

## Are You a Highly Sensitive Person?

by Tami Simon

What follows is the transcript of a SoundsTrue interview between Tami Simon and Elaine Aron. You can listen to the audio podcast [here](#).

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge, produced by Sounds True. My name's Tami Simon, I'm the founder of Sounds True, and I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion, regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges.

The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you'd like to learn more or feel inspired to become a supporter, please visit [SoundsTrueFoundation.org](http://SoundsTrueFoundation.org).

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Dr. Elaine Aron. Elaine Aron earned her PhD in clinical depth psychology as well as interning at the C.G. Jung Institute in San Francisco. Elaine Aron literally wrote the book on The Highly Sensitive Person in 1998. She coined the term, and since then she's dedicated her life and her teaching work to educating people and doing research on what it means to be a highly sensitive person. With Sounds True, Elaine Aron has created a new audio training program called The Highly Sensitive Person's Complete Learning Program: Essential Insights and Tools for Navigating Your Work, Relationships, and Life.

I joked with Elaine during this conversation that HSP, the highly sensitive person, those same initials could be used to describe a highly skeptical person. Elaine entertained all of my skeptical questions with a lot of sensitivity and made a very strong case that the more we can recognize and honor our sensitivity, the more people with high sensitivity will be cultural leaders, and that's something that we need. Here's my conversation with Elaine Aron:

Elaine, you're credited with coining the term "the highly sensitive person." Can you tell me a little bit about that? How does someone get credited with creating a whole category for people?

Elaine Aron: Well, that's a good question. I am a psychologist, and married to a very involved research psychologist. The casual statement that was made to me then jumped ahead, but I told this story in the movie, *Sensitive: The Untold Story* I was seeing a doctor, I had some medical procedure, and he considered me to have overreacted, with tears and all of that, to the procedure. So he sent me for some "medically-related psychotherapy," and at about the third session, this therapist said to me, "Well, you know, I think you

might just be really highly sensitive. I'm highly sensitive, my husband is, all of the people I find worth knowing are highly sensitive."

I didn't know what to make of that, so I went home and began trying to research it, first just doing a search of all of the literature on the term "sensitive," and found that it was applied to gifted children, it was applied to good parents. But there really wasn't any definition of it in psychology, even though you see people using it all of the time. You know, very sensitive patients, something like that. So I got curious, then I did some interviews. Then my husband and I created a questionnaire of 60 items and boiled it down to a shorter one where they all—if you're true on one, you're likely to be true on the others.

And off it went. There was a newspaper article in the local paper, the Santa Cruz Sentinel, about our research. The next thing I knew, people were just inundating me about it. I eventually, out of that, wrote a book. I definitely was not planning to write a self-help book. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but it has happened and it has certainly changed my life a great deal.

So yes, you might wonder. A new term—when I interviewed people, I thought it might be introversion, but 30 percent of highly sensitive people are actually extroverts. The term "shyness" is sometimes applied to these people, or inhibitedness, but shyness is a fear of social judgment, and that is not innate. I consider this trait to be innate, and it is found in equal numbers of men and women. The innate part comes, in part, from understanding children's temperament, and there is something called an "inhibited temperament," which probably closer, but I don't find it a very descriptive term, really. And what would you rather have, an inhibited or an uninhibited child?

But I did look at the animal literature, and in at least 100 species, there are these two different personality types that have called various things, like timid and bold, which I also don't think is accurate. It seems to be a survival strategy that works for a minority, and the reason it's a minority, interestingly enough, is that if everyone were sensitive, there would be no payoff in terms of evolution and survival. So if everybody's found the same delicious grass that was hiding in the bushes, then it would all be eaten up, but only a minority find that.

And of course, sometimes what you've found in situation A that you then generalize to situation B to make yourself more successful doesn't work, so it also is an extra load on the nervous system to observe and process everything more carefully. But that's the main reason it's a minority. It's not that it's any kind of disorder or syndrome or something. No, we've had it for a long time in a lot of species.

