many highly sensitive people struggle with anxieties. As sensitive souls, we are often equipped with a lively imagination and creative visualisation skills. We are good at visualising possibilities but also at imagining anything that could go wrong. This means we are good at anticipating and preparing for difficulties and we are able to avoid accidents and mistakes. But it also makes us prone to worrying.

## Fear is a natural feeling

Fear in itself is natural. Some people do not have enough fear in them. They become reckless and put themselves in danger. When we send young children out

into the world, I think that most of us are hoping that they are fearful enough to stay away from dangerous streets in unfamiliar cities at night. Highly sensitive youngsters are safe to send out into the world. They will be very careful. They are cautious around drugs, they tend not to break the law and they are better drivers than others – if they have dared to get a driver’s licence.

Fear exists on a wide spectrum – from light unease to massive panic attacks. Some of my clients start out by saying that they don’t have a problem with anxiety. But when I start telling them a bit more about it, they often realise that some of their symptoms are actually fear and anxiety in different degrees. Below is an illustration of different degrees of anxiety.



*Degrees of anxiety*

People who claim that they are never afraid probably have a distorted sense of how reality works. Life happens to be dangerous. We die from it and we do not know when this will happen. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, and the choices we make today may have consequences that we will only realise many years later. A certain amount of uncertainty is a natural part of life.

But if your fears and anxieties are hindering your daily life, you might want to seek support and counselling. Cognitive therapy can help you diminish the worst of your fears and teach you techniques to manage your anxieties. The same cognitive skills can be useful when dealing with depression.

It has to be said that it is rare that cognitive therapy will solve the problem in its entirety. But it can help you get relief from the intense fears and unhappiness, which is valuable. It will help you find more energy to work through your problems in other ways.

## Exhaustion and depression

Depression is characterised by negative thoughts about oneself and about one's future prospects. Negative thoughts make you tired. And being tired will make you think negative thoughts. You get caught in a vicious circle. There are two ways of breaking this circle.

You can do things to be less tired. And this is what people suffering from depression are attempting when they stay in bed: trying to get rest and sleep. But it is important to realise that sometimes exhaustion is disguised grief and unhappiness. You cannot get rid of unhappiness by sleeping. And therefore it can be a

really bad idea to stay in bed if your mood is low. More than sleep, you probably need to experience success. Experiences of success often start by putting aside your here-and-now need for comfort in order to achieve some long-term goals.

If you set yourself goals that are within reach, such as getting out of bed and making breakfast, you will create positive experiences for yourself. And even if you struggle to find anything you want to do, it can be good to try to do something anyway. This may be something you remember enjoying in the past. Perhaps the enjoyment will come along as you do things. Pleasurable activities help to raise your energy levels. You might find some inspiration in the lists at the end of the book. Or you can try Jens’s strategy.

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‘When I am feeling really low I pull out my to-do list and find something on it which has been there for a long time and I know I will take great pleasure in crossing off. It is often something I really don’t enjoy doing. That’s why it has been on the list for so long. It doesn’t matter that it is unpleasant. I am already feeling terrible, so things can’t get much worse. When it’s done – e.g. cleaning the drains – I know my mood will lift a little; maybe just from minus 8 to minus 7. But I can feel the change and that gives me hope.’

*Jens, 55*

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## Feelings and thoughts are closely related – the cognitive model

Thoughts and feelings respond to each other in a mutual interaction. You cannot directly control your emotions. If you receive a Christmas present that you hate, you cannot decide to be happy about it. The most you can do is pretend to like it. In the same way you cannot ignore feelings such as jealousy or anger even though it might be convenient for you not to feel those things. But you are not completely powerless when confronted with your emotions, because to some extent you can influence them with your thoughts. You cannot directly control your feelings, but you have some control over your thoughts and you can choose what you focus on and pay attention to.

An event can stir up many different emotions, depending on the kind of thoughts you have about it. Let us imagine you meet a colleague in the street who does not greet you. You can think about this in different ways. If you say to yourself, 'He must be really angry with me,' this might make you feel anxious. If you think, 'Who does he think he is? He should have greeted me,' you might become angry. If you think, 'He probably did not see me,' your feelings might be neutral. If you think, 'His sight must be really poor – I am fortunate that I still have good sight without having to wear glasses,' you might start feeling grateful.

If you are prone to becoming depressed, your thoughts are probably excessively negative. When a person in a depressed state meets a colleague who does not greet them, this can set off a chain reaction

of negative thoughts and feelings. For example: 'Why doesn't he like me? Maybe it's because I was late last Monday. I was late once last year too. Everybody else is on top of everything. I am not like them and I can't do things right. He has probably discovered how weird I am...'

If you struggle with negative thoughts, you might benefit from getting support to control your thoughts. This could help you stop the thoughts before they spin out of control.

Much of this is about the kind of questions you ask yourself. If you keep asking, 'What is wrong with me, why am I not as successful as this gifted person in the magazine?' you will focus your attention on your faults. If you ask yourself, 'How come I haven't ended up homeless and on the streets?' you will start thinking about your resourcefulness. If you ask yourself, 'How come I do not consider taking my own life?' you will start focusing on the things that give you pleasure and what your values are.

