



## I am a Highly Sensitive Man

by Rick Belden

A few years ago, I was attempting to get closer with a woman I liked. We'd been working together for several years and knew one another solely on that basis, but I wanted something more personal with her. I'd been feeling a powerful sexual and romantic attraction to her for a long time, but given our relationship as peers in a work environment, I was being very deliberate in my attempts to gauge her interest in me and careful in my efforts to move things forward. When I'm attracted to someone, I tend to move slowly and gradually anyway; in this case, having lived through my share of work-related romantic entanglements, rejections, and disasters, I was eager to avoid any situation that might turn awkward for either of us.

Things seemed to be progressing in the direction I desired, albeit slowly and with frequent yellow flags, but nevertheless, I finally felt confident enough to share something more personal with her than our daily chitchat about our lives in and out of work. She knew I was a writer and that I'd had a book of poetry published because I'd spoken about it during our many visits. I decided to offer it to her and find out if she was interested enough in me to read it. I asked her if she might like to see the book, and she said she would, so I brought a copy to work and gave it to her.

I didn't want to appear too eager or overly invested in her opinion of the book, so I didn't bring it up again after giving it to her. One day, while we were outside walking during a break, she mentioned she'd finished reading it. Doing my best to appear as cool as possible and not betray the anxiety that had been building ever since I'd first offered her the book, I said, "Great. What did you think?" And she said:

*"I think you're abnormally sensitive for a man."*

Obviously, this was not the sort of response I was hoping to hear. It's not the sort of response any man ever wants to hear, any time, from anyone, most certainly not from a woman to whom he's attracted and with whom he's just taken the supreme risk of showing his vulnerable side.

It was a painful experience for me, to be sure, but not the first. I've heard variations on this theme all my life:

- "Don't be so sensitive."
- "You're too sensitive."
- "You need to stop being so sensitive."

*Shy. Thin-skinned. Wimp. Pussy. Queer. Faggot. Whiner.* I've heard all of these and more for as long as I can remember, and the message is always crystal clear: "There's something wrong with you and you need to change it." As if I haven't tried. As if I could.

Sensitive boys and men are all too often treated as pariahs in a tough guy culture. Sensitive boys in particular are easy prey for bullies, whether they're peers, older kids, or adults in positions of power and authority like parents, teachers, and coaches. I was humiliated countless times as a boy for my sensitivity, by both adults and other children. I learned to regard it as my enemy, as something that only brought me shame and scorn, and as something to keep hidden away, not only from others, but from myself.

It was simply too dangerous to my well-being to allow my sensitivity out into the open any more than I had to, so I tried to harden myself up. I got fairly good at it over time, good enough to survive through adolescence and into young adulthood, but I felt lost most of the time, and I was. That's the inevitable price of denying any core element of who we are.

I continued to maintain an uneasy relationship with my natural sensitivity through my twenties and thirties. During that time, I was gradually transitioning into feeling a bit more comfortable with it because I'd learned that trying to deny it completely only made me sick and miserable. But I still carried the shame and the stigma of feeling and being seen as somehow "defective" as a man because of it, and I was still disowning a large part of myself and my experience as a result. I was also still being reminded by others that I was not okay the way I was and needed to change, as in this statement from a close friend after I'd confided in him regarding a problem I was having:

*"You need to stop being so sensitive. I'm not judging you, but sometimes I just want to shake you and tell you to get over it."*

Same old message: You're wrong. You're defective. You're weak. You're inadequate. You need to change. You need to get over it. At least he didn't *actually* shake me to help me

do that. Prior experience with that sort of “help” from others tells me it doesn’t work at all.

That incident was a pretty good example of the state of my relationship with my own sensitivity as I moved into my early forties. I’d made a lot of progress toward reconciling with the softer, vulnerable, more tender parts of myself, and I was even beginning to feel more confident in giving them a voice, but I was also reminded on a regular basis that I was still just as likely to be scorned and shamed for my sensitivity as I was to be accepted and supported. Deep inside, I still felt like an outcast and a freak in a culture that defines and characterizes tenderness, compassion, and sensitivity as primarily feminine qualities. And I remained haunted by the same dilemma that had plagued me since childhood: How can I be as sensitive as I am and still be a man?

It was during that time that, quite by accident, I stumbled across some material that profoundly changed the way I saw myself and what I’d come to regard as my “curse” of sensitivity. I was in a bookstore looking for something (I don’t even remember what) when a title caught my eye: [\*The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You\*](#). I’d never heard of this book or seen anything like it, but when I began to page through it, I knew I had to have it because this book was about *me*.

For the first time, someone was describing my inherent sensitivity as a positive trait rather than some sort of shameful aberration to be corrected. Furthermore, the author, [Elaine Aron](#), described the experience of what she called a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) as the natural, inevitable result of having a nervous system that is, as she has put it, “uncommonly sensitive.” In other words, the sensitivity with which I’d been struggling throughout my life wasn’t all in my head, it wasn’t a weakness, and it wasn’t a choice. It was rooted in my physiology.

