

PSYCHOLOGIE
POSITIVE

HIGHLY SENSITIVE PEOPLE //Portraits - What the science says

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Marie, 46, fine art painter



Hypersensitive people are pathfinders. Photo: Glwadys Louiset

The ultimate dream of Marie is that sensitive people stop making excuses for being sensitive and realize that they own a "diamond".

“It is time to take action for the planet and hypersensitive people have solutions! Since most of us spend time to hide our sensitivity, we have a hard time to play our full role in society. I believe hypersensitive are pathfinders”. The source of inspiration of this talented artist is nature and horses. She fell in love with horses who speak the “language of emotion” when she was eight.

She denied her emotions for a long time until she was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease that turned her life upside down. *“When I got sick, I realized I had to change software ;)”*. After two years of fight, she heals. She starts to paint again and leaves her job in marketing for a world around tour (she is 26 years old).

In 2000, she starts to work for the well-known environmental organization WWF. In parallel, she studies art at the Washington Studio School in DC. One day, as she was drawing in her apartment, she realizes something very important for her future. *“I was in an urban environment. I was drawing a horse from memory. My eyes were closed. At that time, I wasn’t riding anymore, but suddenly I smelled the barn as if I was back in the stables. I will never forget that moment when I realized I was drawing with all my memory and senses”*. Marie has developed this talent until she became a renowned “emotion portraitist”. Now she interprets, with a pencil or a brush, the relationship a person has with horses, nature or even his/her own sensitivity. *“I use horses and nature to translate the essence of what touches us. It all starts with an interview where I ask people to use their senses to tell me about their memory and feelings”*. In my work, sensitivity is undoubtedly the “most precious thing” I own.

“It is a very powerful quality that requires to be taken care of”. To feel good, Marie needs to take moments to reconnect with herself. She has had to learn to say no, *“a real challenge when one is sensitive”*. The portraitist explains that, in the end, everything is pretty simple as long as we take moments to listen and rest. *“Horses are intensely in the present moment, with all their senses awoken. They can switch very quickly from a peaceful attitude to an extreme panic state. When we are with them, we are forced to be mindful of every second”*.

Fully embrace your sensitivity, here is the piece of advice of Marie who has made sensitivity her main “working tool”.

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9 QUESTIONS ABOUT HYPERSENSITIVITY

One out five people, at least, are hypersensitive. This personality trait shows through more intense feelings than others as well as a deeper and more precise way to deal with information.

Hypersensitive people need more time to assimilate stimuli and recover from them. The term “hypersensitivity” is relatively new: the American psychologists Elaine and Arthur Aron have published 20 years ago the first scientific articles about it. But people who are more sensitive than the average have always existed. They were called sensitive, shy, removed or neurotic. After Aron articles, the terms “hypersensitivity” and “Hyper Sensitive Person” (HSP) have appeared in the media and the personal development field. A number of people have recognized themselves in the scientific description. It was a response to an incredible need to feel recognized, to approach sensitivity positively and to seek advice. However, as the number of books and websites increased on the topic, a number of misunderstandings developed. Today a number of scientific studies have been carried out and we know more about hypersensitivity.

Here are a few questions we have about hypersensitivity and the answers from a specialist, Doctor Saverio Tomasella.

1. Is hypersensitivity inherited?

For Elaine Aron, the great American specialist of hypersensitivity, one of the cause is genetic and the other cause is environmental. It aligns with the Northern American culture which emphasizes the importance of genetics. Doctor Bessel van der Kolk from Boston is an exception because it talks about a number of cases of sensitive people who have been traumatized. In Europe, since Jung, we think that roots of hypersensitivity go back to the person's history from his/her intra-uterine life and to his/her family history over several generations.

2. What is the influence of the environment on hypersensitivity?

The environment has a great influence over the sensitivity of a child. Every child is born very sensitive. The "rational brain" grows progressively until adult age when the "emotional brain" is present since birth. This situation plays out into two opposite forms. In social environments where sensitivity is well accepted, the child 'sensitivity will be welcomed, encouraged and valued. The child will naturally develop his/her sensitivity, know how to express it and feel good about it. On contrary, in families where sensitivity is unpleasant or rejected, the child is confused. He/she has to learn to contain or even inhibit his/her sensitivity by curbing emotions and rejecting intuition. Sensitivity becomes a problem. These environments which require to "manage" feelings are the majority. Of course there are also mixed environments where some emotions are more or less accepted.

3. Is hypersensitivity a psychic disorder?

No. Hypersensitivity isn't an anomaly, nor a disease, nor a psychic disorder. It is a temperament. It doesn't fall within the psychiatry. Every researchers agree on this. There is no need to "cure" or "manage" or "get rid" of sensitivity.

4. Is HSP brain different?

No. HSP have the same brain as everyone. For a while, it was believed that HSP used more frequently the right hemisphere of the brain. This theory was denied by an American study. Differences showed that some cerebral zones were more activated in HSP such as the insula which is the center of self-consciousness. In addition, the centers of the pain and mirror neurons are more activated which is a confirmation (not a cause) of a greater sensitivity to pain and a more developed empathy.

5. Are women more often hypersensitive?

No. Gender parity is respected. There are as many hypersensitive men as hypersensitive women. The only difference is cultural, it relates to the way sensitivity is considered and expressed. Men have a tendency to deny their sensitivity or to hide it. It is harder for them to recognize themselves as "hypersensitive".

6. Is there a difference between hypersensitivity and hyperesthesia, ultra-sensitivity?

Hyperesthesia refers to the intensity of feelings in front of noises, light, flavors, materials; movements, rhythms and vibrations. Hypersensitivity combines hyperesthesia and intensity of emotions, a saturation caused by an overstimulation and a greater sense of details. Ultra-sensitivity refers to an extreme sensitivity along with a great empathy and intuition.

7. Have HSP a richer and deeper interior life?

We hear it. Even if I tend to believe this, I prefer to remain prudent. Some introverts, contemplatives or moderate sensitive people can have a very rich interior life.

8. What are the disadvantages and advantages of a high sensitivity?

Disadvantages relate to be impressionable, to be tired more easily, to experience things at the first level without filters and to feel exposed. Advantages are numerous: ability to listen, mutual understanding, tenderness, subtlety, intuition, creativity...

9. What can we do for hypersensitivity to become a strength?

We need to get rid of fake and debilitating beliefs that consider sensitivity as a problem or an anomaly. Once we are convinced that sensitivity is a fundamental quality, it is necessary to take care of it, to better know it and to grow it. Finally it is very important to surround oneself with people who accept us as we are and to choose a work in accordance with our sensitivity.

Doctor Saverio Tomasella is a Doctor in psychology, a researcher and writer. He is the founder of the Observatoire of ultra-sensitivity and the Day of Hypersensitivity (January 13 in France)