

# Hearing, seeing and feeling too much?

We often get asked these questions: 'Is being a highly sensitive person the same as being gifted?' 'Are all gifted adults highly sensitive as well?' 'Are all highly sensitive persons gifted as well?' There are no simple answers. Reason to address this issue in this leaflet.

## What does being highly sensitive mean?

Elaine Aron introduced the term highly sensitive person into the scientific world in 1997 through her article in a renowned medical journal. She also wrote a number of books that are easy to read. Her definition of high sensitivity knows four aspects: depth of processing, overstimulation, emotional responses and seeing many details. She says this kind of sensitivity is innate to 15 to 20% of the population.

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) described five overexcitabilities. This term is explained as being highly excitable or sensitive for stimuli. The five areas he describes are: psychomotor, sensual, visual, intellectual and emotional overexcitability. Researchers that have continued Dabrowski's research found a positive correlation between overexcitabilities and giftedness in children (Mendaglio, 2008).

Scientific research regarding high sensitivity uses the term 'sensory-processing-sensitivity', to refer to a more sensitive central nervous system that makes highly sensitive persons reach a higher level of arousal more quickly than others. The behaviour following this arousal is very similar to the stress reaction fight, flight or freeze that is very recognisable to both the highly sensitive person and the people around them.

The terms various authors use are not identical. It would be sensible to give a definition of what you mean by high sensitivity when you discuss this subject.

## What is giftedness?

The many definitions and models of giftedness always indicate having a high intelligence as a factor, but it's more than that. At the IHBV we use the description that was the result of a Delphi study by a panel of twenty Dutch experts:

*A gifted individual is a quick and clever thinker, who is able to deal with complex matters. An individual who is autonomous, curious and passionate. A sensitive and emotionally rich person, who is living intensely. He or she is a person who enjoys being creative. (Kooijman - van Thiel, M. (red.), 2008)*

The Delphi-model characterises the sensory input for gifted people as 'highly sensitive': the senses receive many stimuli and they are aware of them sooner than others. It's possible that this, just as Dabrowski and Aron said, is connected to a gradually different nervous system.

## Gifted and highly sensitive

There is clearly an overlap between giftedness and high sensitivity. The Delphi model of giftedness indicates that giftedness goes hand in hand with highly sensitive perception. If high sensitivity is present in at least 15% of the population and giftedness in 2 to 3% then this means that at least 80% of highly sensitive adults is not gifted. The difference is mainly found in the aspects intelligence and speed.

## Good and useful

High sensitivity is a good quality to have. During the times that humans lived close to nature this was even vital in order to survive. Nowadays, it is a trait that can be used in a positive way, both at work and at home: in your ability to listen well, sense what others need, analyse sharply and with a lot of nuances, etc.

## Does your high sensitivity bother you?

But it can be a bother as well. For example: on a large office floor with many people around you, when lights are too bright, in a busy city or in a restaurant. Besides sensitivity to stimuli through the senses, we also hear from many people that they are sensitive to a negative atmosphere, negative feelings or moods that others have. This is more difficult to deal with because it's not visible to others.

It would be a shame if your high sensitivity bothers you so much that you start living like a recluse. That's why we have some recommendations for highly sensitive people.

### Recommendations

- Accept that high sensitivity basically is a good character trait.
- Make a map of your own high sensitivity. Where are your overly sensitive areas and what recovery time do you need?
- Increase your knowledge of high sensitivity. Read about it, talk about it on forums.
- Prevent getting overstimulated. Generally: stay fit and create your own first aid kit. Specifically: ear plugs, sun glasses, cold pack, exercises.
- What to do when you are overstimulated? Use your first aid kit.
- Discuss it with your partner, at work and give clear directions on what you need.
- Consider professional support if you have a lot of trouble with it in daily life.

More recommendations at: <http://ihbv.nl/tips-hsp-eng/>

## References

- Aron, E. <http://www.hsperson.com> (see: lists of books and research).
- Hooggevoelig heel gewoon. *Volwassenen*, Gildeprint, 2014. (in Dutch)
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- Mendaglio, S. *Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration*, Great Potential Press, 2008

Translation: Yvonne Veltmaat