

Spiritual Direction and the Highly Sensitive Person

by Judith Lorimer

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Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

Introduction

If you feel strongly the effects of caffeine, alcohol or medication, and can't bear to watch violent movies, it may be that you are a "Highly Sensitive Person". The chances may be even higher if you also experience sleep problems, are bad at making decisions quickly or feel overwhelmed by too much to do and too many people. These are all aspects of a character trait that American psychologist and researcher Dr Elaine Aron gave this descriptor to back in the 1990s, and which she wrote about in what is still a definitive work in this field, *The Highly Sensitive Person*¹. When I happened upon this book a few years ago, it was one of those 'aha' moments, providing a valuable key in better understanding myself and how to live in the world. It enabled me to accept parts of myself that I had previously struggled with or not acknowledged, and also to embrace and value this trait's gifts. These include things such as being highly attuned to physical environments and others' emotions; being creative and imaginative, with a rich inner life; thinking carefully before acting; processing ideas and information thoroughly; a deep spiritual awareness and an ability to create 'sacred space' for others. When sharing information about this trait with others at various times, I have found that it has been equally helpful for those with whom it resonates.

As I move into the realm of spiritual direction, it seems beneficial to reflect further on this trait, and explore how understanding it may enhance work in this field, both for directors and directees. This essay is divided into two parts: firstly, an introduction to the trait, and how it may look in people's lives, and secondly, based on information gleaned from books and other spiritual directors, a discussion about 'high sensitivity' in relation to spiritual direction practice.

Part 1: Description of the "Highly Sensitive Person" Trait

This trait has been found to be present in 15-20% of the human population (and also in about 100 higher animal species). It has, in its quiet way, contributed significantly to the progress of human civilisation. In her book, Aron describes two primary roles in human society that have developed over time - that of 'warrior-king' (responsible for expansion, freedom and fame) and that of 'royal-priestly advisor' (generally more thoughtful and able to check the warrior's impulses)². Sensitive people often end up in 'royal-priestly advisor' roles, such as writers, historians, philosophers, judges, artists, researchers, theologians, therapists and teachers. In recent times, research has defined this trait more clearly; predominantly through the pioneering work of Dr Aron in the book mentioned above, which was published in January 1996. She coined this phrase with the aim of attributing a more positive view to the trait, previously described by words such

¹ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003)

² Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) pp. 17-18

as ‘inhibited’, ‘shy’, ‘withdrawn’ or ‘highly reactive’. The person is known as a ‘Highly Sensitive Person’ (HSP), and the trait as ‘Sensory Perception Sensitivity’ (SPS). In this essay, I will use both terms, along with the simpler ‘sensitive person’, to refer to someone with this trait.

SPS brings both the advantage of being very aware of subtleties in the environment, as well as the disadvantage of being more easily overwhelmed by them, hence the subtitle of Aron’s book: ‘How to thrive when the world overwhelms you’. This is an innate trait, found equally in both men and women. Aron suggests that “a case could be made that this difference is a factor at least as potent in its effect as gender or ethnicity.”³ She even goes as far as to suggest that there are really four genders – sensitive men, sensitive women, non-sensitive men and non-sensitive women.⁴ Research does seem to indicate that most people either *are* or *are not* ‘sensitive’, with not many falling in the middle.⁵ Physiologically, it is related to how one notices and processes stimulation to the nervous system. This stimulation may be from external sources, such as noise, light, work pressure or people, or from internal sources, such as hunger, memories, thoughts or emotions. The result is a “more careful processing of information”⁶ which leads to deeper reflection. HSPs are often visionaries, artists or inventors, as well as being conscientious, cautious and wise.⁷

However, in spite of a clear distinction between ‘sensitive’ and ‘non-sensitive’, it must also be remembered that, as with all personality typing, there still exists a wide variation among sensitive people. Other variables to consider are gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and a range of other personality traits independent of sensitivity.⁸ It can also be expressed differently depending on whether someone is extravert or introvert (30% are extraverts); high sensation seeking⁹ or not; or whether they grew up in an urban or rural environment. Another factor influencing the expression of this trait is family background. According to research, sensitive children from a troubled childhood (compared with non-sensitive from a troubled childhood, or sensitive from a happy, or even adequate, childhood) are more prone to anxiety and depression as adults, whereas those who grew up in a very supportive environment often thrive in

³Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p. 4

⁴ *ibid*, p. 86

⁵ *ibid*, p. 20; and http://hsperson.com/pdf/Authors_note_HSPbk_Preface.pdf p. 7

⁶ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 7

⁷ *ibid*, p. 7

⁸ Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p. 190

⁹ See here for more information about this: <https://hsperson.com/the-highly-sensitive-person-who-is-also-a-high-sensation-seeker/> Around 30% of HSPs may also be high sensation seeking: <https://highlysensitiverefuge.com/high-sensation-seeking-highly-sensitive-person-signs/> (See also Dr Tracy Cooper’s book mentioned in this article, and also listed in bibliography)

later life, and at times more so than non-sensitive from a happy childhood.¹⁰ So it is important to note that no two highly sensitive people are exactly alike.

There is a growing resource of information and research about this trait, and not the space within the focus of this essay to include it all. See Appendix 1 for links to online tests for sensitivity, and Appendix 2 for a more detailed list of characteristics and suggestions for managing life as an HSP. In the course of my project, I also asked three HSP directors to answer questions about how knowing about this trait has impacted their lives and faith journeys. The questionnaire and their responses can be found in Appendix 3.

Part 2: Implications for Spiritual Direction

i. Recognising the trait and discussing it with directees

Because SPS is “present in some way in every aspect of the sensitive person’s life”,¹¹ if they have a desire to deepen their self-knowledge and faith through engaging in spiritual direction, it can be extremely beneficial to have an understanding of it, as evidenced by responses in the survey. An aware HSP director may well sense this trait in a directee, but one who is not may need a little more assistance. This is where knowing about the trait and its characteristics can be helpful. Further to the description above, Aron suggests an easily remembered acronym that encapsulates the main aspects and can aid in recognition – DOES:¹²

D-Depth of processing

O-Overstimulated easily

E-Emotional reactivity / Empathy

S-Sensory sensitivity

On her website, Aron devotes a page to this question of how to recognise a sensitive person, and though more workplace-related, there are some useful questions there.¹³ In this same article, she also suggests a ‘soundbite’ to use when explaining this trait to someone else for the first time.¹⁴

The question now arises: if a director wonders whether a directee may be sensitive, what should they do? There are two possible approaches. Firstly, use the information to

¹⁰ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 66-67

¹¹ Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p. 45

¹² Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p. 24

¹³ <https://hsperson.com/how-do-you-recognize-an-hsp/>

¹⁴ See end of Appendix 2

inform and maybe alter the way that you work with them, without specifically talking about it. Secondly, bring it up with the directee. This will be a matter for discernment and to consider prayerfully in the light of where the directee is at. In my own experience in sharing this information with two different directees, one was somewhat interested at the time, but it never came up again in our sessions. However, the other was in a different space and life stage, enjoyed learning about personality, and was extremely interested. For me as a director, confirmation is helpful, but equally, I need to take care not to assume that, with this trait, they are exactly the same as me.

Dan Schrock¹⁵ and Teresa Blythe¹⁶ are both experienced spiritual directors and trainers in the US (and both also HSP). They have generously shared some of their understanding of this trait with me. On this question, Teresa writes: “I will sometimes reflect to them that I believe they are HSP and will reveal that I am as well”, while Dan says, “I do bring this up with directees if I intuit that it might be useful for them to explore for the sake of their overall health and well-being... Generally I don't bring it up in the next session, but wait for them to initiate more conversation about it if they want to”. This seems a wise approach.

ii. Working with directees who are HSP

I will now highlight some issues that may commonly come up or that are particularly relevant for sensitive directees. Of course, they are equally things that may affect anyone, but they are likely to be more important for HSPs, to be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. The list below is synthesised from three books, *The Highly Sensitive Person, Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* and *Tools for Helpful Souls*. It is interesting to note in Aron's book for psychotherapists that “although this trait is found in 20% of the population, the actual occurrence is probably closer to 50% of patients in most practices.”¹⁷ Another relevant observation of hers is that, due to challenges many sensitive people face in modern culture, and particularly if they had a troubled childhood, many will end up seeking help at some stage in their lives. Similarly, Ilse Sand reports from a minor study of 24 of her clients, that 50% of them were highly sensitive.¹⁸ Of the four broad approaches (cognitive-behavioural, interpersonal, physical and spiritual),¹⁹ Aron says that spiritual approaches often appeal most to sensitive