TS: Now, there's a lot in what you're saying already, so I want to slow down a bit and pull out some of the strands. To begin with, what are the defining characteristics of being highly sensitive?

EA: I have, a few years ago, adopted four letter, DOES, to help people remember. First, "D" stands for depth of processing, because that is the primary aspect which you can't observe. But people report it, where you can observe the results of it, of seeing something and thinking about it more, reflecting on it more. And possibly unconsciously, so that you have intuitions without knowing how you got them. But that tendency to pause and check before acting.

The second one, "O," is being easily overstimulated, which sadly is the only negative part

of the trait, but it's a big one. People, with all of this processing, if they're processing everything that happens to them, their neurotransmitters get worn out sooner. "E" stands for emotional responsiveness and empathy. We see from brain studies that they have more empathy when seeing pictures of unhappy people, including their partners. And emotionally responsive? Well, they have—both positive and negative emotions are stronger. We know, actually, the positive is even more different than the negative. I argue that the emotional part is what causes the depth of processing, because we don't process anything if we don't have some emotional reason to do it.

That's why people are given tests, to make them worried about failing if they don't study a lot. Even remembering a phone number, we have some emotional reason for needing that phone number, or we wouldn't remember it.

And the last one, "S," is sensitive to subtle stimuli, which it's kind of clear what that is.

TS: And is someone either highly sensitive or not, or could you be somewhere in the middle like, "I'm a little highly sensitive, but I'm not very highly sensitive?"

EA: Right. Well, we've tried to do research on that and got various answers. But right now, what it looks like is that there are three rather distinct groups. One is highly sensitive, one are the moderate people, and there's a low end. But each of them, interestingly, has a normal curve within its category, rather than being a bell-shaped curve where most people are in the middle. More people are in the middle, but it's not ... It's 30 percent, 30 percent at either one, and then about 40 percent in the middle.

Now at the other end, it's interesting, because we have people who are very low in sensitivity, and we sometimes see this in children or in adults where there tends to be impulsiveness, maybe a little bit less empathy, maybe successful in other ways, but there is that group. On the self-test that's on my website and my books, there are people who say yes to every item, and there are people who say no to every item. There's definitely a middle group, so yes, you could fall into that middle group.

TS: So when you talk about a percentage of the population that identifies as being highly sensitive, I think you said 20 percent of the population, are those the people who grade in that high category?

EA: Yes. And there's 15 to 30 percent, but I'd say 20 percent makes it easy. But it's around there. It's too high, again, to be a disadvantage or a disorder. It wouldn't keep appearing in the gene pool for so long.

TS: And when you say this quality is innate, and now you're referring to the gene pool, what you mean is that this is inherited? That you're born this way, it's not an adaptation?

EA: Right. Right. Although there are lots of people who are highly sensitive who are in families where people are not highly sensitive, and Jay Belsky who does a lot of research on this and other things, he argues that people—that in a family, there'll be one person who's highly sensitive and one who's not, because this is an evolutionary advantage, for the family to have both types of children if they have more than one. I always tease him. I say, "Well, how does the mother's womb know the kind of baby to have next?" He says, "I don't know, but I know it's true." And it is funny that you do see that combination a lot. But if you start inquiring into the extended family, you always find highly sensitive people.

We know it's genetic partly from twin studies. We do have some genes identified, but the

whole thing with candidate genes, like the short serotonin allele, is now passé in the research regime. What we thought we might have had a grasp on we no longer say, except through the animal studies and the twin studies.

TS: OK. And then, help me understand the animal studies. How are we studying these different species and what are we looking for?

EA: Well, a biologist—interestingly, I was contacted by a biologist who said, “I’m beginning to be convinced this is a general trait. I’ve been studying it in different species, but if humans have it, too ...” So we’re saying, “Look, animals have it, too.” They’re saying, “Look, humans have it, too.” Well, I’ll give you an example. A couple of examples. Well, three examples maybe.

TS: Sure.

