

Being Sensitive and Creative

By Douglas Eby

Are creative people unusually sensitive?

Many reports by artists, as well as research findings, confirm that is often true.

Of course, being creative is not limited to people identified as artists, or even pursuing creative ventures.

Both creativity and being sensitive are on a spectrum - a range of different levels.

And being sensitive does not mean you are necessarily creative or an artist.

*Oh please be careful with me, I'm sensitive
And I'd like to stay that way*

From the song I'm Sensitive by Jewel Kilcher -
from her debut album Pieces of You



Writer Pearl Buck made a very strong declaration about sensitivity:



"The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanely sensitive.

"To them... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and

failure is death.

"Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create -- so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, their very breath is cut off...

"They must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency they are not really alive unless they are creating."

Pearl Buck (1892-1973) Her novel *The Good Earth* won a Pulitzer Prize, and in 1938 she won the Nobel Prize in literature.

Pearl Buck's statement, even if today it sounds overblown, is something you may relate to if you experience high sensitivity, and a compelling need to create.

And that connection continues to be confirmed by many people's personal experience, as well as research - such as this study:

Creative people more open to stimuli from environment

Decreased Latent Inhibition Is Associated With Increased Creative Achievement in High-Functioning Individuals

The study in the September [2003] issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology says the brains of creative people appear to be more open to incoming stimuli from the surrounding environment.



Other people's brains might shut out this same information through a process called "latent inhibition" - defined as an animal's unconscious capacity to ignore stimuli that experience has shown are irrelevant to its needs.

Through psychological testing, the researchers showed that creative individuals are much more likely to have low levels of latent inhibition.

"This means that creative individuals remain in contact with the extra information constantly streaming in from the environment," says co-author and University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson.

Co-researcher and psychology lecturer Shelley Carson of Harvard University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences said "Scientists have wondered for a long time why madness and creativity seem linked.

"It appears likely that low levels of latent inhibition and exceptional flexibility in thought might predispose to mental illness under some conditions and to creative accomplishment under others."

[The image is from an edition of the book *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* by Aldous Huxley.]

Of course, the statement "might predispose to mental illness" does not mean we are more likely to be "crazy" if we are sensitive, but sensitivity can be emotionally challenging, stressful, and possibly an issue in our mental health.

So what is sensitivity?

Highly Sensitive People have an uncommonly sensitive nervous system - a normal occurrence, according to Elaine Aron.



An HSP herself, Aron reassures other Highly Sensitive that they are quite normal.

Their trait is not a flaw or a syndrome, nor is it a reason to brag. It is an asset they can learn to use and protect.

from summary of book *The Highly Sensitive Person* on her site [The Highly Sensitive Person](#)

"About 15 to 20 percent of the population have this trait.

"It means you are aware of subtleties in your surroundings, a great advantage in many situations.

"It also means you are more easily overwhelmed when you have been out in a highly stimulating environment for too long, bombarded by sights and sounds until you are exhausted."



books by Elaine Aron:

[The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You](#)

[The Highly Sensitive Person's Workbook](#)

[The Highly Sensitive Person in Love](#)

[The Highly Sensitive Child](#)

Dr. Aron's excellent site includes a wide range of information, and a self-test.

She writes on the site about HSPs - highly sensitive people :

"This trait is not something new I discovered--it has been mislabeled as shyness (not an inherited trait), introversion (30% of HSPs are actually extraverts), inhibitedness, fearfulness, and the like.

"HSPs can be these, but none of these are the fundamental trait they have inherited.

"The reason for these negative misnomers and general lack of research on the subject is that in this culture being tough and outgoing is the preferred or ideal personality--not high sensitivity.

"This cultural bias affects HSPs as much as their trait affects them, as I am sure you realize. Even those who loved you probably told you, 'don't be so sensitive,' making you feel abnormal when in fact you could do nothing about it and it is not abnormal at all."

This common reaction from other people - "Don't be so sensitive" - is something a lot of

us have experienced in life at different ages, and it probably has had an enduring impact on how we accept ourselves and think about being sensitive.

Especially as a creative person, you need to follow your own path, your own mind and heart, and be authentic - not conform to other's ideas of acceptable personality traits.

Introversion and shyness, as Aron notes, may not inherently be part of the trait of sensitivity, but in my personal experience, and reading of many quotes by sensitive people, introversion and other qualities such as emotional intensity often accompany being sensitive.

Here are some more quotes by artists:

Actor / musician Mandy Moore:



"I'll cry at anything, even a tissue commercial," confesses ... "I'm overly sensitive. It's so easy to hurt my feelings." allstarz.org/~mandymoore/

"I'm extremely-extremely sensitive. I can cry at the drop of a hat. I'm such a girl when it comes to that. Anything upsets me. I cry all the time. I cry when I'm happy too." absolutely.net

"I get my feelings hurt very easily, and sometimes I just cry for no reason, and I hate that." malaya.com



Heath Ledger cried all night after being attacked with water pistols by paparazzi at the Sydney premiere of Brokeback Mountain - and later sold his \$4.45 million beachside home in Australia to relocate to Brooklyn with partner Michelle Williams and baby Matilda. [Daily Telegraph, 2006]



"There have been some traumatic experiences in my life that have resulted in my feeling that maybe I was going insane for a little while..."