There was something else, too, something equally big, as summarized by Peter Messerschmidt in his blog post [“The Challenges of the Highly Sensitive Man”](#):

*Dr. Elaine Aron, along with other researchers studying the trait of high sensitivity, often cites the statistic that approximately 15-20% of the population fits the definition of a “highly sensitive person.” Furthermore, the indications are that equal numbers of men and women are highly sensitive.*

This was more than an eye-opener for me. It was a game-changer. For the first time, someone was telling me that I could be not just merely sensitive, but *highly* sensitive, and still be a man. This was a possibility that had never been presented to me before, not in person and certainly not in the culture at large, and it was the first step in beginning to own my sensitivity, not just as a valuable element but a *defining* element of my masculine identity.

The path is still not easy. It's an ongoing challenge to see my sensitivity as an asset rather than a weakness to be feared and hidden from others. Men and boys are already living in a no-win, double bind situation around vulnerability; it is amplified for highly sensitive men and boys. If most men lead lives of quiet desperation, they also know that society and most of the people around them prefer they keep it that way. A man or boy who shows sensitivity and expresses vulnerability is always taking a risk. Shame and scorn, whether from other males or from females, remain some of the most powerful tools for keeping men and boys "in line." Most men are not highly sensitive, but many men are far more sensitive than they want anyone else to know.

For men like me who *are* highly sensitive, being who we are in the world, in our relationships, and even with ourselves is often a work in progress. We tend to need more down time than others. We have deep experiences that we need to process and understand. We need to make time and space for feelings that we may have never learned to experience and express because we were never allowed to do so. We receive and process more sensory input than most others do; consequently, we can sometimes find ourselves feeling overwhelmed in contexts that others find routine. We tend to proceed carefully, to get a sense and an understanding of the whole situation, before diving in.

These behaviors and qualities are all assets, but they frequently run counter to the values and practices of an overstimulated, Type A, 24/7 culture that wants more and more, faster and faster, all the time. This is a fundamental conflict that has a profound and often severely negative impact on all HSPs, whether male or female, and results in a lot of pain, confusion, and even physical illness. I've learned the hard way, as many others have, that pushing yourself "like everyone else does" when you're a Highly Sensitive Person is like pounding nails with a microscope.

In another blog post titled ["Highly Sensitive Men: The 'Hidden' HSPs?"](#), Peter Messerschmidt writes, "Society has an alarming ability to 'steal the souls' of Highly Sensitive Men, leaving them feeling sad and confused." This is an experience and an ongoing struggle I know all too well. I still want to hide my sensitivity a lot of the time, and I still do. Sometimes that's because of old fears and conditioning; sometimes it's simple pragmatism. I know I can still be deeply wounded if I'm not careful and therefore I try to choose my opportunities accordingly. Sometimes I still get hurt when I'm open with others about who I am and what I feel (as with the female coworker I liked and the friend in whom I confided). Sometimes my feelings are so deep and acute that I can hardly bear them in private. I probably struggle as much with my feelings in private as I do when I'm with anyone else. The shame and the scorn I've experienced throughout my life in response to my sensitivity has been internalized deep within. I don't need anyone else to criticize and belittle me for it now; those voices are already right here inside me.

In his article [“Healing the Highly Sensitive Male”](#), Ted Zeff, author of [The Strong, Sensitive Boy](#), has written, “By disowning their sensitive side, many males become half a person.” Having spent most of my life living that way, I know it’s true. I also know that, whether I allow or disallow my natural sensitivity, there’s a cost to be paid, and likely some very real pain to be felt either way, and I often stumble in the face of that choice. I still frequently feel angry when I’m actually sad because it feels safer, more manly. I still frequently pull away from others and shut down when what I really want is to connect and feel close, because I don’t have the courage or the stomach to risk the sting of being rejected or misunderstood. I still pull away from myself, most of all, because of the stigma and the fear that’s been conditioned into me, and the absence of skills never learned for being with everything I perceive, sense, and feel.

No one likes pain, and I’m no exception, but I’ve slowly come around to the belief that the pain of feeling is preferable to the pain of not feeling, and that the pain of being who I am is preferable to the pain of being what I’m not. As author Seth Mullins [has written](#), “Sensitivity – even when it comes at the cost of great suffering – may be all that renders worth to existence in the end.” I think one of the important points he makes with that statement is that sensitivity is not the absence of toughness, but is, in many ways, the very *embodiment* of toughness. It takes a great deal of inner strength and resiliency to maintain your sensitivity in a world that seems to go out of its way to beat it out of you, often literally. If that’s not a demonstration of strength, courage, and resolve consistent with any reasonable definition of masculinity, I don’t know what is.

So yes, I’ll say it: I am a Highly Sensitive Man. I’m not abnormal. There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m not a weakling, a wimp, or a pussy. I’m strong, passionate, and courageous. I’ll fight for what’s important to me. And I’m just as tough as any other man. I have to be, just to be who I am in a world that wants me to be something else.

And I am not alone. There are many of us. As many as one in five men, if the numbers are correct. Think about that. You know many of us. You may *be* one of us. Some of us are hiding. Some of us are hurting. Many of us, young and old, boys and men, are still trying to find our place in a world that is often openly hostile to our very natures. But look at that world, and try to imagine what it would be like without us. We may be scorned, shamed, invisible, and undervalued, but we are here and we are needed.

I am a Highly Sensitive Man and this world needs me, just as it needs all of its highly sensitive men and boys. Every one of us. No exceptions!

*Originally posted at [poetry, dreams, and the body](#) on Nov 16 2012.*

*Image: [Highly Sensitive Man](#) by Rick Belden.*



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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [\*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood\*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [\*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within\*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).