EA: Quickly. One is, David Sloan Wilson did these studies on pumpkinseed sunfish in which he went out and trapped some of the sunfish and then couldn’t trap the others. So he called them “timid versus bold,” I called them “smart versus stupid.”[Laughs] But the ones that couldn’t be trapped easily, they then went out and got them all in a huge net and brought them in and compared their behaviors in the lab. They were the same species, and yet many things about them were different. Not only their behavior, but they had different parasites and all kinds of differences. And it was about 20 percent of the fish that had this characteristic, this way of behaving.

And fruit flies, there are sitters and rovers. Rovers are flying around more, sitters are apparently watching for what they’re looking for before they just start flying around. And in rhesus monkey macaques—Steven Sumi did research on them and he called them “uptight” and “laid back, ” because the uptight ones were more anxious. But he also found that, when you took the uptight ones and gave them to particularly skilled mothers to mother, they became the leaders of the troops. I imagine because they were good at observing the power relationships and the best way to get what they wanted.

So I think that brings us to the subject of differential susceptibility, which is that we keep finding with humans—and with animals, too—raised well, they can be leaders. Raised poorly, they do worse than others. They have more depression, more anxiety than other people. An important point for raising sensitive children, of course, as well as for interventions and all for adults, sensitive people probably do much better in psychotherapy in terms of improving, but there’s probably a lot more of them in therapy because they’re more damaged by the same kind of childhood than another person would be.

TS: Now in addition to being a researcher yourself, you identify as a highly sensitive person. Is that true?

EA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

TS: Would you say are you a highly, highly sensitive person?

EA: Yes. I answered yes to all of the items on the self-test, maybe because I wrote it! [Laughs] But it was based on these interviews, and actually, we’re in the process of revising it a bit. I didn’t know it until that person said that to me, and then I began to think about it and try to learn more about it.

TS: Which brings me to a different kind of HSP question, a Highly Skeptical Person question for a moment.

EA: Sure.

TS: Believe it or not, even here at Sounds True, some people have expressed skepticism about the highly sensitive person. They're like, "Wait a second. Is this some way that we've created a positive framing for someone's intense sensitivity that really is making them, in many ways, hard to function in the world, but now it's being described as this beautiful, fabulous, exquisite sensitivity, when really it's like they're a hot-house flower?" or something like that. What do you think about that?

EA: Well, two things. One, it's almost always men who say that. I find men have a real complex about sensitivity, whether they are or not. I tease them when I'm being interviewed, and I've seen this so often, that it's either criticized or made a joke of. And sensitivity for a man—I wish that term was not the term I was using, because it's really hard for men just to have that word around them. So that's one source of skepticism is just tension around the concept of, "Boy, I sure don't want to be somebody like that," and "Maybe they're all just pitiful things?"

The other point is that the sensitive people we do notice are those who've had a harder childhood, who are more anxious, more depressed, more easily wounded because they have low self-esteem. And the ones that are higher functioning, most people don't notice them. They blend in, they adapt. Unless you know them well, you don't know that much about their sensitivity. You know them as creative, ethical, interesting, good listeners, good at details, good at the big picture. Not that they're that superlative over other people, but that's more the impression that you get. So it is that differential susceptibility again that makes some people more noticeable than others.

TS: Now let's say somebody's listening, and they're inquiring, "Am I really a highly sensitive person? I'm not sure." Do you have a few key investigative questions they could ask themselves to help them know if they are or they're not?

EA: Sure. One is if they don't like—let's start with overstimulation. Noisy or chaotic environments, if they try to avoid those. If they prefer to avoid things like violent TV and movies. Although I have to just say that there are high sensation-seeking highly sensitive people, so that might vary for them somewhat with the violent movies if they find them very exciting and intriguing. But mostly, they avoid certain things that are dangerous or unpleasant.

So in the overstimulation realm, not being pushed to do more than they have time to do, not being able to multitask so well, and finding it difficult to perform well when they're being observed, because they get more aroused in those situations.

Now on the depth of processing side, they often—it's unpleasant for them to work at a job that doesn't have meaning. They need meaning in life and meaning in their work. They tend to have a rich, complex inner life and vivid dreams. They tend to think more about spiritual matters or philosophical matters than other people.