This is not about trying to think as positively as possible. If you are too optimistic and gullible, you will get into trouble. If I believe that, no matter what I talk about, people will find me interesting, I might decide not to prepare for my talks or courses. And usually people get tired of those who are not properly prepared. It is important to try to be as realistic as possible. If you think too positively about your circumstances, you probably need to give the rose-coloured spectacles a good clean, so that you can begin to see reality as it is. This will help you become better at navigating life in the world.

If you have a tendency to think negative thoughts, you need to brighten your dark, gloomy glasses. It will help you to see yourself and the world without negative distortions. And this will lighten your mood and make you feel less tired.

If you are very delicate, you are likely to have a disposition for negative thoughts. Do not expect yourself to be able to become as bright and laid-back as more resilient people. It is part of your nature to be cautious and vigilant, which is to some extent very wise because you suffer more deeply when things unexpectedly get difficult. Your sensitive nervous system is put off balance more easily than other people's.

Sometimes it is wise to prepare for the worst. You may have experienced people telling you to relax and stop worrying so much. This is because it works well for people who are more robust. For people with a sensitive nervous system, the situation is somewhat different.

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'We go to check-ups regularly with our son who was born with a heart defect. I have made it a habit to always prepare myself for the worst and think through situations where he requires an operation. The check-ups went well for many years and many people commented on my continued worrying. Friends with good intentions suggested I should try to look on the bright side and just hope that things would continue to go well instead of preparing for worst-case scenarios.

One time when we went to a check-up I had followed their advice. I was feeling hopeful and telling myself, "It is going to be all right" as I walked through the doors to the hospital. But it wasn't; at least it was not what I was hoping for. The feedback was negative. My son needed an operation.

I was deeply shocked. I was completely overwhelmed and empty at the same time. My head seemed to have lost its connection to the rest of my body. I wasn't able to ask any relevant questions. I was so shaken up that I was unable to be there for my 12-year-old son who was very scared. When I came home, I collapsed, everything went black and it took a long time for me to recover.

Before the operation I had learned to listen to myself. I thought through every aspect of the operation very carefully. I looked at photos and prepared myself for anything that might be difficult to witness. I even prepared myself – as well as I could – for the possibility that my son might die. During the operation I was able to stay there and be completely present with my son, even when he was taken off the medical ventilator and his father had to leave the room because it became too much. I was able to stay through it all. Because I was prepared.

Now I always prepare myself for the worst when we go to check-ups. The family still tells me to be more optimistic and not be prematurely worried. I know I need to listen to myself. Knowing how shocked I was, I think the energy I spend preparing myself is wisely spent. And every time the feedback from the check-ups is positive I celebrate inside.'

*Louise, 41*



If you have a sensitive nervous system, it is often a good idea to prepare yourself emotionally for worst-case scenarios. That way you will be less overwhelmed if the situation occurs.

### The highly sensitive trait may look like anxiety disorder to outsiders

Let us use the example of a highly sensitive woman who avoids meeting strangers. From the outside it might look as if this woman is afraid of other people. A therapist with good intentions may advise her to expose herself to the things she fears, maybe even several times a day for a period. The therapist believes this will make the woman feel better about being around other people. During sessions with a therapist who is not aware of the high sensitivity trait, the woman may be given homework such as going to places with lots of strangers and trying to make contact with some of them. The problem is that the reason the woman avoids strangers is not that she is afraid; it is because it is too over-stimulating for her. And she is protecting herself from this over-stimulation. If she is pressured into meeting strangers, it will exhaust her and her usual situational awareness and social skills will be diminished. This can result in bad experiences that may work against the aim of making her more comfortable with strangers.

Some highly sensitive people have had bad experiences when being counselled by less sensitive therapists. They may have been encouraged to find ways to be more like the majority: to work towards letting go of inhibitions,

taking more risks, being more spontaneous or trying to talk without thinking everything through first.

Another example could be a highly sensitive man who feels uneasy about being in the canteen at work. A therapist may advise him to work through his anxieties by going to the canteen more often, exposing himself to the things that make him uneasy. This could work for someone more resilient. They would have positive experiences, which would help them change their mindset and feelings about the situation. But it may be more complex for a highly sensitive person. There may be too much noise and chaos in the canteen for him to feel at ease there. Maybe the conversations people are having are superficial and don't capture his natural interest. Many people blame themselves for not enjoying these situations and for not participating more in conversations. And if they pretend to be comfortable and behave as someone they are not, this may create anxiety.

Some highly sensitive people are better off eating their lunch alone – maybe in a park. Some choose to stay in the office to eat instead of joining other people in the canteen. There may be other problems associated with this solution, but for many this is what works best, at least some days during the week.

If you are familiar with this dilemma and you have to socialise with your colleagues during lunch breaks, you can try to work towards feeling all right with being there in your own way. If you are able to accept that you do not have the energy for a lot of small talk and find a way to feel comfortable with sitting silently alongside others, you are on the right track. If you usually force

yourself to find things to say, just accepting your own silence can be a great relief and give you more energy.

First and foremost, you need to be able to like yourself as a highly sensitive person. And then you need to arrange your surroundings in ways that create less overstimulation for you and which are more in accordance with your needs. When these things fall into place, many other issues will probably be resolved too, and you will feel much more comfortable, function much better and most likely feel that you have more energy for being sociable.