¹⁵ <http://www.danschrock.org/>

¹⁶ <https://teresablythe.net/>

¹⁷ Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p. vi

¹⁸ Sand, Ilse. *Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016) p. 136-7. This study was done using Aron's self-test, and before Sand was widely known as working with HSPs. She was not surprised at this result, for these reasons: HSP struggle more in daily life; HSPs feel under pressure from living in a society that hold resilience and being outgoing in high esteem; when in this position, HSPs are less likely to ignore it, they prefer to take it to a deeper level and enjoy reflecting on their lives.

¹⁹ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 174

people. They are drawn to this because they are so inclined to look inward and also, they are often looking for ways to transcend life. As a result, although the above statistic doesn't refer to spiritual direction, it is reasonable to assume that more than 20% of directees may also be highly sensitive. The other thing to note is, just as sensitive children growing up in a supportive environment can do very well in life, a 'good fit' in spiritual direction for a sensitive person, can lead to very positive outcomes.

Firstly, as an HSP is more affected by physical surroundings and sensory stimuli, it is helpful to ensure the meeting space has no bright lights, loud noises, strong smells and is the right temperature, as these can all be distractions. They will probably not comment on them, so it is worth checking in with them about such details. Also, be watchful for physical signs of over-arousal, such as blushing, trembling or averted eyes. You can try to bring calm by changing the subject, or allowing silence until calm again.

The following are issues of particular relevance for sensitive directees:

1. There may be problems with boundaries and saying 'no', so helping them reflect on questions around self-care and self-support could be helpful. With so much input coming in, and so much empathy going out towards others, they can forget to focus on themselves.
2. They may have ended up in the 'wrong life', trying to live as 'non-sensitive', and therefore find themselves in incompatible work situations. There may need to be discernment around lifestyle and work choices.
3. Making decisions, especially big ones, can be difficult, because of the depth of processing involved and a tendency to look ahead to all possible consequences. Help with discernment may also be needed here.
4. Sensitive people generally dread anger, confrontation and change, so faith or life issues around these may be challenging to work through.
5. Low self-esteem is common, and HSPs are especially in need of acknowledgement, acceptance and empathy. By helping provide these in sessions, it can be very easy to help raise self-esteem. Noticing and celebrating the positive, and help with reframing the past, can be extremely helpful.
6. Emotions, both negative and positive, can be intense, so a focus on working effectively with emotions will be beneficial. This will also be helpful for them as they manage relationships.
7. Sensitive directees tend to prefer deeper rather than more superficial conversations. "The simplest way to deepen the conversation is to keep quiet and just listen. Silence creates room for depth ... what is said next will come from a deeper place."²⁰ Also, you can move from the general to the specific of personal

²⁰ Sand, Ilse. *Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016) p. 69

experiences. Then if necessary, you can move from the specific back to the general, to *decrease* arousal.

8. In questions of faith and organised religion, HSPs may be either very committed and loyal, or quite dissatisfied and disdainful, so provide help and space to process feelings and experiences around this. 'Unorganised religion' often thrives among HSPs.²¹
9. Aron suggests that for a sensitive person with a troubled childhood, it is almost essential to have therapy. It may be necessary at some point to encourage such a directee to consider this, if they haven't already. The kind of therapy generally best suited is Jungian-oriented.²²
10. Spiritual experiences occur in abundance with HSPs, due to their spiritual attunement, active imaginations and inner voices. Help them to linger on these, maybe writing them down, so that they don't get lost amongst all the other input. Make use of the power of their imagination in your work together.
11. There is a close connection with the unconscious, often expressed in vivid dreams, so these may be a rich source of material to work with.
12. To cope with the inevitable overwhelm of life, encouraging HSPs into spiritual practices such as silence, stillness, meditation, retreats, yoga, or techniques that focus on body and breath, will be particularly helpful.
13. You may encounter more silences with sensitive directees, whether from something they either cannot bear or cannot put into words, through shame or unreasonable loyalty, or simply over-arousal. Use your discernment to know when to just sit with it, if it is peaceful and when to interrupt or give help or prompts, when it becomes painful.
14. On the other hand, 'long speeches' are equally common, as depth of processing can lead to a race to get through a lot of material. This can sometimes hide a few important feelings that cannot be directly focused on, so it is important to be able to stay attuned and 'bookmark' anything important to return to. Keeping focused may be a challenge for you as director.
15. Sensitive directees may have a stricter set of 'maxims' or rules of conduct that they live by, so they may need help exploring these to see if they have become limiting.
16. Sensitive men have another layer of challenges to work through, as their style is not perceived as the ideal in western culture. If they have not been well supported, they will benefit from assistance with understanding this trait and reframing their past.