Emotionally, I call them emotional leaders. They usually cry more easily than others. In a situation where there should be tears, they're often the first. They probably worry a little bit more than others. We know from research that they pick up on positive things more than others, and they also show signs of increased empathy over others in brain studies

of that, of the parts of the brain then light up when you've got a lot of empathy.

Things like "I feel deeply. I notice what other people are feeling." I think that's kind of obvious. The sensitivity, the subtleties would be "I noticed the birds singing" or "I notice things that other people don't seem to notice." I once had another couple—my husband's not highly sensitive, but the husband of the other couple is, so we came down to dinner being in a hotel. We were traveling together, and I said, "OK. Who knows what pictures are on the wall?" [Laughs] And the highly sensitive husband and I knew what were on the wall, but the other two did not, because we just noticed.

TS: Well, I'm very convinced, and this is my confessional moment here, that my partner, my wife of 18 years, is an HSP. For sure. For sure. I'm still feeling out where I am in the range of things. So my question, though, to you, as someone who's married to a for-sure HSP, is what can be done as her partner, to bring out the best in her and to support her?

EA: Well, of course, there's so much in each person's personal history that may be interacting, where there's sensitivity. But the most important thing, I think, is to support her in her need for down time, for alone time, which is hard in a relationship. I just had a very intense seven days, and I was going to go hiking with my husband yesterday, and I said, "You know what? I need to go alone." And he immediately understood. Of course, he's talked about this to his therapist, that he needs to understand not to take it personally. It's good that they know when you're coming back, so you have a perfect right to say, "Take the day off, but will you be home for dinner?" So there's that.

I think we have—it depends on whether she tends to overwork herself. There's a whole problem with boundaries and boundaries with people, not—because of our empathy, we tend to want to do more than maybe we should for other people, including our partner possibly. So just seeing that the person's not overly stressed.

In conflicts, sensitive people will often cave in, because they don't want to get into an argument. So good conflict resolution skills are important, including stopping if either person is getting really agitated and taking a 20-minute break until the nervous system calms down, and letting them know that you feel that their sensitivity is a positive thing. When I was writing *The Highly Sensitive Person*, when I wrote the chapter on relationships, I wrote about what an advantage it could be to be with a less sensitive partner. I had my husband read it, and he said, "Well, you don't get it. You don't get the advantages from me of being with you, a sensitive person." So you need to look at what you get from your partner and be sure that she knows that so that she can see the pluses of her sensitivity even in your eyes, or especially in your eyes.

TS: That does seem like a very important thing. Now there are all of these positives, but it can also be challenging, truth be told. I'm sure your husband has faced that?

EA: Oh yes. If you want to name a challenge, we can talk about it.

TS: Well, just a—you mentioned the overstimulation, so if somebody's very environmentally sensitive, you could walk into a hotel, "No, I can't stay here. This is not going to work for me. No, this place is not going to work for me." Just a very—a sense of super particularity about things.

EA: Yes. Well, we can be considered fussy and high maintenance. My husband now knows to always ask for a quiet table in a restaurant. He always asks for the top floor rooms, so there's no one over me, and not near elevators and ice machines. He does this just

regularly, and of course, actually he finds he likes these things better himself. But some sensitive people won't speak up about these things, and that can be worse in a way, if they're suffering and the suffering eventually comes out in other ways.

But I always tell sensitive people you can't use it as a club. If this is the best that can be done, then you just have to shut up and—

TS: [Yes.] Which, I think, is maybe some of the reason there can be negativity sometimes towards the HSPs, is it can be a kind of tyranny, if you will, their HSP quality.

EA: Oh, yes. It could.

TS: How does the HSP person avoid falling into that, the tyranny of it?

EA: I think empathy. Thinking about the other person's situation. They can't change any more than you can change, so there has to be compromise. There can be some joy in compromise. You'd like the other person to know that you are compromising, so you get some brownie points for that. I think it's necessary. I don't know—I think if a person understands they're highly sensitive, that can be an issue in the beginning, that tendency to suddenly feel you're right. I always say, when you find out you're highly sensitive, don't go home and expect your partner to necessarily be overjoyed, because they know that the power in the relationship is going to shift.