"How do you ever explain the feelings of anxiety and paralyzing fear? I can't answer those questions. It's just a feeling of 'Am I crazy? Am I too sensitive to be in this world?'"

"A feeling that the world is just too complicated for me right now, and I don't feel like I belong here. But it passes, and fortunately today I feel blessed for all the good things in my life."

Winona Ryder [cinema.com]

Winona Ryder's comment brings up the issue of **anxiety**.

In her newsletter article "[Tips for HSPs' Less Sensitive Friends and Lovers](#)" Elaine Aron writes:

"HSPs are more affected by having troubled childhoods -- such a past can, for example, make them anxious, depressed, insecure, or shy as adults.

"This has nothing to do with the trait itself -- HSPs with good-enough childhoods do not have these troubles. Nor are the problems unchangeable. They can be vastly improved by your attitude and by your HSP's inner work, especially in skilled psychotherapy (sometimes along with medications).

"The work is slow and often difficult, as is almost anything worthwhile. HSPs often like this inner work-- they are well designed for it.."

Anxiety has often been part of my life, so perhaps I am more aware of it and concerned about its impacts, but I think it is often connected with sensitivity, especially for creative people who are generally more willing than others to access their emotions.

If it is part of your life, it is worth the effort to deal with it, because anxiety can keep you from more fully expressing your creative talents.

The Talent Development Resources site has a number of [articles on anxiety](#), plus [anxiety relief products/programs](#).

~ ~ ~

Some more perspectives on how sensitivity can relate to creative work:



"I'm a very sensitive person. I hurt real easy and real deep, which is why I think I have to write songs, [and] why so many of them fit the feelings of so many people that can't write.

"It's because I feel everything to my core."

Dolly Parton [checkout.com]



"She has the same kind of passion and excess [as Joan] and, you know, she can laugh and she can cry two seconds afterwards. She can cry for an ant on the street.

"She has, like, no skin. She feels everything. Even the wind can make her cry."

Director Luc Besson - about **Milla Jovovich** in their film
"The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc" [LA Times, 11.11.99]



"I get emotional all the time," says **Jennifer Beals**. "I get emotional every time I make a speech, or talk about other cast members," she says. "Every now and again, my heart just explodes and expands."

Laurel Holloman, her castmate on "The L Word", has seen this firsthand. "If Jennifer is passionate about something, it comes to the surface within seconds," she says.

"My theory on that is all the best actors have a couple of layers of skin peeled away. There's a huge emotional life in Jennifer, and it's kind of beautiful."

[From article The Real Beals - by Jancee Dunn, Lifetime, August 2004]

High sensitivity may be related to a number of "excitabilities" described in research on gifted children and adults, particularly by psychologist/psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski.

These personal "channels of information flow" and modes of experiencing can impact how gifted and creative individuals reach higher levels of development.

But even for non-gifted people, these "excitabilities" may be relevant.

In his Theory of Positive Disintegration, Dabrowski described the potential value of inner conflict, and five independent areas of psychic/emotional excitability or functioning, including:

Sensual - intensity and craving for pleasure; keen sensual aliveness to sights, smells, tastes, textures and sounds; seeking sensual outlets for inner tensions (e.g. overeating; sexual activity; shopping)...

Intellectual - questioning, questing, analysis, problem solving, theoretical thinking, curiosity, extensive reading, introspection, thinking about personal and social moral values; conceptual and intuitive integration...

Imaginational- vivid imagery, invention, creative imagination, rich association of images and impressions, animated visualization, use of image and metaphor in verbal expression, rich fantasy life, ability to recall dreams in vivid detail; animistic and magical thinking; fears of the unknown; poetic and dramatic perception; imagery as an expression of emotional tension...

Emotional - tense stomach, sinking heart, flushing; intensity of feeling, inhibition, timidity, shyness; strong emotional memory; anxieties, fears; strong empathy; need for protection; attachment to animals; difficulty adjusting to new environments; loneliness; conflict with others; feelings of inferiority and inadequacy...

Dr. Dabrowski said, "One could say that one who manifests a given form of overexcitability.. sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner.

"Reality for such an individual ceases to be indifferent but affects [them] deeply and leaves long-lasting impressions. Enhanced excitability is thus a means for more frequent interactions and a wider range of experiencing."

From article: [Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration](#) - by Elizabeth Mika

More information on the page: [Dabrowski on advanced development](#)

~ ~ ~

Taking care of your sensitive self

Acclaimed writer Mary Gaitskill refers to finding a place to live that was quiet enough for her "chaotic" emotions.

She does not identify that "chaos" as resulting from sensitivity, but many people do report

that being sensitive can fuel inner turmoil.

"I wanted to live somewhere [Marin County, Calif.] that was very quiet and didn't demand anything of me. ... I don't drive. Which is one of the reasons that I liked being in Marin, because without a car, everything had to slow down to one mile an hour.

