

Sensitivity Screening

Screening for Sensitivity

Derived from Elaine Aron's *HSP Questionnaire* (1997) and David Richey's *Holistic Inventory of Stimulus Sensitivities Questionnaire* (1999), the screening below may be used to measure clients' sensitivity to aversive sensory stimuli, along with accompanying negative affect.

Why are we measuring that?

The answer lies right in the subtitle of her book, *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person: Improving Outcomes for That Minority of People Who Are the Majority of Our Clients*. If you read past the cover (which I recommend), Elaine Aron, PhD, writes:

“Although the trait is found in 20% of the population, the actual occurrence is probably closer to 50% of patients in most practices....Individuals display this trait mainly if they had a troubled childhood which makes them more prone than nonsensitive persons to depression, anxiety, and shyness; although those who had good childhoods do not display these problems any more than nonsensitive persons.”

Indeed, there is evidence that trauma is a factor in HSP sensitivities. In fact, David Ritchey's H.I.S.S. questionnaire documented the prevalence of emotional and physical abuse among HSPs (Richey uses the term, "anomalously sensitive people"). Because HSPs are disproportionately affected by difficult or abusive childhoods, and do not heal very easily from interpersonal wounding, relationships tend to be much more challenging-including the therapeutic one.

Clinicians should not think of the trait itself as a disorder. Aron makes the distinction (again, right there) in the title of the book, *Psychotherapy **and** the Highly Sensitive Person*, as opposed to Psychotherapy **for** the Highly Sensitive Person. Aron asserts that HSPs are:

“a poorly misunderstood minority...seeking an explanation for why they seem to be so different. ...it is crucial that we know how to distinguish sensitivity from the many disorders that it could be mistaken for.”

Jung referred to it as innate sensitiveness, or high sensory processing sensitivity. High sensory processing sensitivity includes:

- Reactivity to aversive stimuli such as loud noises or coarse fabrics, which are captured in the sensory discomfort construct.
- The capacity to react to sensory stimuli of low stimulative value, captured by the idea of perceptual sensitivity.
- Associated constructs such as threshold and sensory defensiveness probably represent mixtures of both aspects of sensitivity.

According to Belsky, people vary significantly in the degree to which they are affected by experiences or features of the environment to which they are exposed, with some individuals more susceptible (or sensitive) to such influences than others. Aron further developed the notion of high sensitivity or sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) and coined the term **Highly Sensitive Person (HSP)** for those possessing the trait; and, developed a self-report measure, the *HSP Questionnaire* (1997), to screen for it. Summarized in Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, the research on sensory-processing sensitivity suggests that it is innate and found in about 15–20% of people; and is characterized by a greater depth of processing of sensory input, leading to a greater

Sensitivity Screening

awareness of subtleties, along with consequent hyperarousal by levels of sensory stimulation that do not bother others.

Based on their own research, Evans and Rothbart (2007) concluded that Aron's questionnaire was really a measure of two statistically independent components: orienting sensitivity and negative affect.

Orienting Sensitivity

- Affective perceptual sensitivity: spontaneous emotional cognitive content associated with low intensity stimuli.
- Associative sensitivity: spontaneous cognitive content that is unrelated to customary associations with the environment, e.g., *When I am resting with my eyes closed, I sometimes see visual images*

Negative Affect

- Aggression control: capacity to inhibit the behavioral expression of anger.
- Discomfort: unpleasant affect resulting from the sensory qualities of stimulation.
- Fear: unpleasant affect related to anticipation of pain or distress.
- Frustration: unpleasant affect related to the interruption of tasks and behavior.
- Sadness: unpleasant affect and lowered mood and energy related to object or person loss, disappointment, and exposure to suffering.
- Social Anger: hostility felt toward other people.

As an "overall style of the nervous system," Aron assures us that sensitivity is rather easy to spot, as it pervades all aspects of the HSPs life. Broken down into four broad defining features-identifiable in observable behavior, presenting problems, client history, or in the reactions of negative events in the client's formative years- it can be easily remembered by the acronym,

DOES:

- **D**epth of processing.
- **O**ver aroused (easily relative to others)
- **E**mootional reactivity and high empathy
- **S**ensitivity to subtle stimuli

Reflective of their low threshold for sensory input, HSPs often have heightened senses, with little tolerance for uncomfortable fabrics, sudden sounds, strong odors. They tend to make a fuss about things that other people barely notice. Judith Orloff, a psychiatrist and author of *Emotional Freedom*, describes it as such, "You have more receptors to perceive things. ...It's like feeling something with 50 fingers as opposed to 10." At the heart of it is most likely a genetic endowment— a nervous system that is set to notice, register, and internally amplify very low frequency stimuli.