This person is going to start asking for things they didn't ask for before, because they understand that they're different and they need these things or they don't like these things. They're not going to go anymore to professional basketball games, it's just too noisy, even though that was the partner's favorite thing to do and the other person went along because it seemed like the right thing to do. But compromise is at the heart of all relationships, and being able to talk about the conflicts.

I think if, in sense, the person is told that they seem to be using it as a club, it certainly is the beginning of a conversation. Certainly, you don't use it if it's not actually what's going on. You have to try to realize, "Well, I'm not going to my partner's family reunion because I don't like her relatives, but I'm going to say that it's too overstimulating." No. You have to be more honest than that.

TS: So we've been talking about how a partner can take care of their HSP partner, but how does the highly sensitive person, besides making sure that they have the alone time they need, how does the highly sensitive person take care of their own sensitivity?

EA: Oh, on their own, you mean?

TS: Yes.

EA: I thought you were going to ask how they take care of their less sensitive partner?

TS: No. No. How do they take care of their own sensitivity?

EA: [Laughs] But that's important.

TS: Well, you could answer both.

EA: OK. Well, I'll first say that I noticed so many things that my husband needs before he

notices it. I tend to see that we have enough insurance, I get him to the doctor more. A lot of women do that for men, but I'm usually aware of what he needs before he knows that he needs it. Now how I take care of myself, besides the downtime, is certainly planning my life so that, in general, I'm not overstimulated and I'm healthy and get enough exercise and all of that, and that is a constant, constant job.

I think trusting in myself that the sensitivity is real, and knowing some other highly sensitive people—which also gives you a perspective on the trait, that maybe you can step back and say, “Well, that highly sensitive person is obnoxious.” We're not all angels, by any means, and what is it in that person? And it is sometimes being fussy or demanding, which then can help a person correct their own personality.

Healing—you know, the biggest factor in the success of relationships, by far and away—my husband studies close relationships and has been doing that all of his life, adult life, and the biggest factor is the mental health of each of the people in the relationship. So very often, if there is a problem with the relationship, one has to look to one's own complexes, one's own childhood, one's own issues, and not just to the sensitivity, to heal oneself, to take care of oneself, as well as helping out the relationship.

So if there's a lot of trauma in the past or unhappy childhood, I really recommend sensitive people find a therapist, a good therapist, a therapist who understands sensitivity so you're not having to hassle through that, and someone who can deal well with the particular issues that that person has. And, really, designing a lifestyle that works for your sensitivity and not trying to be like your partner or like other people. It's hard for me when I need to quit and my husband's still working, but I need to quit, so I stop. These days we're becoming more aware that he needed to quit when I quit, but he just wasn't aware of it.

TS: So we've been talking about when you're in a relationship with someone who's not an HSP, and you are. Do two people with high sensitivity often end up partnering together? What's that like?

EA: Well, not more than others. I'll say we're doing a huge data analysis, a lot of stuff that we had where—it's through the HSP scale and through some studies my husband was doing. And we'll see whether this holds up, but so far it looks as though—being sensitive or not, being with a partner who's sensitive or not, none of it makes that much difference for the quality of the marriage, as people report the quality of their relationship.

So it's good not to get too hung up on “My problem is that we're both sensitive, or one of us is not,” it's not really the issue usually. But two sensitive people, if they both need down time but there's something that has to be done, of course there's more negotiation to do there. If one partner's getting overstimulated from overwork or whatever and not taking care of themselves, that can also be quite annoying to the person who is taking care of themselves.

There's always a question of who does have to do more work, parenting or earning money or whatever, and sometimes one person that has more skill but then also is more overstimulated, and that kind of thing has to be negotiated. I think, sometimes, a couple together who are both highly sensitive might have low couple self-esteem, because maybe they decide not to have a third child, or they're not—together, their combined earnings are not as much as most other couples because they're both doing meaningful work, which often means it's not well-paid work.