Finally, although some aspects of this trait will never change in an individual, some can be worked on. The potential for overstimulation is always there, but its effects can be

²¹Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 210

²² *ibid*, pp. 183-4

lessened if the sensitive person feels safe and secure, as this removes one potential source of arousal. Safety can be found both in healthy relationships and within themselves, so anything done to help nourish these two things will help the sensitive person to flourish. Things that **can** be worked on, however, are how to manage overstimulation and anxiety.

iii. For HSP directors

I am aware of no formal research around what percentage of spiritual directors may be HSP, but again, it is reasonable to assume that it is higher than 20%. Anecdotally, Dan Schrock reports that his supervisor, who has trained directors for many years, thinks that 80% of her students are HSP. If this is the case, it is useful to reflect on both the advantages and disadvantages of this trait in practice, and here I draw on insights from two books in particular.²³

One downside of being a sensitive director is that you can intensely sense the emotions of others, and be deeply affected by them. This can become burdensome and create more internal arousal. Also, you may become so absorbed by what you are listening to that you completely lose contact with yourself. If this happens, it is helpful to practice switching focus, turning your gaze away periodically from the directee, so you can sense your own feelings - as well as Spirit-promptings. You need to be conscious both of yourself and the other in order to have a good contact. Additionally, you will need more time to digest and work through the input, so you may need to see fewer directees in a week, and take longer breaks between sessions. There is also a danger of becoming so empathic that you end up encouraging behaviour that really should change, and, coupled with a reluctance to face the dissatisfaction or disapproval of others, it may become difficult to offer more challenging questions or reflections. Sensitive directors may also be very aware of consequences of making a mistake and be held back by a fear of doing harm.

On the other hand, due to their natural gifts of sensing and empathising, sensitive directors can “offer a connection and a form of presence that is of a very high quality... (they are) experts in providing a kind of empathic resonance that confirms the feelings of others and that can have a healing effect”.²⁴ The important thing is self-care. Aside from pacing yourself, both Sand and Aron mention the importance of having done your own work around this trait, so that your practice is not affected. “The stronger the

²³ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) and Sand, Ilse. *Tools for Helpful Souls* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017)

²⁴ Sand, Ilse. *Tools for Helpful Souls* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017) p. 112

contact you have with your own core, the less likely it is that you will become overwhelmed by others when they express themselves.”²⁵

From the questionnaire responses,²⁶ Christine suspects that her “rich and layered” noticing, attending and listening is connected to being HSP, while Amanda reflects on the need to be “self-aware that the trait can also mean I could pick up on things that are not necessarily what God wants to bring to the person, so discerning what to go with, and what to leave” is important. For Beth, a major learning about this trait, both for herself and others, was in giving permission to go slower, to live life a little differently, to explore different forms of prayer and in affirming the sensitivity as a gift to be embraced. Dan comments that among his students, those with the HSP trait may pick up more information about a directee than those without, which can be both a strength – a better sense of what is going on in a directee, and a weakness - they get tired much faster. He is not implying that HSPs are automatically better directors, or that non-sensitives cannot be excellent directors, but that “HS directors benefit from understanding the possibilities and cautions of working with (rather than against) their own high sensitivity in spiritual direction”. In Teresa’s case, understanding about her trait has had a big impact on how she manages her life; arranging her week with two non-contact days and spacing her appointments. Working around 35 hours a week, she sometimes feels guilty about being ‘lazy’, but needs to control her work week, work load and free time. She makes time for relaxation and practises mindfulness for stress reduction to combat anxiety. It has meant she has developed strong boundaries, and she prioritises a week-long solo retreat once a year for rest and reflection on her work. This feels essential for her.