In her 2002 book, *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight*, Sharon Heller, Ph.D. asserts that HSPs are essentially incapable of blocking out sensory stimulus. Especially serious reactions to relatively innocuous stimuli is known as *sensory defensiveness*. For the HSP, sensory sensitivities

Sensitivity Screening

do not just cause discomfort, they demand processing. To contend with these uncomfortable sensations and defend against overstimulation, the HSP must mobilize and consume a great deal of energy. The consumption of resources is substantial, with signs of stress developing quickly. Orloff contends that underneath all of it, is likely a **hair-trigger flight-or-fight response**- a lower threshold of activation of stress hormones that leaves the body flooded with both cortisol and adrenaline.

Yet another facet of sensitivity was the focus of Michael Jawer's research. As an investigator for the EPA investigating reports of *sick building syndrome*, Jawer was intrigued by the fact that only a handful of people had ever actually complained about the building's conditions. When he surveyed people previously identified as HSPs, he found unusual susceptibility to an array of conditions with a "psychosomatic" component. Compared to the general population, HSPs suffered disproportionately with allergies, migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, and fibromyalgia. Jawer felt that his findings pointed to wide-scale biological variations in HSPs. "Take migraines," he says. "We know they're triggered by a number of things in the environment—sights, smells, even changes in the weather." Not confined to sensory input, moods may also act as a catalyst: "Strong feelings, even ones people don't realize they have, can bring migraines on." Given HSPs exceptional ability to sense and internalize the moods of those around them, the mere presence of an agitated person may act as a trigger. Jawer concludes that HSPs are unusually touchy to both emotional and tangible irritants-from unkind comments to the pollen in the air.

In summary: The HSP's touchy nervous system leads to a touchy temperament. They perceive the slightest sensory or emotional provocation, then respond with a burst of brain activity that generates an über reaction-drama, rumination, and tears, on one hand, and irrepressible enthusiasm on the other. Due to their unique biology, personalities may range from temperamental to moody to histrionic. Those HSPs parented by responsive, attuned caregivers fare very well; while those parented by misattuned, abusive, or neglectful caregivers are much more likely to seek our services.#

Sensitivity Screening

Using the following scale, circle the number that best represents your experience

Question	1 Completely Agree			4 Somewhat Agree			7 Completely Disagree
#1.	As a child, most people considered me sensitive and/or shy						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#2.	Adapting to change seems to be easier for me than for others						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#3.	I am affected or bothered by harsh or bright lights						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#4.	Time pressure and a lot of things to do at once is how I work best						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#5.	I seem to notice much more about the environment than others do						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#6.	Other people's moods rarely have any impact on me						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#7.	If I cannot go at my own pace, I may become disinterested in the task or activity						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#8.	I am rarely angry with anyone						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#9.	I startle easily and am affected by loud noises						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#10.	Pungent odors or coarse scratchy fabrics don't really bother me much						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#11.	I am easily physiologically aroused.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#12.	I'm rarely bothered when people are late						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#13.	I tend to have different values than other people, e.g. I value compassion over materialism						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sensitivity Screening

Question	1 Completely Agree			4 Somewhat Agree			7 Completely Disagree
#14.	When I hear people say that they can “feel energy” or “pick up on certain vibrations”, I really don't know what they're talking about						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#15.	Heightened physiological arousal is often too much for me to tolerate, and often feel the need to get away and to calm down.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#16.	If I'm being honest, I thrive on chaos						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#17.	It seems like my empathy makes it hard for me to set boundaries						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#18.	I'm comfortable with small talk; but, talking about anything deeper seems like way too much work						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#19.	I have difficulty controlling hostile impulses						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#20.	For me, stability sounds tragically boring; I am at my best in a busy, changing environment						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#21.	I've been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#22.	I am generally relaxed and comfortable, especially when there's a lot going on around me						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#23.	Knowing what would make people more comfortable in a given environment seems completely intuitive						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#24.	Integrity is not all that important to me						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
#25.	Sometimes I need to be alone, shut out all sensory input and chill						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sensitivity Screening

Scoring and Interpretation

		Score
1.	Add up scores for all the odd numbered questions.	
2.	Before adding up the even numbered questions, first reverse the scoring, e.g., if person circled the # 1, it is scored a 7. If the person circled #5, it is scored as a 3, etc.	
3.	Add up the reversed scores	
4	Add up both the odd and (reversed) even scores	
	Screening Score	
Interpretation: The lower the score, the higher the sensitivity.		