

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) vs Non-SPS

Common Stress Response Tendencies & Regulation Patterns

(Educational Nervous System Comparison Sheet — Not Diagnostic)

	SPS (Sensory Processing Sensitivity)	Non-SPS
Baseline Processing Style	Tends toward deeper cognitive and emotional processing of sensory and environmental information	Tends toward more selective or externally focused processing of environmental information
Sensitivity to Stimulation	More sensitive to sensory, emotional, and social stimulation	Typically requires higher levels of stimulation before overwhelm occurs
Common Stress Triggers	Cumulative overstimulation, emotional intensity, ambiguity, interpersonal tension, uncertainty	Direct conflict, tangible threat, time pressure, frustration, external obstacles
Stress Activation Pattern	May activate earlier due to high sensory/emotional input load	May activate more in response to immediate or concrete stressors
Typical Internal Experience Under Stress	“There is too much happening internally or externally at once.”	“Something needs to be solved, controlled, or addressed.”
Cognitive Pattern Under Stress	Increased reflection, anticipation, recursive thinking, emotional processing	Increased task focus, rapid assessment, external problem orientation
Emotional Stress Pattern	Overwhelm, anxiety, emotional flooding, withdrawal, shutdown	Irritability, frustration, impatience, reactive problem-solving

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Fight Response Tendencies	May become defensive, controlling, or emotionally reactive after prolonged overwhelm	May become confrontational, forceful, or externally reactive under pressure
Flight Response Tendencies	Anxiety-style activation, avoidance, overthinking, mental escape, overstimulation avoidance	Avoidance of discomfort, conflict, failure, or perceived threat
Freeze Response Tendencies	Mental overload, indecision, shutdown, numbness, or dissociative features under high overwhelm	Temporary hesitation, shutdown, or immobilization under acute stress
Fawn/Appeasement Tendencies	May prioritize harmony, reassurance, or people-pleasing to reduce tension	Can occur depending on conditioning and attachment history, but may be less dominant
Body-Based Stress Signals	Fatigue, racing thoughts, sensory overload, chest tightness, hypervigilance, emotional exhaustion	Muscle tension, adrenaline activation, narrowed focus, physical agitation
Relationship to Uncertainty	Often more reactive to ambiguity, unpredictability, and emotional uncertainty	Often more reactive to direct risk, failure, or loss of control
Common Cognitive Tendencies Under Stress	Catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, confirmation bias, loss aversion, rumination	Overconfidence, impulsive action, reactance, minimization of emotional cues
Decision-Making Under Pressure	May become delayed due to overprocessing or overwhelm	May become rushed due to urgency or action bias
Recovery After Stress	Often benefits from longer decompression and reduced stimulation after high activation	Often recovers more quickly once stressor resolves or action is taken
Helpful Regulation Approaches	Reduced stimulation, grounding, nervous system regulation, emotional processing, structured reassurance	Physical decompression, problem-solving, movement, structured action, deliberate slowing

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Primary Regulation Need	Reduce overload and restore internal stability	Reduce escalation and restore behavioral control
Prefrontal Cortex Re-engagement	Often improved through calming sensory/emotional load first	Often improved through slowing impulsive reaction and restoring reflection
Potential Strengths Under Pressure	High empathy, intuition, detail awareness, emotional attunement, pattern recognition	Decisiveness, action orientation, persistence, rapid response capability
Potential Difficulties Under Pressure	Overwhelm, paralysis by analysis, emotional exhaustion, withdrawal	Impulsivity, emotional suppression, aggressive reactivity, overextension

Quick Regulation Comparison

SPS Regulation Tendencies	Non-SPS Regulation Tendencies
Lower stimulation load	Lower escalation level
Slow down cognitive overload	Slow down reactive behavior
Ground into body awareness	Pause before acting
Restore nervous system safety first	Restore behavioral control first
Use reassurance and structure	Use focused action and reflection
Allow decompression time	Allow physical and mental discharge

Important Note

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a temperament trait, not a disorder or diagnosis. Stress responses are influenced by many interacting factors including trauma history, attachment patterns, nervous system conditioning, environment, personality structure, sleep, and overall health. These patterns describe common tendencies, not rigid categories.

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Sources & Research Foundations Used For This Comparison

The comparison sheet was synthesized from established research and clinical frameworks across temperament theory, stress physiology, trauma psychology, affective neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. It is not pulled from one single study or diagnostic model.

Primary SPS (Sensory Processing Sensitivity) Research

Elaine Aron

Founder of the SPS framework / Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) construct.

Foundational Books

- The Highly Sensitive Person
- Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person

Key Research Themes

- Depth of processing
- Overstimulation susceptibility
- Emotional responsiveness
- Sensory sensitivity
- Differential susceptibility

Foundational Paper

Aron, E. N., & Aron, A. (1997).

Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality.
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73(2), 345–368.

Stress Physiology / Nervous System Regulation

Stephen Porges

Major Concepts Used

- Neuroception
- Autonomic nervous system states
- Social engagement vs defensive states
- Fight/flight/freeze physiology

Primary Source

- The Polyvagal Theory
-

Bessel van der Kolk

Major Concepts Used

- Trauma-related nervous system activation
- Emotional overwhelm
- Dissociation/shutdown
- Body-based stress responses

Primary Source

- The Body Keeps the Score
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Stress Response & Cognitive Load

Bruce McEwen

Major Concepts Used

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- Allostatic load
- Chronic stress activation
- Stress adaptation
- Cognitive impairment under stress

Key Work

McEwen, B. S.

Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators.

Daniel Kahneman

Major Concepts Used

- Cognitive biases
- Threat-based decision making
- Fast vs slow thinking
- Loss aversion
- Heuristics under uncertainty

Primary Source

- Thinking, Fast and Slow
-

Trauma / Survival State Concepts

Pete Walker

Major Concepts Used

- Fight/flight/freeze/fawn trauma responses
- Complex PTSD patterns
- Emotional flashbacks
- Nervous system dysregulation

Primary Source

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- Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving
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Executive Function & Prefrontal Cortex Stress Research

Daniel Siegel

Major Concepts Used

- “Flipping the lid”
- Integration vs dysregulation
- Prefrontal cortex impairment under stress
- Emotional regulation

Primary Source

- Mindsight
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Additional Conceptual Influences

Attachment & Emotional Regulation

- John Bowlby
- Allan Schore

Somatic / Body-Based Regulation

- Peter Levine
 - Waking the Tiger
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Important Clinical Clarification

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The following portions of the comparison are **integrative educational synthesis**, not formally established diagnostic categories or universally validated distinctions:

- SPS vs non-SPS bias tendencies
- SPS vs non-SPS fight/flight predominance
- specific cognitive style comparisons
- exact regulation differences

These were derived by combining:

- SPS research
- autonomic nervous system research
- trauma physiology
- cognitive psychology
- clinical observation models

They should be viewed as:

“common nervous system tendencies”

—not rigid scientific categories.