"My internal state was so chaotic that I needed to be somewhere that wasn't going to reflect that back to me."

Mary Gaitskill [The Write Stuff Interview by Alexander Laurence 1994]



The film "Secretary" is based on a story in her book Bad Behavior

Here are more writers and coaches that help people work and live with sensitivity:



[Making Work Work for the Highly Sensitive Person](#) -

by Barrie S. Jaeger

"This book enlarges upon The Highly Sensitive Person (1996), by Elaine Aron, who describes the HSP as someone whose nervous system is particularly susceptible to stimuli.

"HSPs are more sensitive not only to their physical environments but also to emotional trauma.

"Jaeger believes that about 20 percent of the

"In discussing the work environment, Jaeger recommends that HSPs avoid drudgery, which is particularly devastating because HSPs are generally creative types who thrive on new challenges.

"Jaeger also advises that craftwork can quickly deteriorate into drudgery for HSPs, who often remain in a job they hate for too long because of commitments or fear.

"Instead, HSPs need to find more fulfilling work, which the author refers to as a calling. Jaeger says the particular needs of HSPs include stress management, rest and healing, learning the importance of saying no, and dealing with abusive co-workers.

"Jaeger includes case studies and quotes from numerous HSPs to illustrate the advantages of finding satisfying work.

from review by David Siegfried / Booklist

population can be described as HSPs and that the personality type may be inherited.

photo of Barrie Jaeger from her [site](#)

Learning to thrive as a Highly Sensitive Soul presents challenges.

If you're sensitive, you have likely accumulated years of training in trying overcome the trait because you don't "fit in" with society.

And yet being Highly Sensitive is a vital part of you.

A first step toward thriving as a Sensitive Soul is to understand and accept your trait.

Hear this now: There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. You are just different. As one of my clients says, being Highly Sensitive is both a gift and a responsibility.

Sensitive Souls require regular self-care, meaningful work, and supportive relationships.



Working with a sensitive coach or therapist who helps you tune into your own magnificent inner guidance system -- your sensitivity -- is a powerful means of support.

As you begin to manage your life in a way that truly works for you, you will trust the power and gift of your sensitivity, and be inspired to share your much-needed wisdom with the world.

Jenna Avery - from her article [Are You Highly Sensitive?](#)

Actor Leigh Taylor-Young talks about being highly sensitive to others, and how physical movement can help prevent overwhelm.

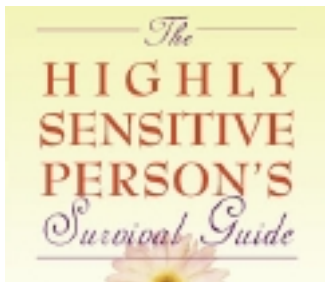
Maybe this is another way that performing and using movement in artforms such as acting, dancing, playing music, sculpting and others, can help manage sensitivity.

"From the time I was five until I was 17 [I took ballet lessons]. It was my dream. It helped me become very disciplined physically. It enabled me to move energy through my body.

"For those who are very empathetic and sensitive to other people, movement is essential because it enables them to disperse energies that aren't always theirs. You can get back into your own energy field very, very fast with physical movement. So I was very devoted to movement and have been ever since."



Leigh Taylor-Young From interview in Body Mind Spirit magazine posted on her site lty.com



[The Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide:
Essential Skills for Living Well in an
Overstimulating World](#)

by Ted Zeff, PhD,
foreword by Elaine Aron, PhD

"Ted Zeff shares many thoughtful insights and solutions to problems for highly sensitive people. This is an excellent collection of new, practical coping strategies."

Elaine Aron, author of
The Highly Sensitive Person

Highly Sensitive People (HSP) make up some 20 percent of the population, who both enjoy and wrestle with a finely tuned nervous system..

HSPs tend to be sensitive to noise, smells, lights, feel overwhelmed by crowds and time pressure or can't screen out stimuli.

They also tend to be very sensitive to pain, the effects of caffeine and violent movies.

This accessible, practical guide contains strategies to help you survive and thrive in an over-stimulating world. Build your coping skills by exploring the book's engaging exercises.

Author [Ted Zeff](#) - from posting in hspbook list [Yahoo group]

Site for book - with related resources
hpsurvival.com

Author and success consultant Jenna Forrest writes in her memoir [Help Is On Its Way](#) about growing up with the trait of high sensitivity.

In our podcast interview, she talks about empowering and transcending sensitivity.

From the interview:

"Millions of highly sensitive people right at this moment are carrying a heavier burden than the rest of society just because they're perceptive of the world's discord, which is coming at them every day from a laundry list of sources.

"This is where many sensitive kids and adults are right now, thinking that all these energies going on inside them are because something's wrong with them.

"Highly sensitive people have a beautiful ability to turn these burdens into art, inventions, writing, acting and other expressions that speak to the hearts of humanity."

Hear the podcast interview (and read transcript) on [Inner Talent Interviews](#).



~ ~ ~

More information and resources :

[Intensity / sensitivity](#)

[Intensity / sensitivity resources](#) : articles sites books

[High Sensitivity articles](#)

[Highly Sensitive](#) site

~ ~ ~