### Other problems may contribute to a sensitised nervous system

There are advantages when you identify and understand yourself as highly sensitive. But there are things to be wary of as well when you label yourself with a trait. There may be other reasons you have developed a sensitive nervous system. If, for instance, you have experienced trauma in your life and are struggling with post-traumatic stress,<sup>1</sup> you are likely to be delicate and anxious in a way that resembles the highly sensitive personality trait. If you identify yourself as highly sensitive, you may not

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1 Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is caused by a significant trauma such as experiencing war, rape, robbery or someone close to you dying. If you are suffering from PTSD, you will be hyper-vigilant and your nervous system will be very sensitive. One of the characteristics of PTSD is having flashbacks (memories connected to the traumatic event which will continue to invade the person's consciousness even if he or she tries to prevent and control it). PTSD can be successfully treated and it is important to get the right support.

seek the support you need to look at your trauma. The same problem can occur with other mental health issues. You can be suffering from mental health problems and be highly sensitive at the same time. It is important not to reject support if you are struggling with mental health issues even if you also identify as highly sensitive.

Grief that has not been acknowledged and worked through can also make a person anxious and vulnerable. At one time I was working with a client – let us call him Jens – who struggled intensely every time his wife left their home. He would worry so much that it was anxiety bordering on panic. He had tried cognitive behavioural therapy and medication without much change. It turned out that he had lost his grandmother when he was four years old. To lose grandparents is something we all experience and therefore Jens had not regarded this as something particularly important.

But when I began to ask more questions about this, it turned out that his grandparents had been living with Jens and his parents. Jens's mother had been working full-time and was a very productive and busy person, and therefore it was his grandmother who had become Jens's primary carer and the adult to whom he had the strongest attachment. When his grandmother died, his well-meaning family had tried to 'protect' Jens and so he did not attend the funeral and nobody spoke with him about what was happening.

I asked Jens to write a farewell letter to his grandmother and the old grief surfaced. After working through his grief, Jens became much more robust than he could ever remember being before.



If Jens had only focused on creating a lifestyle that supported him as a highly sensitive person, he might never have sought the right help to deal with his unresolved grief.

If you work through old traumas, it is possible to experience yourself getting stronger and more resilient. As a highly sensitive person, it is recommended that you do not just settle for organising your life according to your needs as a sensitive person. It is important to address traumas, and this will help you to evolve and grow to work through these therapeutically.

It is important to remember that it is not either/or. You can be highly sensitive *and* be suffering from mental health problems. And you can benefit from organising your life to suit your sensitivity better as well as receiving support and treatment for your mental health problems.

# DEVELOPING AND GROWING

Highly sensitive people and psychotherapy  
Sensitive people may benefit greatly from psychotherapy. Usually, they will be conscientious about homework and reflect deeply on every session. Clients who do not think much about their conversations with the therapist may need shorter intervals between sessions in order to keep the process alive. In my experience, most highly sensitive clients will reflect on our conversations between sessions and will not need to come to see me so often. They are able to keep the process going by themselves.

With highly sensitive clients, I do sometimes encounter the opposite problem: that the process is unfolding too quickly for the client and he or she becomes overwhelmed. In these instances it is my job to slow things down. Sometimes I can do that by only repeating what I have heard my client say. Just hearing me repeat their own words can immediately inspire new reflections in a highly sensitive person, and he or she will move a bit further along in their process. Sometimes all that is needed is my attention and presence. They will do the work themselves.

Before a session with a client I will consider the upcoming conversations and what the aims might

be. When the client is highly sensitive, this kind of preparation can be difficult. Time and again I have found that the client has reflected and done so much work themselves between sessions that the aims have already been reached and the client is in a completely different place.

The primary aim in psychotherapy for highly sensitive people is often to promote and support self-love. Many who are highly sensitive struggle with low self-esteem for which they try to compensate by setting extremely high standards for themselves. They get caught in vicious circles. These high standards mean that the highly sensitive person repeatedly experiences failing, which then has a negative effect on their sense of self. I will usually do work with people around their personal maxims and perception of self.

### Loving yourself – supporting yourself

When you are highly sensitive, you will encounter situations in which no one around you seems able to understand what it is like to be you. People might think you just need to learn to be more like everybody else. If you come across these attitudes, it is important that you support yourself and stick with your values. If you do that, you might start finding it okay to be in situations where others think you are on the wrong track.

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'In my family everybody reproaches me for not attending my grandparents' golden wedding anniversary. But I know that I make a big effort even

when my resources are limited at times. So I give myself credit.'

*Rasmus, 32*

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Some people talk to themselves in ways that are not very validating. And often they do not realise how problematic this can be. They may have been talking to themselves in this way for as long as they can remember and not realised that it could be different.

While speaking with me, one client realised that she talked very angrily to herself every time she got nervous. She would say things like 'Get a grip' or 'Pull yourself together.' Below is a part of the conversation that followed:

Therapist: Let's say that it was your little sister who was feeling nervous. Would you talk to her in the same way?

Client: No, of course not! I wouldn't dream of it.

Therapist: What kind of things would you say to her then?

Client (after some consideration): I would probably ask her if there was anything I could do to make things easier for her.

Afterwards a task to work on at home could be to write a loving letter to this imagined nervous little sister. Not a letter for the actual little sister to see, but to bring to the next session and read out loud.