Those kinds of things happen until they get a chance to compare another couple in a deeper way. My husband—I don't know if you've ever heard of, quote, the "36 Questions"? But he designed these to help people get closer in the laboratory, but they got on the Internet and went viral. But one of the studies he found was that two couples doing the 36 questions ... what happens is you answer questions that are not very self-disclosing, but interesting. Like, "Who would you have dinner with if you could have dinner with anybody past or present?" They're interesting questions. And then it gets into more, "Tell me about your relationship with your mother," or "Name three things you like about the other person." So it gets more intimate, things that build intimacy in the way of self-disclosure.

But he's found that couples doing this with another couple also get closer not only to the other couple, but they feel better about each other. I think this gives people a chance to compare themselves to others, and they say, "Oh. I've got a pretty good partner, and we've got a pretty good relationship." That's probably even more important to sensitive people.

I think both of them tend to, maybe, consider their relationship their quiet home sanctuary, but that can get boring. And another thing that my husband and I have researched a lot is the importance of exciting, novel activities in a relationship. But just going out every Friday night to a restaurant or to a movie actually, in some cases, makes a relationship worse because they're being bored by each other, than if they've come up with things that they've never done before. Not anything that's scary, but maybe they've never been together to a baseball game, or they've never gone to the opera. Or they've never gone horseback riding.

So they try something that they're both willing to do, and it makes them feel really good about the relationship. After all, when we fall in love, we're expanding and growing. But then, after a while, that excitement goes, and then we need another way of getting that in. I think that would be very important for two sensitive people.

TS: Now I want to make sure that I understand something, Elaine. It seems like you've implied, and maybe you've stated it but I just don't totally get it, that this trait of highly sensitivity has a lot of evolutionary value, and that's why it's in us as humans, but also in other species. Help me understand the evolutionary value.

EA: Well, it's the choices we make. In animals, they actually did a computer simulation of how this works. If there's a patch of good grass and there's a patch of not so good grass, part of the simulation involves, "How much better is one patch than the other?" And then you have an individual that notices patch A is better than patch B, then proceeds in time and space to another place where two patches are different and, because of having noticed this subtle difference, is able to get good grass again.

Now, this doesn't always work this way, because there's not always enough difference, but I think sensitive people are probably the first people to be bothered by secondhand smoke, pay attention to additives in food, to be concerned about their weight, or various things that we've eventually found out are important for everybody, but maybe sensitive people noticed it more. They're not always right. Sometimes they're way off on their crazy health ideas or whatever, but that's not always true.

I think raising children—I don't know whether they have more or less children now that people have a choice about that, but if they can get their child safely to adulthood, even by a small percentage, that's an evolutionary advantage. The simplest way I describe it is,

if there's a traffic jam and such a person has, just out of the pleasure of it, studied the local map, driven on different streets, explored, and when there's a traffic jam that they know a shortcut and the other people don't. If everybody knew the shortcut, it wouldn't be a shortcut anymore. That's why it being a minority is so important.

Now suppose you're trying to get out of town because of a forest fire, and you know some routes other people don't know? You're not unwilling to share them, but you do know them and you take them, then there's another survival advantage. I think it's a little bit harder to see in humans, because we don't have those kind of statistics. I laugh that sensitive people know where the fire exits are, but they're considered OCD about that until there's a fire.

So we might worry about a lot of things needlessly, but then we also might be doing things to protect ourselves from robberies, say, or a break-in, that is protecting us. But we don't have statistics on that. Prevention is one of the hardest things to study, because if it didn't happen, then you don't know what caused it not to happen.

TS: Now can we address the highly skeptical person again? Is that OK?

EA: Oh, absolutely.

TS: You're a researcher, so you're comfortable with it.

EA: I've heard it all. I've heard it all.

TS: You have? OK. So I'm imagining that someone's listening and saying, "All of these qualities, it makes sense to me. But coming up with this as a label, as a category, do we know enough? Is there really enough science to support that? Or in 20, 30 years may we find that these characteristics were really better explained by some different model?" What would you say to that?

