**The Difference Between Highly Sensitive and Hypersensitive**

**High sensitivity is biological. Hypersensitivity is a coping style.**

Posted Nov 10, 2014

Though they're often mistaken for one another, *high sensitivity* and *hypersensitivity* are entirely different ideas and have very little to do with each other.

*Hypersensitivity*is best described as plain old emotional fragility. I’m sure we’ve all seen someone whose hypersensitivity puts coworkers on edge. There’s a nagging [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/fear) in some workplaces that an innocent word will be misinterpreted and result in an unpleasant visit from HR. (There's [a post about handling hypersensitivity](http://ironshrink.com/2014/11/hypersensitive-people-at-work/) over at my main blog.)

Occasionally, I’ve heard people account for emotional hypersensitivity by claiming that it’s simply part of being a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP). *HSP* is the new label for old truth that some people are more sensitive to environmental stimuli than others.

HSPs have relative difficulty filtering sounds and other sensory inputs. They’re especially sensitive to subtle stimuli that other people don’t notice. If you’re interested to know whether you might be described as highly sensitive, there’s a respectable quiz here: <http://www.hsperson.com/test/highly-sensitive-test/>.

High sensitivity is a biological predisposition traceable to [brain](https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/neuroscience) structures like the reticular activating system. It has little, if anything, to do with emotional sturdiness.

Like any predisposition, high sensitivity is a mixed bag. I happen to be highly sensitive to the environment. The downside is that I’m compelled to sit with my back to the wall at restaurants in order to limit sensory input. On the positive side, I know when the oven has been left on because the tiny “tic” of expanding metal might as well be an alarm bell to my brain.

Despite being highly sensitive, I am not hypersensitive. It’s extremely difficult to hurt my feelings because I have solid coping skills. (It hasn’t always been that way. It took some work.) That’s the difference between *high sensitivity* and *hypersensitivity*. The former is biologically based, and the latter is a reflection of one’s emotional skill set. Despite what you might read elsewhere, *high sensitivity* and *hypersensitivity* don’t go hand-in-hand.

It’s true that being an HSP tends to make a person more perceptive of other people’s moods. That can contribute to hurt feelings simply because the HSP has more emotional information to sort through. There may be the seed of something painful in that extraneous information.

But being an HSP doesn’t condemn a person to emotional fragility. HSPs are no less capable than anyone else of developing emotional [resilience](https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/resilience) and reliable coping skills.

That’s good news for all of us HSPs. The common [wisdom](https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/wisdom) that we are predisposed to emotional injury simply isn’t true. Biology is difficult to change, but skills are easy to add.

\*   \*   \*   \*   \*



Source:

Shawn Smith is a [psychologist in Denver, Colorado](http://mesapsych.com/) and the author of [*Surviving Aggressive People: Practical Violence Prevention Skills for the Workplace and the Street*](http://www.amazon.com/Surviving-Aggressive-People-Practical-Prevention/dp/099068640X/ref%3Dtmm_pap_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1414704223&sr=8-1).