If you discover that there are situations in which you tend to start bad-mouthing yourself, it may be

good to prepare yourself for this. Begin with imagining the situation: maybe you automatically criticise yourself when you make a mistake. Try to imagine yourself making a mistake; see yourself from the outside in a specific situation. Then practise telling yourself some kind, encouraging things. You can write a letter to yourself to read at moments when you make mistakes. Keep the letter in your wallet or your bag so you always have it with you. Take it out and read it whenever you make mistakes. An example of such a letter could be:

Dear Suzy

You have the right to make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes once in a while. I know you did not make a mistake to deliberately bother anyone and nobody is entitled to bother you because of this mistake. I know that you are usually very conscientious and do everything you can to make everybody happy. I am sure you have tried your best. That is enough, dear Suzy. That is all we can ask of anyone. Give yourself a pat on the back and take a moment to let your attention turn inwards. Sense your own worth.

Yours sincerely,

Suzy

When Suzy read this letter aloud, she began crying. I believe she realised how much she longed to be talked to like this. She is now practising how to give herself some of the validation she did not receive as a child.

If you struggle to write to yourself in a kind and loving way, you can try to imagine that you are writing

to someone you care deeply about who is in your situation. Afterwards you can put in your own name instead of theirs. It takes time to change old habits and patterns. If you have been bad-mouthing yourself for 30 years, it is unlikely that you will be able to stop doing this overnight. It takes much practice, determination and hard work. But little by little the new habits will grow stronger and the old ones will wither and disappear.

There is much energy to be gained here. Bad-mouthing yourself is just as exhausting and straining for your nervous system as when somebody else does it to you. Use any occasion to practise giving yourself appreciation. This is an example of the effects of a self-supporting attitude:

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'Late one evening my sister called me up and scolded me because in her opinion I do not do enough for our mother. If this had happened a while ago, it would have caused me much despair and a sleepless night. This time I said to myself: "Dear Anna, I know you are doing your utmost. It is okay." Then I put my arms around myself and fell asleep.'

*Anna, 49*

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When you become good at giving yourself support, you will always have at least one person right at hand to acknowledge your efforts – even when they may not seem particularly significant.

## Being compassionate towards yourself

Some people think it is wrong to be compassionate towards oneself. When I have sessions with clients where we explore situations from their childhood, I sometimes ask, 'When you look at this child that you once were, how does it make you feel?' The usual answer will be 'I feel very sorry for myself' and then very quickly 'Oh no, that sounds like a terrible thing to say.' But actually I am glad to hear that she is able to feel this sorrowful for herself. I see it as awakening self-love – and most people who seek help from a psychotherapist do not have much of that.

It is true that you can feel sorry for someone in a way that is unhealthy. Imagine a woman who starts the same moaning litany whenever she sits down with other people, repeating the same complaints over and over. Her problem is that she is feeling too sorry for herself. She is probably not in touch with her love for herself and this is why she feels so bad. Beneath the self-victimising strategy there may be a lot of anger which is covering up a great source of grief. When she is able to really connect with this grief, feel deeply how bad things are for her and be compassionate towards herself, she will no longer feel the need to repeat the same stories over and over.

I will sometimes ask my clients to give themselves a hug or a pat on the back. Often they are very reluctant. Some will start to cry because they realise how much

they have missed loving caresses. After they have cried, they feel better and have learned something very valuable.

## Reconciliation

It can be painful to feel as if you are a nuisance to others. This is especially true if you have personal maxims that forbid this or you have high standards for how pleasant you need to be around other people. As a highly sensitive person, you may have to ask others to restrict themselves at times.

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'I really don't like going upstairs to ask my neighbour to try to be less noisy. Even if I do my best to smile and be kind, I know I probably look really grumpy, because I feel very negative inside when I have to listen to sounds I don't like. Luckily, he is very nice about it.'

*Helle, 57*

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To reconcile with yourself also means to accept that at times you will be burdensome to others. Self-reconciliation is a lifelong task – not only for highly sensitive people but for everyone.

When we are young, we are full of ideas about how we would like our life to pan out. But as we grow, we start to realise how complicated life is and how powerless we often are, and we will have to let go of some of the things we hoped for. Some of our dreams about how well we wanted to do in life will turn out to be unrealistic. When this happens, it is important to be kind to yourself; to say



to yourself, 'I would have liked to do better' and 'It is as it is and that's okay,' implying 'I've done things well enough for me to still like myself.'

### The joy of becoming yourself

To become aware of oneself as a highly sensitive person can make a big difference for some people. It suddenly feels less terrifying and unacceptable to be different. It may open up opportunities to meet people who have similar experiences and struggle with similar dilemmas in life. Some of the participants in my courses are an inspiration to others because they have been successful in their quest to discover more about themselves. The courage to be yourself is contagious.

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'Nowadays I allow myself to walk at a pace that feels natural to me even though it is slow. I have always paced myself to walk a lot faster. But I don't any more. It takes longer to get to places but it feels good in my body.'

*Lisa, 28*

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To be highly sensitive is not something that can be treated in order to eliminate it. When you are highly sensitive, you will continually need to take breaks and look after yourself more than the majority of people. But the more you are able to embrace yourself as you are, the less energy you will have to spend trying to fit in and the stronger you will become.

In some areas, being highly sensitive makes things more difficult. But in other areas we are more competent.

A study of apes showed that young apes who were more reactive (sensitive) than other apes would fail to thrive when they got older if they were cared for by restless mothers. But if the reactive young apes were looked after by calm mothers, they would become leaders of the troop (Suomi 1987).

