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The Highly Sensitive Person and the Temperament Trait Sensory Processing Sensitivity

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DESCRIPTION OF THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE PERSON

Sensory processing sensitivity is a temperament trait characterized by the acronym **DOES** (Aron, 2018):

- **D**epth of processing of environmental stimuli,
- **O**verstimulation
- **E**motionality/**E**mpathy as a result of deep processing, and
- Increased attention to **S**ubtle **S**timuli.

Individuals with this temperament trait represent about 20% of the population but comprise about 50% of those seeking professional counseling services (Aron, 2010). While most research to date studied individuals falling into one of two categories: high sensitivity or not high sensitivity, Lionetti and colleagues (2018) found evidence for high, medium, and low sensitivity among 1,136 psychology undergraduates in the United States and England. In general, researchers agree that those with this temperament trait, highly sensitive persons (HSPs), make up a minority group; however, without knowledge of this temperament, professional counselors are at risk for misdiagnosing or mistreating what is a healthy, inborn, and common trait.

The primary challenge for HSPs is overstimulation. Overstimulation becomes the foundation for emotional intensity, strong response to criticism, negative internalization, and the potential for low self-esteem. Overstimulation can be routine for HSPs when there is a mismatch between their needs and their work, home, and other environments. One key to differentiating between the HSP temperament and mental health disorders is the presence of distress in the absence of overstimulation, which requires further assessment for potential disorders. It is quite possible that distressing symptoms will subside when highly sensitive clients become knowledgeable about their trait and exercise agency to reduce overstimulation. Still, many individuals with mental health disorders may also have the HSP temperament trait.

Ellis and Boyce (2011) used the metaphor of the orchid and the dandelion to describe the impact of the environment on the HSP (orchid) in comparison to the rest of the population (dandelions). Just as orchids are quite challenging to grow in many climates, the HSP is at higher risk for maladaptation and negative developmental outcomes in adverse environments (poor fit), but thrive more (higher treatment response) when interacting with positive environments (Greven et al., 2019). In research investigating links between SPS, negative home environments, and negative outcomes, adverse home environments were characterized by the occurrence of stressful events, such as loss of family members, serious accidents and illnesses, frequent arguments among family members, divorce, and economic stress (Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016). Such conditions can lead to regular overstimulation for the HSP from numerous sensory