

Highly Sensitive Dogs

By Nancy Dewar

A few years ago, while researching a personality trait known as “Highly Sensitive Personality” (HSP), I came across a veterinarian in Switzerland who was doing research on this topic with dogs. I reached out to Dr. Maya Braem to see if we could do an article on her. Her research was finally published this year, and our interview with Maya follows.

A bit about you?

I was born and bred in Basel, Switzerland, which is in the German-speaking part of the country. I grew up with my younger sister, my Swiss father (musician) and my American mother (psycholinguist, sign language researcher). My parents are both very intelligent, interesting and interested people and passionate about their jobs (and many other things), so I was exposed to interesting discussions and was encouraged to question things early on.



I am not sure where my love for animals comes from, as the rest of my family here in Switzerland is not particularly close to animals. However, a large part of my US family has horses, dogs and cats. In any case, I felt a connection with animals from early on...and eventually my parents gave in and we adopted our cat Jimmy, the bunnies Ping and Pong, Schnuffi and Schmusi and Gerbils Meg and Mog. I started horseback riding when I was 10 and spent most of my free time at the barn the following 15-25 years. It was the horses that originally got me into veterinary medicine.

What is Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) in humans? Is it the same as Highly Sensitive Personalities (HSP)?

Yes, Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) and “Highly Sensitive Personality” are the same thing: A personality trait found in 15-20% of humans, independent of gender or culture. It was first described as such by Elaine and Arthur Aron in their first paper in 1997 and has since been a topic of increasing interest both in research as well as in popular publications. Elaine Aron summarizes the main four characteristics of the high sensitivity personality trait in the acronym: DOES.

- **D** stands for Depth of processing: More highly sensitive individuals tend to process information more deeply, think about subjects more, and therefore for example can have more trouble making decisions or be more easily bored by small talk.

- **O** stands for Overstimulation: Highly sensitive individuals tend to be more easily overstimulated. This makes sense if you consider that (a) these individuals pick up on more detail relating to all sensory modalities (including emotional information) and (b) process all this information more deeply.

- **E** stands for Emotional reactivity and Empathy: HSP individuals experience emotions more intensely and therefore react with stronger emotions to situations, both negative and positive. They might cry more easily, laugh more, express happiness more strongly and intuitively “pick up” on what others might be feeling.

- **S** stands for Sensory Sensitivity of Sensing the Subtle: Highly sensitive individuals are more aware of subtleties in the environment (visual, acoustic, tactile, olfactory, emotional).

It is important to emphasize that SPS is a personality trait, i.e. a variation of the norm and NOT a pathology, mental illness or diagnosis.

What motivated you to do SPS research on dogs (Canine SPS; cSPS)?

Being a highly sensitive person myself and knowing how much learning about this trait has helped me understand why I am the way I am and why I might not have fit in as easily as others, made me wonder whether the same was true for animals. While working with my (canine and feline) patients, I kept catching myself telling owners “your dog/cat is highly sensitive”



- so I started wondering whether this could be “measured” and proven scientifically. I chose studying the trait in dogs, as this species lives in such close proximity to humans and shares our everyday lives. Research also shows that the way humans and dogs bond has many parallels to how humans bond with one another.

Topline, key findings?

1) cSPS exists: A personality trait comparable to SPS in humans can be measured in dogs - we called it canine Sensory Processing Sensitivity (cSPS)

2) Development of a scientifically validated HSD questionnaire: We have developed a scientifically validated questionnaire for dogs that leads to a score between 1-7, the closer to 7, the more likely the dog is highly sensitive. Paralleling the highly sensitive person questionnaire developed and validated by Dr. Elaine Aron, we named this questionnaire “the Highly Sensitive Dog questionnaire”.

3) There are parallels between humans and dogs:

- We found several parallels to the SPS trait in humans, for example that cSPS overlaps with fearfulness and neuroticism, but is not the same as these two personality traits; e.g. a more highly sensitive dog might be more likely to be fearful or neurotic than a less highly sensitive dog, but not all fearful and neurotic dogs are highly sensitive...and not all highly sensitive dogs are fearful or neurotic.

- More highly sensitive people seem to be more vulnerable for mental health problems. Paralleling this, we found that behavior problems were reported more frequently in more highly sensitive dogs, as well.

4) Interaction dog and owner personality and communication: This was an exciting finding, as it shows that personalities can interact across species, which hasn't been studied in detail up to now. Most research focusses on the interaction within a species. We found that the greater the difference in high sensitivity of dog and owner, the more behavior problems were reported for the dogs. This was the case especially if the dog was more highly sensitive than the owner. Our results also indicate that more highly sensitive dogs seem to respond differently to how owners communicate with them.

How do you know a dog has cSPS?

Typical behaviors for more highly sensitive dogs might be, amongst others:

- They often stop and watch in new situations and need time to process information. They might understand what their owner wants without them really having to tell them.
- They pick up on their owners' moods and emotions – depending on the dog they either leave the room or come up to their owner, for example.
- They express their emotions clearly, indicating that they experience both positive and negative emotions strongly.
- They seem to be aware of everything that happens around them and pick up on small details.
- They are easily overwhelmed, don't feel comfortable when a lot is going on and need more rest.
- They can be more sensitive to touch, e.g. to being wet or to things touching them (e.g. coats, harnesses) or they enjoy touch thoroughly.
- They might respond more strongly to medication.



If a person isn't highly sensitive, are they better off with a dog that isn't highly sensitive...or does it matter?

I would turn this around: a more highly sensitive dog is probably better off with a more highly sensitive owner, as this owner is more likely to (intuitively) understand the dog's needs and to have a lifestyle that suits the more highly sensitive dog and his or her needs better. This, however, does not mean that any other type of pairing will not work.



When disciplining or training a dog, do you think we should err on the side of caution and assume the dog has cSPS?

A definite yes. In any case, independent of personality, we should always treat an individual with respect and avoid fear, anxiety and pain or other negative emotions or high arousal. As was shown in our study, no matter how sensitive the dogs were, more behavior problems were reported for dogs that were exposed to punishment, with more highly sensitive dogs even more sensitive to withholding information; e.g. ignoring.

Anything else you would like to add?

Just a huge thank you to all the dogs and their owners who participated in this study and made it possible, to Elaine Aron who believed in my work and supported me initially, to my supervisors and my co-authors, my family and friends and everybody who is interested in this...and to you, for being so persistent over the past few years and waiting patiently for the time to be right to write about this!

(Coming soon: www.highly-sensitive-animals.info)