Conclusion

I close with observations from Sand and Aron, which emphasise the value of understanding this trait. Sand writes:

Realising that there are two types within the same species – ideal in their own different ways – helps those of us who struggle to keep up with the rat race to find an identity. Not just as the fragile ones but also as people who have talents that the rest of the world needs. We are not just the ones who are unable; we have resources that are essential for the survival of the species.²⁷

Aron has found that people “whose real difficulties begin with their trait ... are greatly relieved and improved when they learn the basic facts about sensitivity”²⁸ and “as adults, HSPs tend to have just the right personalities for inner work and healing”.²⁹

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 120

²⁶ Full questionnaire responses from the 3 respondents are included in Appendix 3

²⁷ Sand, Ilse. *Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016) p. 139

²⁸ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 169

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 173

Understanding the gifts and strengths of this trait can be powerful, as HSPs have “a different kind of power, talent and courage”.³⁰ Aron introduces a beautiful metaphor towards the end of her book, comparing the difference between the sensitive and non-sensitive to that between fish and birds.³¹ Both are strong in their own realm, but not in the realm of the other. I visualise it like this: birds flying high and fast through the frictionless air, while fish go deep and revel in moving more slowly through the calming water. Aron also likens “depth work”, for HSPs, to a playground or a “big, beautiful wilderness”, which

lets us travel through all kinds of terrain. We camp happily for a while with anything useful – books, courses and relationships. We become companions with experts and amateurs discovered along the way. It’s a good land.³²

As for the spiritual director who is working alongside them, having gained understanding of this trait, they can be an ‘experienced guide’ for them in this place. And for a highly sensitive director, gifted as they are with deep spiritual awareness, alongside their ability for empathy and intuition, the challenges and benefits are clear. If they have learned to understand and accept this trait, and how to live well with it, they are beautifully able to sit as effective spiritual ‘midwives’ or ‘companions’ to their directees.

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³⁰ *ibid*, p. 230

³¹ Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person* (London: HarperCollins, 2003) p. 230

³² *ibid*, p. 185

Bibliography and Further Reading

Books

Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You* (London: HarperCollins, 2003)

Aron, Elaine N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010)

Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Person in Love* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001)

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Sand, Ilse. *Tools for Helpful Souls* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017)

Zeff, Ted. *The Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2004)

Zeff, Ted. *The Power of Sensitivity: Success Stories of Highly Sensitive People Thriving in a Non-sensitive World* (San Ramon, CA: Prana Publishing, 2014)

The Science behind the trait

The science supporting 'DOES': <https://hsperson.com/faq/evidence-for-does/>

Note for next edition of Elaine Aron's book:

http://hsperson.com/pdf/Authors_note_HSPbk_Preface.pdf

The highly sensitive brain: an fMRI study of sensory processing sensitivity and response to others' emotions: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4086365/> :

Are you a highly sensitive person? Here's the science behind this personality type:

<https://reset.me/story/highly-sensitive-person-need-know-science-personality-type/>

Websites

www.hsperson.com Elaine Aron

<https://highlysensitive-hsp.com/> Ilse Sand

<http://highlysensitiveperson.net/> Kelly O’Laughlin

<https://highlysensitiverefuge.com/about-contact/> online community/articles for HSPs, founded by Jenn Granneman and Andre Solo

<https://www.hspnetwork.com.au/> Australia/NZ network, with resources and links

<http://highlysensitivemom.com/> for mums

<http://www.janineramsey.com.au/sensitivity-style/> sensitivity style in the workplace

Other online articles

How to thrive if you’re a highly sensitive person:

<https://1440.org/blog/how-to-thrive-if-youre-a-highly-sensitive-person/>

Are you a highly sensitive person? 8 strategies to help:

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/highly-sensitive-people_b_3275145?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xllmNvbS8&guc_e_referrer_sig=AQAAAKwa5Pn6KaPHJwoJFt9Vdua5NoWQbVa1WaDBXDg7aPUJYSvC-dhkYGF5g0KP5Y1BFgxeoXwPtrva9Z-KlwSqKfkql7sTzvJeq0TU9LIKOkHDRDhXATxCTPys-cvh2WKYCoIMT_hCmccUV5W6q2ZcWt0uVrLbSwYfOm359i7TXfvj

HSPs in ministry:

<https://www.shepherdheartconsulting.com/2019/02/26/highly-sensitive-persons-in-ministry/>

Movies

Sensitive, The Untold Story: The first documentary made on this topic

<https://sensitivethemovie.com/>

A second is soon to be released: *Sensitive and in Love*

Appendix 1: Online self-tests for High-Sensitivity

Elaine Aron's website:

<https://hsperson.com/test/highly-sensitive-test/>

Ilse Sand's website:

<https://highlysensitive-hsp.com/highly-sensitive-people/ilse-sands-sensitivity-test/>

Appendix 2: Further characteristics of HSPs and advice for managing life

Further characteristics of HSPs (not mentioned in essay):³³

- Good at spotting and avoiding errors
- Highly conscientious - heavily attuned to causes and consequences
- Able to concentrate deeply
- Especially good at tasks requiring vigilance and accuracy
- Often thinking about their own thinking
- May not follow something well at first, because of deeper processing, but with time can understand and remember more
- May prefer being on the side lines for a while before joining in
- Often learn languages better
- Often cannot display competence at something when being observed
- Great fine motor skills and good at holding still
- Gifted, artistic or passionate about the arts. Deeply moved by artwork or music.
- More 'right-brained', less linear, more creative
- More sensitive to things in the air, and also to drugs/medication
- Can have more problems with sleep
- Hunger is an inner stimulus that can have a strong effect
- At school, probably fond of reading and quiet study, and excelled at school work.
- The overstimulation of university life may be a challenge
- May be very concerned about social justice and the environment/animals
- Tend to go for quality rather than quantity in social relationships
- May struggle to find their vocation or a way to thrive at work
- Tend to fall in love very intensely, often unrequited
- Nature has an unusually calming and healing effect. Fond of animals, plants, being in or near water.
- More often single, or in firmer monogamy
- Often most happy when talking about soul/spirit/spiritual things
- Feel very 'at home' in a sacred space, or able to create it for others
- More likely to question a religion they practice
- Life milestone reached at a slightly older age
- May experience relationship problems
- Tend to overreact to criticism

Advice for HSPs

- Read up about this trait (see Bibliography for books and websites, there is a wealth of information available online and in books)
- Talk to other HSPs if you know any
- Develop good boundaries

³³ Primarily sourced from Aron, *The Highly Sensitive Person* and Sand, *Tools for Helpful Souls*

- Listen to this brief talk by Dr Elaine Aron, where she talks about important things to consider when discovering you have this trait <https://www.hspnetwork.com.au/the-hsp-trait/>
 - **Summary:** If you are highly sensitive, you'll need to make some changes:
 1. Look again at your past – at regretted decisions or ‘failures’ - reframe them
 2. Stop living like the non-sensitive, eg you need more down time and meaningful work
 3. Work on self-esteem, as culture generally doesn't value sensitivity
 4. It does affect relationships. Help others around you understand that your need for downtime and gentler remarks are beyond your control
 5. If you've had a troubled childhood, you will be more anxious and depressed, but if you haven't, you are no more likely to have these problems than anyone else, in fact, some evidence that you will be better off than others
 6. If you are raising a sensitive child, you need to learn about that
- Make sleep a priority, learn how to relax, reduce stress, to promote optimal functioning
 - Respect natural rhythms, go to bed when sleepy, and even resting with eyes closed is helpful
 - Allow downtime for unwinding and reflecting on the day
 - Be wary of coffee, it's a ‘powerful drug’ for HSPs
- It can be helpful to see caring for your sensitive body in the same way you might think about caring for an infant. You should attend to the first sign of distress.
- Two possible ‘dangers’ in how HSPs manage their lives, they can be ‘**OUT**’ in the world too much, or they can be ‘**IN**’ too much. Try to find the right balance for you as either extreme is not good. If you are also ‘high sensation seeking’, this may be more difficult.
- When feeling overstimulated:
 - Use music to change your mood
 - Get away, or outside, into nature
 - Close your eyes
 - Take frequent breaks
 - Water helps in many ways – drink, swim, bathe
 - Take a walk, move
 - Calm your breathing
- Explore contemplative spiritual practices like silence and stillness, centering prayer, meditation, walking in nature, yoga, retreats and make space for them in your life
- Treasure your spiritual experiences but don't expect everyone else to understand them
- Delve into your vivid dreams, they are useful material for personal growth