If you had a difficult childhood, if you did not experience sufficient safe attachment and now find yourself struggling in life, you should know that all is not lost. Old wounds can heal and you can learn to give yourself in the present the love that you did not receive in childhood. When you learn to give yourself love, you are also creating the conditions needed to give and receive love from others.

# RESEARCHING THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE TRAIT

## Strong reactions to sensory inputs

Even newborn babies will react in different ways to sensory inputs. If you give them water through a straw and suddenly change the sweetness of the water, some babies will continue drinking peacefully, whereas others will have very strong reactions. A study by La Gasse, Gruber and Lipsitt (1989) shows that two years later those babies who reacted strongly to the change were a lot more shy and cautious than the others.

This study is mentioned by the American psychologist and researcher Jerome Kagan in his book *The Long Shadow of Temperament* (Kagan and Snidman 2004). He also describes his own studies regarding heredity and temperament. Jerome Kagan conducted research on 500 four-month-old babies and found that approximately every fifth baby would react differently to the majority. In the beginning he named these children 'inhibited children' because they would be more vigilant and cautious than other children. Later he changed the term to 'high-reactive children'.

In Kagan's terminology, being highly reactive means that you will be able to register a higher degree of arousal in a child when he or she is subjected to new inputs and changes. The babies were presented with bursting balloons, unfamiliar coloured mobiles and their mother smiling at them but – unlike what she would normally do – keeping quiet. Four out of five infants would stay calm and relaxed, but one in five would react, crying and waving their arms. Jerome Kagan followed up on many of these infants when they turned two, four, seven and 11 years old, and found that in every single case the high-reactive children would continue to stand out by reacting more strongly to new inputs.

The term 'high-reactive' is not to be confused with being outwardly reacting, which is something very different. When we talk about high-reactive, we talk about inner arousal and affect. Even though high-reactive infants cry and wave their arms when something unfamiliar is going on around them, it is likely that as they grow older you will not be able to register the strong reaction the child is experiencing internally. What you notice might be things like the child placing him- or herself behind his or her mother or father when meeting strangers. So the infants who cried and waved their arms usually do not grow up to be noisy teenagers. On the contrary, they are likely to grow up to be quiet and more reserved youngsters who think more deeply about life than their peers.

The American psychologist and researcher Elaine Aron bases much of her research on other people's

studies. She believes that the children Jerome Kagan classifies as high-reactive actually are highly sensitive. Elaine Aron has since done research on highly sensitive adults and their reactions to sensory inputs using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) brain scans. The results of her research were published recently in the international scientific journal *Brain and Behaviour* (Acevedo *et al.* 2014).

For the research 18 participants were scanned while viewing photos of their romantic partners and of strangers who were displaying positive, negative or neutral facial expressions. The brain scans showed that the brain regions involved in empathy including the mirror neuron system<sup>1</sup> were significantly more active in people who were identified as highly sensitive than in other participants. Greater responses were registered when the highly sensitive participants were viewing images of their partners and especially when those images were of them smiling. The emotions of other people – positive as well as negative – created more internal arousal in highly sensitive participants than in others.

Even though the number of participants in this research was limited, I have no doubt that the results tell us something essential. What they show makes sense and it corresponds with my own experiences of highly sensitive people. I am particularly pleased to know that it showed the most significant responses in the brains of highly sensitive people when they were shown

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1 The mirror neuron system was discovered in the 1990s. It enables us to sense and reflect the emotions of others very accurately as if they were our own.

images of their partners feeling happy. It contradicts the common assumption that sensitive people only react when things are unsafe or unfamiliar. They actually react even more strongly to positive experiences, as demonstrated by this study.

### A new articulation

The term ‘highly sensitive’ is a new articulation of a personality type that has been described in the past with words such as ‘anxious’, ‘shy’ or ‘neurotic’. When I was young, it used to be called ‘bad nerves’. There is a tendency to regard outgoing and resilient people as healthier and more valuable than those who may be quiet, reserved and reflective, and highly sensitive people usually come across as the latter. Below is an example of how this tendency is expressed within the field of psychology.

The five-factor model – or the Big Five – is one of the most dominant models in personality psychology. It is used to describe a person’s personality using five different factors: neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Extroversion is described with these words: warmth, social engagement, domination, active, thrill-seeking and positive emotions. Introversion, on the other hand, is simply described as the absence of extroversion. It seems likely that the people involved in constructing this model were outgoing and robust themselves. This model overlooks characteristics such as having a rich inner life and reflecting deeply,

which are typical for the highly sensitive person or the introvert.<sup>2</sup>

All things considered, it is not surprising that introverted and highly sensitive people often struggle with low self-esteem. I am very grateful to Elaine Aron for offering an alternative way of thinking about and framing these traits.

The way that different human traits are described and valued in certain cultures or time periods has a big impact on the individual.

Elaine Aron describes the highly sensitive person as a complex composition of many different characteristics: conscientious, creative, inspired, suggestible, empathic, having a delicate sensory and nervous system and so on. These characteristics can contribute to difficulties in life but they can also be a source of creativity, presence and empathy.

She has described a personality type in which sensitive and delicate souls can recognise themselves. Here we find a new story about ourselves that is not solely concerned with there being something wrong with us, but is a story about belonging to a group of people who are able to experience deep joy and have other talents.