EA: Well, as a scientist I would say, "Yes, that's the way science works." We keep gathering research, and maybe the model gets changed. I have no problem with that. But after you've accumulated a certain amount of data, you also are supposed to start talking about that to each other and a little bit to the public if it seems the public wants to know, which this thing has taken off. I had no expectation that this would be—if you Google "highly sensitive person," to me it's a nightmare out there, how much stuff is out there, some of it nonsense and some of it not.

I couldn't stop that, but that's something that some skeptics might find especially questionable, is what is all of this big to-do about this? But there are now over 80 studies published about the trait, not just by me, but by other people, with all kinds of different findings. Some of them, I would say, have better methods than others, but it would be wrong to deny it, certainly wrong to say, "The name I gave it and the way I've described it is perfect." No, I expect that to change with time.

TS: And when you say it's a "trait," what does that mean, that it's a trait?

EA: Well, I'll say temperament trait is a better way to put it, because a personality trait we think is an interaction of a person's life history and what they were born with. I'm talking about this more as something you were born with. In contrast to, say, PTSD, which can look similar, because people can become highly sensitive to certain stimuli, but not to all stimuli. Not to positive stimuli, and not from before the trauma. So there are differences,

even though they have similarities.

For something to be innate, it's hard to tease out in an adult, but not that hard. It's something that people said about the child from almost the time they were born, whether it was in positive or negative terms, "This child was very sensitive." We know children differ. What we term that, is—"shyness" we've used, "inhibitedness" we've used, "negative" we've used, because they cry more in some situations, but not in all.

TS: Now Elaine, you've written a book on *The Highly Sensitive Child*, *The Highly Sensitive Person in Love*—I mean, I think it's fair to say that you've dedicated the last 25 years of your life to studying this trait of high sensitivity. I read that some people even call you the "Queen of HSP." But here's what I'm interested in knowing. What's been the hardest for you, personally, about being someone that has HSP? What's really challenged you the most?

EA: That's a very good question. I might take it out of that. I suppose that, socially, I still wish that I had time for more friends. But even if I had time, I might not be as sociable as other people, and I've talked about extrovert envy. If it looks like people have lots of friends, even if they're highly sensitive, and they enjoy getting together with other people, it looks to me like they're having a good time. And I'm not of that sort, and it probably is as much from my childhood as my sensitivity, so it's a little bit hard to sort out.

Like in a conversation, that thing I said about thinking about what people are saying and they've already moved on by the time you have something to say, I often feel that in conversations. I could have a good conversation one on one with a person, probably, given enough time with them, but I'm not as quick and skilled at it as I would like to be.

TS: Extrovert envy? That's interesting.

EA: Yes. I have one son, so my son and my husband and I are together in the car, and they get going talking and I start to fall out, listening to them, but I realize that I'm not saying anything. I'd like to be engaged, but if it's only one of them, then it works fine.

TS: As you know, Elaine, *Sounds True* publishes a lot of material that's about spiritual wisdom and spiritual teachings. I'm curious to know if you've seen any correlation between HSP, being a highly sensitive person, and a real interest and commitment to spirituality? Is there any correlation?

EA: Well, I refuse to do the actual research study in which I find sensitive people are more spiritual. [Laughs] It seems like a really mean thing to do. I don't want to do that. But I did find an article. The title of it—I actually got it out so I could say it—"The Evolution of Religious Capacity in the Genus Homo." It's in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. And these people talk about my trait—my trait? I mean my term. "Sensory processing sensitivity" is the term I use in research, and they say that they think of this as the *sine qua non*, the necessity for religion to have evolved in human beings, was for some of them to be sensitive.

I think you can see the logic in that in many different ways. If you process things more deeply, then you're going to think about life and death, and where it comes from, where it goes to. You're going to notice differences in states of consciousness in yourself and in others, and perhaps begin to notice how to cultivate higher states. I think they were naturally the shamans, and later on, what I call the "priestly advisors." In the European

cultures, there's warrior kings and those who advise them, and I think the sensitive people were probably often the advisors. Astrologists or astronomers who noticed how seasons worked and had knowledge about medicine and all of that, they just naturally fell into that, so I expect them to have an interest in that now.

