

Being Sensitive and Creative

By Douglas Eby

An excerpt from the Kindle ebook [Being Sensitive and Creative](#).

Are creative people unusually sensitive?

Clinical and research reports confirm that is often true - as well as comments by many creative people about their own experience.

For example, therapist Lisa A. Riley, LMFT notes:

Throughout my practice, I have encountered a connection between highly sensitive people and their own creative impulses.

This characteristic does not discriminate between painter, actor, or musician—they all appear to have one thing in common: they experience the world differently than the average individual.

Creatives often feel and perceive more intensely, dramatically, and with a wildly vivid color palate to draw from, which can only be described as looking at the world through a much larger lens.

From her guest post on my Highly Sensitive site:

[Highly Sensitive Personality and Creativity](#)

Of course, being creative is not limited to people identified as artists, or just those who are 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.

Psychologist Elaine Aron, PhD is probably the leading expert on high sensitivity, or more technically, sensory processing sensitivity.

Her research has found it is an innate personality trait present in 15 to 20 percent of us. It is not the same as introversion or shyness, though there are interactions and overlaps, as I noted in my post [Shyness, Introversion, Sensitivity - What's the Difference?](#)

Dr. Aron explains:

"Highly sensitive individuals are those born with a tendency to notice more in their environment and deeply reflect on everything before acting, as compared to those who notice less and act quickly and impulsively. As a result, sensitive people, both children and adults, tend to be empathic, smart, intuitive, creative, careful, and conscientious..."



From her book *The Highly Sensitive Child*.

Her newer book is [The Undervalued Self](#).

Back to Pearl Buck's famous quote above: "The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive" etc.

While I appreciate her perspectives, there are parts I don't agree with: What does "truly creative" even mean, and is she implying that only those who are highly sensitive qualify as "true" creators?

Also, she says "inhumanly sensitive" as though it were some extreme condition – but research by psychologist Elaine Aron, PhD and others indicates the trait occurs with 15 – 20 % of people.

In an edition of her newsletter Comfort Zone, Dr. Aron writes that Buck "was saying all creative people are highly sensitive. I don't know about that, but I know ALL HSPs are creative, by definition.

"Many have squashed their creativity because of their low self-esteem; many more had it squashed for them, before they could ever know about. But we all have it, as I will explain."

Dr. Aron notes, "One of the best ways to make life meaningful for an HSP is to use that creativity."

More in my Creative Mind post [Elaine Aron on Creativity and Sensitivity](#)

Also, much as I appreciate Jewel's lyrics "I want to stay that way" - saying "please be careful with me" can imply the criticism people have about highly sensitive people, saying things like "Lighten up" or simply "You're too sensitive."

As a sensitive person, it isn't up to others - it's up to you to learn your needs and limits, and take care of not getting overwhelmed, so you can really embrace your sensitive trait and use it creatively.

More on sensitivity and creative ability

This 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.

What is sensitivity?

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

"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."

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

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

Books by Elaine Aron include:

[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]



Winona Ryder:

"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." [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 series of sites has a number of [articles on anxiety](#), plus a site: [Anxiety Relief Solutions](#).

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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]

Excitabilities

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.

Taking care of your sensitive self

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

"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. [From review by David Siegfried / Booklist]

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.

Get more information and resources in the book:

[Being Sensitive and Creative.](#)

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