**[Highly Sensitive Person](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/highly-sensitive-person)**

**4 Important Strengths of Highly Sensitive People**

**Sensory pleasure, aesthetic sensitivity, and more.**

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**THE BASICS**

* [Are You a Highly Sensitive Person?](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/highly-sensitive-person)
* [Find a therapist near me](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists)

**Key points**

* Psychology tends to focus on the negative qualities of the highly sensitive person.
* According to new research, of the six basic qualities in highly sensitive people, four are actually beneficial.
* Looking at highly sensitive people in terms of their strengths and weaknesses can help everyone be more attuned to life's pleasures.

What does it mean to be a highly sensitive person? This concept, sometimes shortened to "HSP," may strike you as a desirable quality to have. Being attuned to your inner state along with the feelings and behaviors of the people around you may even seem to be a component of what’s called [emotional intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/emotional-intelligence). After all, if you can understand yourself and empathize with others, it should help you become better able to navigate any situation with which you’re confronted, especially if tact and good graces are required.

However, there’s a downside to being an HSP. Have you ever found yourself so busy trying to drown out your inner sensations that you're stymied in making a decision that requires quick responses? Someone asks you a direct question, and you have to answer. As you do so, your mind races as you consider all the possible implications of the words that are about to come out of your mouth. You might even feel your heart pounding, adding to your inner stress. Eventually, having come up with your response, you sink back down into doubt, worry, and regret, fearing that what you said will not be well-received. All of that inner awareness can become a hindrance to people chronically facing these pressures.

Then there’s yet another element of the HSP involving sensitivity not just to inner states but also to the physical stimuli in one's surroundings. You may feel overwhelmed in sensory-rich environments, finding it hard to turn your [attention](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attention) away from noises, colors, and temperature changes, potentially detracting further from your ability to follow a single train of thought. On the other hand, perhaps this sensitivity allows you to enjoy some of life’s aesthetic elements. Putting yourself in the center of a Van Gogh painting, for example, could give you pleasure precisely because you are able to wander around in the colorful world of his wheat fields or starry nights.

**A Brief History of the Highly Sensitive Person**

According to Leiden University’s Véronique De Gucht and colleagues (2022), the negative aspects of HSPs tend to be outweighed in previous studies, overshadowing some of those potential benefits.

Indeed, as the authors note, “it is assumed that being more aware of (subtle) sensory (internal as well as external) stimuli, being more reflective, and processing these stimuli more profoundly, (potentially) leads to higher emotional and physiological reactivity.” In the view of previous researchers, such heightened reactivity is associated only with psychopathology or mental health problems. To address this limitation, De Gucht and her fellow researchers decided to delve further into the HSP concept and identify both its strengths and weaknesses.

Looking back at earlier work on the HSP, it’s easy to see how this [bias](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/bias) developed. As reviewed by Rahoud University’s Corina U. Greven et al. (2019), the related quality of “[sensory processing sensitivity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/highly-sensitive-person)" (SPS) is a quality of the individual’s temperament. Though not a disorder itself, SPS can heighten the highly sensitive individual’s risk of developing a psychological disorder under adverse circumstances in [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/child-development). In adulthood, they may even be unduly affected by exposure to “terrorism-related media and community themes.”

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If, as De Gucht and her fellow researchers believe, there’s too much emphasis on how the HSP is constantly at the mercy of their external surroundings, it’s important to chart out the ways that this temperament might prove to have some benefits. Contextualizing the HSP in terms of these more adaptive qualities could help refocus, they propose, onto themes such as life satisfaction, perceived quality of life, and [resilience](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/resilience).

**Refocusing on the Highly Sensitive Person’s Strengths and Weaknesses**

With this background in mind, it’s time to look at the work of the Dutch team in their redefinition of the HSP and its positive and negative qualities. Beginning with an initial pool of 60 items from related instruments used in previous research, De Gucht et al. administered their draft questionnaire along with tests they believed would have a theoretical relationship with HSP and its possible facets. The nearly 10,300 participants in their sample ranged from 18 to 87 years old (average=42 years). In addition to [personality](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/personality) measures, the participants completed several scales assessing physical health and psychological symptoms.

Across a series of substudies investigating the structure of their new measure, which they named the [Sensory Processing](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sensory-processing-disorder) Sensitivity Questionnaire (SPSQ), the Leiden U. researchers distilled the original 60 items into 43, which statistically fell into six basic factors. The following sample items give you a sense of the range of qualities the SPSQ assesses (each item is rated on a 1 [not at all] to 7 [completely] scale):

**Emotional and Physiological Reactivity**

I feel quickly rushed when I have to do too much in a short time.
I get nervous when too much happens at once.
I get easily upset from [stressful](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/stress) situations.

**Sensory Discomfort**

I find harsh sounds very annoying.
I am often bothered by too bright light.
I don't like loud music.

**Social-Affective Sensitivity**

I can usually see when someone masks their feelings with a smile.
It usually strikes me when the tone of a person's voice does not match his or her words.
It usually strikes me when people try to pretend not to be afraid.

**Sensory Sensitivity to Subtle Internal and External Stimuli**
I am quickly aware of changes in my body such as my body temperature.
I immediately feel when my mouth or throat gets drier.
I feel the slightest contraction of hunger in my stomach.

**Sensory Comfort and Pleasure**
I can enjoy [humor](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/humor) or laughable situations.
I can really enjoy a relaxing activity.
I feel good when I'm with people I love.

**Aesthetic Sensitivity**
I can be very touched by a beautiful work of art.
When I listen to music, I usually notice subtle touching tones in the music.
I often notice the emotional side (charge) of paintings and photographs.

As you can undoubtedly tell just from the content of the items themselves, these six scales divide into positive and negative aspects of being an HSP. In fact, only the first two factors (the negative) were correlated with [neuroticism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/neuroticism); the last four (the positive) were correlated with the personality trait of [openness to experience](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/openness). On average, participants scored at about a 5 on the 1-to-7 scale, with some mean differences across various demographic subgroups; the primary distinction was that women had higher scores on all measures.

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**The Newly Identified Strengths of the Highly Sensitive Person and What This Means for You**

With the Dutch findings in mind, you now have some potential comebacks you can give to people who accuse you of being “too sensitive.” In addition, if you worry that there’s something wrong with you for being so aware of your inner sensations, such as physical discomfort, or so easily lost in works of art or music, you can now recognize the adaptive values of these qualities. These are strengths that can balance the less-than-desirable features of the HSP in highly stressful or complex situations.

An additional plus for being an HSP is, as the U. Leiden researchers note, the possibility of being better able to benefit from psychological interventions, including [psychotherapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/therapy). Referring to the quality of “vantage sensitivity,” defined as “the proclivity for people to benefit disproportionately from positive features of environmental experiences,” the authors point to this “bright side” of HSP.

**To sum up,** this broader look at the HSP can give you a new way to look both inside and outside of yourself for those sources of fulfillment that can enrich your ability to explore the many complexities that life has to offer.

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