When I was doing my interviews, they were two-hour interviews. I don't know how I ever survived them, but I was younger then. Two, two-and-a-half hour interviews, and I had questions in order, and the spiritual ones were the last. But people always talked about their spirituality before I got to the end. And all kinds of things—seeing angels, being devoutly religious in their religion, being devoutly atheist but having a strong feeling about it. It goes in all directions.

TS: It's interesting having this conversation with you, Elaine. One of the things that I sense is that you're a highly intuitive person. You haven't used that word to describe people who have HSP. What do you think about high intuition and HSP?

EA: Well, I think it's a natural, because if you are noticing subtleties and processing them—not all processing is conscious. We don't know quite what to call the processing of a fruit fly or a pumpkinseed sunfish, yet those pumpkinseed sunfish knew how to avoid a trap. What were they doing with that information they were gathering, watching the scientists put those things in the pond? We don't know.

But I call intuition knowing things without knowing how you know them. Carl Jung called that one of the four functions that humans have. You can know things wrong with intuition, just as you can know things wrong with thinking or feeling or sensing. But it is a way to know things.

TS: Elaine, just one final question. I'm wanting to support the transformation that you went through in your life and listeners' lives, which is moving from, "All of this sensitivity has me feeling like, perhaps I don't fit in. Perhaps how I am doesn't work?"

EA: "There's something wrong with me." Right. Right.

TS: Yes, "There's something wrong with me." Moving from that to a sense of, "I am part of an evolutionary type of exquisite knowing that's moving us forward." What can you say here at the end that can support people in having that view of HSP?

EA: Well, first, believe it's real. It's really important. You can just read the research on my website. You can use Google Scholar to bring up the study. "Sensory processing sensitivity" is the term there. You need to meet some other sensitive people, and there are events where that can happen, so that you also get a sense that it's real. I think that's probably the most important thing. As you get the sense of it being real, you get the sense of the positive qualities that are there. If there are negative parts that are coming up for you, that probably means that one needs some healing.

Also, reframing your childhood, because you can look back and say, "Gee. Why'd I do that, and everybody said this?" Or even in your adulthood, "Why didn't I take that job?" Or, "Why did that relationship fail?" Very often you can see it in terms of your sensitivity, and then that changes how you view yourself. It's helping a lot that it's becoming better known, and therefore when you do bring up the subject, a lot more people are understanding. Then you have better answers for the skeptics if you have a better understanding yourself. It's going to take time, but I do think that we have real potential to lead in the world.

If we're supposed to be the priestly advisors to the warrior kings, we had better see that we're listened to and not just ignored because we seem like we have some difficulty and we're scared to speak up. We need to speak up about the things that we see, or problems. Whether it's secondhand smoke or a climate crisis, we've got to speak up.

TS: I've been speaking to someone who's been dubbed the Queen of HSP, Elaine Aron. She wrote the book on the highly sensitive person and, with Sounds True, has created a new audio learning series called The Highly Sensitive Person's Complete Learning Program: Essential Insights and Tools for Navigating Your Work, Relationships, and Life. Elaine, thank you so much for the conversation. I think I might be more sensitive than I thought I was.

EA: I think you might be, too. I think that we're right on that. I've never met an interviewer who wasn't—well, I've never met a good interviewer that wasn't highly sensitive, and you've shown a lot of sensitivity. I do want to mention that we do have a new movie coming out, Sensitive and In Love, and that's premiering in New York City in January, but it'll be available shortly after that. I have a book on The Highly Sensitive Parent coming out in April.

TS: Wonderful. Thank you for listening to Insights at the Edge. You can read a full transcript of today's interview at [SoundsTrue.com/podcast](https://SoundsTrue.com/podcast). If you're interested, hit the subscribe button in your podcast app. And also, if you feel inspired, head to iTunes and leave Insights at the Edge a review. I love getting your feedback, being in connection with you, and learning how we can continue to evolve and improve our program. Working together, I believe we can create a kinder and wiser world. SoundsTrue.com: waking up the world.