

# WELLNESSMONTHLY

Understanding Highly Sensitive People | July 2023



*“Even a moderate and familiar stimulation like a day at work can cause a highly sensitive person to need quiet by evening.”*

— Elaine Aron, Ph.D., author of *The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You*

## Highly Sensitive People Can Feel Misunderstood

Elaine Aron, Ph.D., a psychologist, introduced the phrase [highly sensitive person \(HSP\)](#) in the 1990s to describe a trait found in about 15 to 20 percent of the population.

According to Aron, an HSP has a normal, innate survival-strategy trait called sensory-processing sensitivity – being observant before acting. Sometimes this trait is perceived by others as being overly cautious, easily offended, excessively thorough or slow to make decisions. Consequently, HSPs can feel misunderstood.

Research indicates that an HSP’s brain receives, processes and reflects on information more deeply than a non-HSP’s brain. For example, HSPs have a tendency to notice connections and subtleties in human interactions and the environment. HSPs are also recognized for having strong emotions, empathy for others, creativity, capacity for rich relationships and inner lives, and appreciation for art, music or nature.

Some HSPs have a strong reaction to bright lights, sounds, smells, large social gatherings or crowded places. An HSP who feels stressed or over-stimulated may feel tired, irritable or depressed and need some downtime to rest.

There are differences among HSPs, people who are shy, introverted or who have good intuition. They also share similarities. Psychologists say HSPs can be introverted or extroverted, and that shyness is a learned behavior, not an innate trait. According to Aron, HSPs usually have good but not infallible intuition. “When you make a decision consciously, you may notice that you are slower than others because you think over all the options so carefully,” she says. “That’s depth processing, too.”

### HSPs in the Workplace

Experts say highly sensitive employees may be challenged to determine whether there is a legitimate need to further examine an issue before making a decision or there is an underlying fear that is preventing them from making it. In a *Harvard Business Review* article on [“Facing the Fears That Hold You Back at Work.”](#) authors Rebecca Zucker and Ruth Gotian have these suggestions:

- Identify where you feel stuck, for example, you may be hesitant to have a difficult conversation, hold others accountable, be more decisive or say “no” more often.
- Courageously name the fears that are holding you back. For example, you may be afraid of making a mistake or offending someone.

- Reflect on the cause(s) of your fears. These may be deeply rooted in your childhood, based on past disappointments or trauma, or an imagined worst-case scenario.
- Conduct a series of safe experiments to test your limiting beliefs and gradually loosen the grip on your core fears.

In the workplace, managers and co-workers who understand the nature of sensory-processing sensitivity can help an HSP teammate perform at the top of their game. Here are some recommendations that are applicable to HSPs and their work colleagues:

1. Value emotional well-being and encourage open, non-judgmental communication.
2. Be an active listener. Show empathy. Avoid interrupting or dismissing feelings.
3. Balance constructive feedback with positive reinforcement and recognition.
4. Try flexible work arrangements that help support healthy life-work balance.
5. Encourage self-care practices such as exercise, rest, good nutrition and hobbies.

Interestingly, these five recommendations also apply to co-workers who might be identified as emotionally insensitive or observed to be lacking in empathy.

## Sensitivity Management

A diverse workforce contains all types of people who can benefit from a compassionate, collaborative approach. Exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences can broaden their understanding of each other and foster empathy. Cross-functional projects or team-building activities can be used to develop a supportive work environment.

If you are an HSP, have some HSP characteristics or are close to an HSP, here are some ways to manage situations and emotions that can sap energy:

1. Understand that HSPs may need encouragement to set and uphold healthy boundaries.
2. Practice mindfulness meditation, deep breathing, muscle relaxation and other stress-reduction techniques.
3. Make activities that help improve your physical and mental health a routine part of daily life.
4. Find outlets for creative expression, such as art, music, writing, acting or gardening.
5. Talk to a therapist about how it feels when an HSP is told they are over-reacting, too sensitive or need to have a thicker skin.

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a role in the ability to manage intrusive thoughts that affect quality of life. When described as the capacity to effectively manage one's own and others' emotions, [research shows](#) that EI is a more reliable predictor of professional and personal growth than a person's intelligence quotient (IQ).

Studies suggest that the most effective work groups demonstrate high EI and create norms for attitudes and behaviors that help build trust, group identity and group efficacy. When this is achieved, the outcome is complete engagement in tasks.

### Did You Know?

*Psychologists Elaine and Art Aron developed a questionnaire to evaluate degrees of sensitivity in 1997 that is still in use. To answer the questions and receive a score, visit Elaine Aron's [Highly Sensitive Person website](#).*