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2 Thirty per cent of highly sensitive people are extroverted, but even extroverted sensitive people will be able to recognise themselves in the descriptions of introversion (see Chapter 1). This just goes to show how we can describe and perceive things in very different ways.

## Nature and nurture

Elaine Aron's description of the highly sensitive trait is not conjured out of thin air. It is based on many interviews and her many years of experience as a psychotherapist.

There is no doubt that we are born with individual differences when it come to our personality traits. Many years of research confirms this and makes it difficult to argue otherwise. Some studies carried out on identical twins at the University of Minnesota since 1979 (e.g see Lewis 2014) show that inherent characteristics in many cases are more important than environment and upbringing.

In a study by American psychologist Professor Stephen J. Suomi (1987), it was found that monkey offspring often showed traits inherited from their fathers whom they had never met.

Even though research from the last decades shows that hereditary factors are much more important than previously assumed, social factors and environment still play a vital role in our development as human beings. When it comes to sensitivity, environment and upbringing are significant in determining whether it becomes a vulnerability or a resource.

## Test results

There is no doubt that some people are born sensitive. There is also no doubt that under the right circumstances being sensitive is or can become highly beneficial. It can be questioned whether we know for certain that 15–20 per cent of the population are highly



sensitive. When we look at Jerome Kagan's research using 500 babies, the conclusion was that approximately every fifth baby was more reactive than the others, so we could argue that this tells us that the 15–20 per cent estimate is reasonably correct. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Kagan only recruited babies from middle-class women, most of whom had a higher education. Also he screened out babies where there had been complications during pregnancy or birth. If he had done the research with a random section of a population, the results might have been different.

Elaine Aron's research was carried out by asking thousands of North Americans to answer a questionnaire she had developed. However, the results of the questionnaire were based on self-reporting; only people's own perceptions of themselves were recorded. There were no objective observations of the participants' behaviour, and family and friends were not asked whether they agreed with the answers given – for example, whether someone is conscientious and/or empathic. Some people were quick to tick the boxes that they believed to reflect positively on them. Others may have been insecure and questioning themselves: 'Am I really conscientious?' They may recall situations where they have been overwhelmed and very insensitive towards others when trying to escape a difficult situation. This may have distorted the outcome of the questionnaires.

Elaine Aron based her research on interviews carried out among North Americans. The test may have been perceived differently by non-Americans. I suspect that women in Denmark perceive sensitivity quite positively

and that more than every fifth person will answer yes to 12 or more questions.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the research in this field, and my own experiences as a psychotherapist for highly sensitive people, I have developed my own test.<sup>4</sup> Since it was first published, in 2010, it has been used by many highly sensitive people throughout Scandinavia. Like Elaine Aron's test, however, the results rely completely on people's own ideas and statements about themselves.

Sometime in the future we will probably have tests that are not reliant on self-reporting. Then we may find that the number of highly sensitive people is higher or lower than the presently estimated 15–20 per cent. I do think the estimation is fairly accurate, however. C.G. Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, believed that every fourth person was introverted and introversion has many similarities with being highly sensitive. There is no doubt that highly sensitive people are a minority; otherwise we would not have the recurring experiences of being different.

The minor study I did using Elaine Aron's 23 questions was carried out with 24 clients and before I was widely known as working with highly sensitive people. It showed that 50 per cent of my clients were highly sensitive. To me it makes sense that highly sensitive people seek support and help through counselling more

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3 Elaine Aron's self-test has 23 questions; to be regarded as highly sensitive, respondents needed to answer yes to 12 or more of them. The test can be found in Aron 1997.

4 Unlike Elaine Aron, I am not a scientist and my test is not intended to be a research instrument. It is made for individuals, who, just like me, enjoy taking tests and learn more about themselves in this way.

often than the general population. There are several reasons for this:

- ~ Highly sensitive people struggle more in daily life because of their sensitised nervous system.
- ~ Highly sensitive people feel under pressure from living in a society that holds resilience and being outgoing in high esteem.
- ~ When highly sensitive people find themselves struggling, they are less likely to sweep it under the carpet – partly because their threshold for pain is lower than other people's but also because they prefer to take things to a deeper level and enjoy reflecting on their lives.

## Epilogue

# A GIFT FOR THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE

Many people who come across the trait for the first time may nod and even cry when they recognise themselves, and may even feel emotional for a long time afterwards.

Many have talked about entering a period of exhaustion, and I think this is because they finally feel seen and understood which helps them to connect with themselves in a deeper way. They realise how hard and painful it is to perceive oneself as wrong and flawed – as they often have for most of their lives. At the same time they begin to stand taller and find the courage to be themselves.

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‘Since I became aware of being highly sensitive I have been joining in on conversations in the lunch break. I have a greater sense of being part of the community with my colleagues.’

*Maja, 38*

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When I ask people who participate in my courses about being highly sensitive what they have found rewarding, there is one answer that seems to reoccur: they feel less wrong. Most of them have always been aware that there

was something different about them and they have been worried that they were somehow flawed.

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'I was suicidal. I didn't feel like I was good enough or that I was able to fit in anywhere. When I learned about the trait of being highly sensitive, I recognised myself and suddenly felt able to see myself in a more positive light. That's when things started to change.'

*Dorthe, 52*

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Becoming aware of the sensitive trait helps us expand our perception of normality. There is no longer just *one* ideal way of being – robust, outgoing, energetic and happily thriving under pressure in open-plan offices.

