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Highly sensitive people make great leaders

Some folks taste, feel, notice and hear more than the average Joe, and were repressed for it, psychologist says

Karen Gram

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VANCOUVER - They grew up being told to toughen up, to quit being so shy, to stop being so sensitive, to get out there and fight their battles. On report cards where teachers list areas that need improvement, they would find comments urging them to be more outgoing, as if being reserved was a fault, like messy handwriting.

But research by a California psychologist has found toughening up these folks would be as impossible as changing their eye colour. Their sensitivity is an inherited trait, identified in twin studies, that increases the depth with which their brains process stimuli, whether it be physical or emotional.

Highly sensitive people, or HSPs as they have come to be known, make up about 15 to 20 per cent of the population. They taste more, feel more, notice more, hear more and frequently become overwhelmed by it all. It's not that their taste buds are bigger or their hearing more acute, it's that their brains are sorting the information into more subtle distinctions than the average Joe.

Elaine Aron, a psychologist in San Francisco who has spent many years in Canada, coined the term "highly sensitive people" after doing research identifying the trait. It's not a perfect description, she says, but it's better than neurotic or introverted or mentally ill or aloof, or other such epithets that they have been branded with over the years.

Physicians frequently dismiss them as hypochondriacs.

Aron is herself a highly sensitive person who decided it was high time the condition was examined scientifically. She has devoted her career to the trait and has conducted many peer-reviewed studies, published in scientific journals. She also authored three books for lay people: *The Highly Sensitive Person*, *The Highly Sensitive Child* and *The Highly Sensitive Person in Love*.

The books reassure people the trait is normal and has many positives. They show how to identify it and how to make the most of it in everyday situations.

Sensitivity is anything but a flaw, says Aron. Many HSPs are often unusually creative and productive workers, attentive and thoughtful partners, and intellectually gifted individuals.

While she may have been the first to name it, she follows a long line of psychologists who have noticed some people are more sensitive than others. Carl Jung described it early in his work, but later he, like many others, just called it introversion and lumped it in with depression.

But Aron says this is incorrect. Thirty per cent of HSPs are extroverted. And while many HSPs are depressed, anxious or introverted, when you factor out those conditions, the trait still exists.

"They don't rush right into things," she says. "They pause and check first, reflecting on their past experiences."

HSP is common in all species, from the fruit fly to the sunfish to primates and humans. It's innate and has a very specific survival role. The HSPs can detect danger, whether it's a predator or a poison, before others in the pack. In humans, they tend to be good at group dynamics, noticing subtle cues that others miss and analysing them. They are uncanny lie detectors and refined wine tasters or perfume samplers.

"They'd be amazingly good on Survivor," jokes Pam Catopia, a Vancouver counsellor who works with HSPs and is also one herself.

They see the big picture and can see the ways a culture is heading down a wrong path. They make great leaders -- think the Dalai Lama or wise advisers to world leaders. Not surprisingly, they also tend to be creative, she says.

As well, they tend to be fearful, disliking fireworks, horror movies and time away from home. And if they have had a troubled childhood, they are much more vulnerable to anxiety and depression, says Aron.

Catopia says most HSPs learn to hide their sensitivity, which is very damaging as well. They feel relieved when they connect with other HSPs at a workshop and learn they have value to society.

"They are relieved to hear they don't need to change, that they have actual strengths and those strengths can become coping mechanisms."

Catopia teaches them coping techniques such as scheduling their days to ensure they get at least an hour, maybe two, of downtime each day and to get lots of sleep. "There is a lot of processing happening when dreaming."

Catopia also teaches them how to talk to their doctors so they will listen. HSPs notice subtle changes in their bodies long before others would. Doctors tend to disregard them, but Catopia coaches HSPs on what to say in order to get their attention.

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