

Anxiety and the Sensitive Person

by

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The Sensitive Person's Level of Suffering and Need to Present Well

Individuals suffering from anxiety are often highly sensitive people whose acute awareness has become an affliction rather than a gift. In an effort to mask their psychological pain, anxious individuals often present extremely well -- composed, attractive, competent, intelligent, or articulate. Traits of perfectionism and attention to detail likely add to a generally favorable impression, and these same refined qualities may actually contribute to the individual's legitimate degree of competence or significant achievement in life. While this presentation may reflect a high level of functioning in the *external* world, it also belies a demoralizing picture of a tortured *internal* reality.

Characteristically, anxious people also experience a sense of poignant transparency, a feeling that their anxieties might become visible and provoke the negative scrutiny of others. This contributes to a pervasive concern that others might unmask a vulnerable and imperfect self that is fraught with inadequacies assumed to be of exaggerated proportions. Moreover, their high level of insight that anxious symptoms are excessive or unreasonable creates a significant degree of shame and a strong motivation to keep anxieties undiscoverable to others. In this way, anxious people learn to present as unoffensive, competent, and above reproach in an attempt to avoid humiliation or rejection.

Not only are they uncomfortable in their own skin, anxious individuals are acutely aware of all the ways in which there is an imperfect fit between themselves and their immediate world. The specifics of their discrepant experiences are unique to each individual, and it is the therapist's task to understand just how they are so. The following list comprises some of the inherent disparities between the anxious person's inner and outer worlds.

The Assets and Liabilities of the Anxious Person

Gifts/ Assets

Acute sensitivity.

Alert and discerning.

Rich interior; reflective and contemplative.

Intelligent; complicated "wiring."

Afflictions/ Liabilities

These individuals must adapt to an extraverted society that doesn't always value this trait.

To manage over-stimulation, anxious people insulate themselves from stressful situations, creating a worsened condition of increased sensitivity and decreased habituation to stress.

Often overwhelmed; criticized for thinking too much; lonely.

High maintenance, like an expensive car. Become sick or exhausted.

Empathic and compassionate.	Poor boundaries; lack of assertiveness.
Responsible and conscientious.	Easily exploited by others, particularly bosses.
Accuracy; able to detect errors; Good at cognitive techniques such as identifying automatic thoughts.	Hyper-vigilance; perfectionism; and rejection- sensitivity. Difficulty controlling levels of arousal. These may negatively affect performance levels.
High level of functioning.	Relaxation, recreation, and self-care receive low priority.

My Message to the Sensitive Person:

My message to you is that you can live and even thrive in a world that doesn't quite match who you are and how you feel inside. Even if you cannot feel them around you, trust that there are other like-minded people such as yourself who are similar to you in nature and are as sensitive and deep as you are.

Regarding your feelings of transparency: No one can see into you unless you want them to. While you may be able to intuit the feeling states of others, most people do not possess this ability. Even if it were true that others could sense your feelings or discomfort, it doesn't mean they really know who you are. A good measure of determining whether someone truly knows you is whether they feel compassion, respect, or love for you. If you don't get this feeling from others, then perhaps they don't really know you.

Regarding your perfectionism: I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that you don't have very much control. And the good news is that you don't have very much control. In other words, you are off the hook in terms of trying to control everything and make it all come out ok. I encourage you to grieve over the fact that nothing can be done perfectly, and that you are not perfect. Grieving feels uncomfortable too, but it feels better than anxiety. Your need to be perfect is not helping to reduce your anxiety, it is actually increasing it. Learn to be ok with the feeling of being "good enough," and practice doing things that are just "good enough." Each one of us is a work in progress, and we are all beautifully, poetically flawed.

Last, celebrate your sensitivity, as it is a gift. Remember that as a result of your sensitivity, you make a great friend, a deep thinker, an original person, and someone with substance. I invite you to experience, with all your sensitivity, the natural expressions of humanness and imperfections that come with authentically relating to life. Your unique presence changes the world. I'm glad that you are here.

Sincerely,

Heather Stone, Ph.D.