Realising that there are two types within the same species – ideal in their own different ways – helps those of us who struggle to keep up with the rat race to find an identity. Not just as the fragile ones but also as people who have talents that the rest of the world needs. We are not just the ones who are unable; we have resources that are essential for the survival of the species.

When we start to look at ourselves this way, it becomes much more acceptable to have a delicate nervous system. It feels more okay to turn down an invitation to go to watch a horror film at the cinema. It feels more okay not to join a day trip or to leave a party early if you find yourself over-stimulated.

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'Now I understand why my life looks the way it does and why I think the way I do. It is such a relief to know that I am "just" sensitive. Not weak or going

mental. It has given me a sense of freedom to find the right framework for what's going on. And now I am much better at navigating my own world without feeling guilty when I can't join in on things.'

*Lise, 30*



Now you can openly talk about the things you used to think you had to do in secret and make excuses for. This is a great relief for many. Not just for the highly sensitive ones but for anyone who feels delicate at times – there is now an opportunity to allow yourself to be as delicate as you are. Sensitivity is not a flaw; it enriches your personality.



'After reading about the highly sensitive trait and understanding why there are times when I cannot do things others can and expect me to do too, I have stopped making excuses for myself. Now I say it as it is: I am over-stimulated and I need a break.'

*Susanne, 35*



# IDEAS FOR HIGHLY SENSITIVE PEOPLE

*Activities That Can Bring Joy and Wellbeing to Delicate Souls*

## Inspiring activities

- ~ Read a book.
- ~ Listen to the radio.
- ~ Go to the theatre or cinema.
- ~ Go to a concert.
- ~ Attend a workshop or lecture.
- ~ Read words of wisdom and reflect on them.

## Outgoing activities

- ~ Spend quality time with someone: give and receive massages, share inner experiences and reflections or enjoy each other's presence without words.
- ~ Spend time with children.

## Activities for when you are over-stimulated

Do something nurturing for your body

- ~ Yoga, Pilates or gentle exercises. If you do not have the energy to attend classes, you can buy DVDs with different exercise programmes or borrow them from the library. It would be good to get instructions from a teacher first and then you can do the exercises at home. When you need to withdraw, you can turn off the phone, put on a DVD and give all your attention to the programme.
- ~ Go for a run or a bike ride, or do water aerobics or other kinds of exercise.
- ~ Dance. Some highly sensitive people find great pleasure in just putting on some music at home and letting their body move freely. It is also a great way to exercise.
- ~ Have a bath or a footbath.
- ~ Give yourself a face massage, hand massage, foot massage or body massage. Light some candles and put on music while you do it. Or do it outside in the summer.



## Be in nature

- ~ Get some plants for your windowsill or your garden and enjoy watching things grow.
- ~ Nurture your plants and flowers.
- ~ Garden.
- ~ Go walking.
- ~ Take a sleeping bag and a mat out into nature and find somewhere with sounds of running water, waves or birdsong. Sit or lie down and meditate or have a sleep (only half an hour so you don't get heavy-headed).
- ~ Have a meal outdoors. Instead of sitting inside in restaurants and cafés, it might suit a highly sensitive person better to buy some takeout and sit in a park or on the beach. This is a lot less stimulating than sitting among a lot of strangers in a noisy room.
- ~ Lie in a hammock and look at the sky or into the treetops.
- ~ With a sleeping bag, mat and warm clothes, it is possible to spend time in nature during winter as well.
- ~ Go kayaking.
- ~ Take an umbrella and go for a walk in the rain. Enjoy the sound of raindrops on the umbrella and the smells of nature that are enhanced when it rains.

## Express yourself

- ~ Play music or sing.
- ~ Write books, poems, letters or a diary.

## Be creative

- ~ Arrange flowers.
- ~ Make pottery.
- ~ Paint and draw.
- ~ Make sculptures.

## Please your senses

- ~ Buy aromatic flowers or an aroma lamp with oils that you prefer.
- ~ Cook and eat delicious foods.
- ~ Look at art.
- ~ Listen to music, birds or nature.
- ~ Tidy and clean up, put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and enjoy.
- ~ Walk barefoot on warm soil or sand.
- ~ Let the sun warm your body.

## Rest your soul

- ~ Meditate.
- ~ Practise mindfulness or yoga.
- ~ Do relaxation exercises.
- ~ Contemplate or daydream.
- ~ Let your thoughts and imagination flow.
- ~ Find a spot with a gorgeous view. Sit and take it in.
- ~ Sit and look into a fire, preferably with burning wood logs and maybe a purring cat to accompany you.

## Enjoy the presence of animals

- ~ Play with a cat.
- ~ Pet an animal.
- ~ Groom or ride a horse.
- ~ Look at fish in an aquarium.
- ~ Feed birds.
- ~ Walk a dog.



## TEST YOURSELF: HOW SENSITIVE ARE YOU?

Tests should always be regarded with some discernment. When we attempt to describe an individual using tests, it will never be comprehensive. There are too many aspects that cannot be included. The results are also likely to vary according to your mood on the day you take the test. Use the test as a general guideline regarding your sensitivity but do not put too much emphasis on it.

There are five different ways to respond to each statement; each of them has a number. Grade each response from 0 to 4 as below:

0 = This does not describe me at all.

1 = This describes me a little.