A brief ‘soundbite’ description of the trait by Dr Aron:

A good sound bite might be, “Have you ever heard of the trait of high sensitivity? About 20% of people are born with it. It's completely normal. Basically it's just a preference to process one's experiences more deeply. You know, think about things more than other people do.”
(You can stop here and wait for questions, or go on.) “They (“we” is better though) also notice things others miss, and have stronger emotional reactions, both positive and negative. Noticing so much, feeling so much, and thinking about everything so much naturally means that they also get more easily overwhelmed, so that they need more down time and are more bothered by things like noise or having too much to do at once.”

from: <https://hsperson.com/how-do-you-recognize-an-hsp/>

Appendix 3: Questionnaire and responses

(Names have been changed for confidentiality)

1. How long ago did you first learn about the 'Highly Sensitive Person'?

Christine: Five years

Amanda: It was about 2003 and I was in my early 20s

Beth: About 20 years ago

2. How did you learn about it?

Christine: To this day I have no idea how I came to read Elaine Aron's book on being an HSP. I do not know what motivated me to buy the book!

Amanda: I learned about it from reading the book 'The Highly Sensitive Person' by Elaine Aron.

Beth: Someone suggested I read the first book about it.

3. What was your initial reaction when you realised that you were HSP?

Christine: Mixed. A sense of relief at finally understanding:

- 1. why I found the outside world such hard work and got overwhelmed with too many tasks (still do)**
- 2. why I attended to the 'details' of our house; like the arrangement of furniture, the importance of colour and ambience of rooms! I had assumed everyone did this!**
- 3. why I couldn't handle loud music, and violence on TV**
- 4. why I needed to leave gatherings early and often left feeling drained rather than energized**
- 5. why I could 'see' the feelings and minute movements of moods in the faces and body language of others**

And denial. I didn't want to be this way. I felt like a round peg in a square hole! It took me a long time to see the trait as a gift.

Amanda: My initial reaction was one of relief – I wasn't crazy, there were other people like me, there were ways to help me understand myself better so that I could see my sensitivity as a gift and not always a liability

Beth: Oddly enough, when I read the book, I didn't immediately identify myself as HSP. I was working as an associate pastor at that time, and the book made me realize that almost all the women who came to me for pastoral counselling/advice/conversations were HSP. Something about the way I preached and something about my upfront presence at church gave them permission to come to me.

The notion of being HSP helped me immensely in my pastoral relationships with these women. I saw that I needed to give them permission to go at a slower pace of life than many other people embrace. I saw that I needed to help them learn to pray in ways that affirmed their HSP attributes. I affirmed their sensitivity to other people as a gift they have to offer.

It was a couple of years later when I re-read the book that I realized I, too, was HSP. It was quite a surprise, after embracing the concept for other people!

4. How has knowing about this trait impacted on your spiritual journey?

Christine: I wonder if the trait has contributed to my huge curiosity about God and my 'seeing' and 'hearing' can be very deep. Nothing is black and white in my spiritual journey. I experience 'foresight' and not sure if this is part of being an HSP. My intuition is very strong (God within) and I have a strong sense of the presence of the Spirit in my life (sadly, not all the time!).

Amanda: Knowing about this trait has helped me to appreciate that the sensitivity I have also contributes to my spirituality and the unique ways that this is expressed and also its potential for expression.

Beth: Just like I said to the women I had conversations with, the notion of being HSP has given me permission to go slower, embrace a variety of forms of prayer, and be grateful that I'm perceptive about so many things. It's been a concept that has given me permission to be myself before God.

5. Is this something you have talked through with someone else?

If yes, with whom? For each option, write 'yes' or 'no', whether they had been previously aware of it, and whether it was a helpful conversation.

- **Pastor**
- **Spiritual director**

Christine: Yes. I've given a 'definition' to add an explanation to my experiences of life. I wouldn't say it was a conversation – more me giving information.

- **Friend**

Christine: Yes and she is a spiritual director and 'got' it.

Beth: I've talked with lots of friends about it.

- **Partner/spouse**

Christine: Yes, I use 'life' as an explanation. For example, I no longer watch violence or implied violence on TV or at the movies and I don't watch the violence on the news. Our granddaughter is an HSP and this has helped bring 'me' more out into the open. My husband, bless him, now listens to his music when I'm not around because he likes it very loud!

Beth: Yes – helpful to me, I'm not sure if it was helpful to him.

- **Therapist**
- **Other**

Amanda: I've talked about this with various people over the years – friends and therapists mainly.

6. As a result of understanding this character trait, has anything changed in your inner life?

If yes, what?

Christine: I notice I am more attuned to my inner life; to my thoughts, feelings and life experiences. I take more 'notice' of them, especially the shadow. I listen to my inner self, hear the 'voice within', to quote Joyce Rupp and trust my intuition.

Amanda: The understanding has slowly opened me to self-acceptance and therefore more confidence that I have a particular place in the world and a gift to bring to it.

Beth: Yes, more self-acceptance, more permission to go slow.

7. As a result of understanding this character trait, has anything changed in your outer life (work/relationships/church)?

If yes, what?

Christine: As a teacher having the HSP trait has helped me to establish relationships with students; it has allowed me to 'read' how life in the classroom/school/generally is going for them and this has enhanced my work.

In my relationships I seem to have the inner space to let people 'come as they are' and my desire to talk has lessened while my listening ears have got bigger! I'm trusting my intuition in my relationships and the spiritual disciplines of attending, noticing and letting go has helped deepen them. My sense is my HSP skills have been enhanced by my spiritual director training.

Where my HSP trait has really been noticeable is my health. Elaine Aaron talks about the sensitivity HSP's have to medication and I have discovered that the latter gives me migraines and makes me psychotic. I have become my own health advocate as a result of listening to my body and recognising that a medication is not working for me. I have educated my doctor on being an HSP and she now listens when I turn up saying I'm experiencing a migraine or my mind is doing weird things.

Amanda: My outer life is probably much the same in that I still have to perform the same functions but I guess my approach to it has probably evolved to be somewhat healthier.

Beth: Yes, more permission to go slow, to work part time, to say no.

8. What advice would you give to someone who discovers that they are HSP, in relation to their spiritual journey?

Christine: To be open to all that they encounter and expect their journey to be colourful, interesting, possibly fearful, exciting, insightful and grounded in many layers.

Amanda: My advice would be learn as much as you can, self-understanding goes a long way towards setting you free to live a full and happy life

Beth: Find some people who are HSP to talk with about the implications for your spiritual life, about the limits you need to place on your time and energy in order to use this gift to the fullest extent, in order to be the person God created you to be.

9. What would be helpful for a spiritual director to know if they have a directee who is HSP?

Christine: That they process deeply; whether it be thoughts, feelings and/or experiences and in a way that may surprise the spiritual director.

10. Has this trait impacted on the way you practise as a spiritual director? If yes, how?

Christine: I wonder if my noticing, attending and listening which can be rich and layered is connected to being an HSP or whether this is applicable to all spiritual directors?

Amanda: As a director I guess it mainly means as much as I can I want to be myself within the direction relationship – bringing that sensitivity to where it matters and also

being self-aware that the trait can also mean I could pick up on things that are not necessarily what God wants to bring to the person – so discerning what to go with, and what to leave

Beth: The concept is hugely helpful in all the ways mentioned above. People who are HSP need permission to live their lives a bit differently than other people, to live on a smaller scale, to embrace quiet and reflection, to slow down, to realize they are going to get tired from things that other people find energizing or at least not so tiring. They need encouragement to take their perceptions of people and situations into God's presence in prayer.

(Thanks to these three women for generously sharing their reflections and giving permission for this project to be made available through the Spiritual Growth Ministries website)