2 = This describes me to some extent.

3 = This describes me fairly well.

4 = This describes me perfectly.

1. I feel excitement when I hear a beautiful piece of music. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I spend more energy than others trying to predict what might go wrong and prepare myself for different scenarios. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I am good at seeing new possibilities and options. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I get excited easily and have a lot of good ideas. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I know that there is more to life than the things we can see and hear. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I have a low pain threshold. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I often find that things that seem easy for others can become overwhelming for me. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I need to spend time on my own every day. \_\_\_\_\_
9. If I have to spend time with others for more than 2–3 hours without the possibility of withdrawing once in a while, I will often become exhausted. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I feel tempted to hide when I sense conflict coming. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Anger, even if it is not directed at me, is stressful. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Other people's pain affects me deeply. \_\_\_\_\_
13. I go to great lengths to avoid unpleasant surprises and mistakes. \_\_\_\_\_

14. I am creative. \_\_\_\_\_
15. Works of art can at times fill me with deep delight. \_\_\_\_\_
16. I get the sense that I have a lower threshold than others when it comes to multitasking; for instance, I can find it stressful to take part in a conversation while surfing on the internet. \_\_\_\_\_
17. I do not like being in highly stimulating places such as amusement parks and superstores or at sports events. \_\_\_\_\_
18. If I see violent images on TV, it can affect me for days afterwards. \_\_\_\_\_
19. I spend more time thinking about things than others. \_\_\_\_\_
20. I am good at sensing the state of animals and plants. \_\_\_\_\_
21. When surrounded by the beauty of nature, I am filled with intense joy. \_\_\_\_\_
22. I put out feelers and can easily sense how other people are feeling. \_\_\_\_\_
23. I feel guilty very easily. \_\_\_\_\_
24. It stresses me if people are observing me while I work. \_\_\_\_\_
25. I have an eye for authenticity and can see through other people's games. \_\_\_\_\_

- 26. I am easily startled. \_\_\_\_\_
- 27. I can offer others the experience of deeply felt presence and meaningful companionship. \_\_\_\_\_
- 28. Sounds that do not seem to bother other people can be extremely irritating for me. \_\_\_\_\_
- 29. I am very intuitive. \_\_\_\_\_
- 30. I am able to enjoy being alone. \_\_\_\_\_
- 31. Most of the time I am judicious and only seldom quick and spontaneous. \_\_\_\_\_
- 32. I am very affected by loud noises, strong smells and bright light. \_\_\_\_\_
- 33. I have a greater need for rest in quiet and peaceful surroundings than others. \_\_\_\_\_
- 34. If I am hungry or feeling cold, I struggle to distract myself from it. \_\_\_\_\_
- 35. I cry easily. \_\_\_\_\_
- Total** \_\_\_\_\_



36. I like to engage in new experiences without being prepared. \_\_\_\_\_
37. I feel good about myself when I get my way by being astute. \_\_\_\_\_
38. Socialising does not make me tired. If there is a good vibe, I can socialise all day without having to spend time on my own or taking breaks. \_\_\_\_\_
39. I love survival camps. \_\_\_\_\_
40. I like feeling under pressure at work. \_\_\_\_\_
41. I tend to think that it is people's own fault if they are unwell. \_\_\_\_\_
42. I usually have a lot of energy and my mood is unaffected by things happening around me. \_\_\_\_\_
43. I am often among the last people to leave a party. \_\_\_\_\_
44. I take things in my stride and I tend not to worry too much. \_\_\_\_\_
45. I like doing things like spending a weekend away with friend in a holiday cottage and I do not need to rest on my own. \_\_\_\_\_
46. I love it when friends come around unexpectedly. \_\_\_\_\_
47. I can manage with very little sleep. \_\_\_\_\_
48. I love to set off firecrackers. \_\_\_\_\_
- Total** \_\_\_\_\_

Statements 1–35 constitute group 1. Add up the numbers from your responses in group 1. If you have responded 1 to all the questions, the total sum will be 35.

Statements 36–48 constitute group 2. Add up the numbers from your responses in group 2. If you have responded 2 to all the questions in this group, the total sum will be 26.

Now subtract the sum of group 2 from the sum of group 1. Using the example sums from above, the total sum would be 9.

The number you end up with will tell you how sensitive you are. It will be somewhere between minus 52 and 140. The higher your number, the more sensitive you are. If your number is more than 60, it is possible that you are highly sensitive.

This test should not be the sole basis for assessing whether someone is a highly sensitive person. Familiarise yourself with the traits and also see Elaine Aron's test on her website: [www.hsperson.com](http://www.hsperson.com).

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Ilse Sand is a theology graduate from the University of Aarhus, where she wrote her Master's thesis on C.G. Jung and Søren Kierkegaard. She is also trained in several psychotherapeutic approaches and registered with the Association for Psychotherapy in Denmark.

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Elisabeth Svanholmer is originally from Denmark and has been living in the UK since 2013. Her background is in dance and arts but she has been working as a mental health trainer since 2006 and is particularly passionate about recovery and holistic approaches to mental health.

Elisabeth came across the concept of being highly sensitive in 2007 and has found it useful both in her personal and professional life. She is keen to promote understanding of the sensitive trait, but when she began delivering training outside Denmark she found there was a lack of books like Ilse Sand's available in English. She contacted Ilse and offered to help translate the book and

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