

SURVIVING LIFE DRAMAS

KAREN GOSLING

COUNSELOR FOR EMOTIONAL WEALTH

Part 3 of 12

Surviving Sensitivity



changing minds, changing lives



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Published by Gosling International ABN: 28-219-744-700
13 Valerie Street, Ashmore Queensland 4214 Australia
<www.goslings.net>

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Transcription by Dr Jay Polmar <www.lifeimprovementbooks.com>

Edited by GoslingProductions <www.goslingproductions.com>

Logos and web site design by Ivo Widjaja, Melbourne, Australia <www.equeenox.com>

Printed & bound in the United States of America by Vervante <www.vervante.com>

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Surviving Life Dramas: Surviving Sensitivity
Part 3 of 12

Dr. Mike Gosling:

Hello, I'm Doctor Mike Gosling and on behalf of the entire staff at Gosling International and the Emotional Wealth Academy, I'd like to welcome you to today's seminar in the twelve part seminar series, *Surviving Life Dramas*. Today's topic is *Surviving Sensitivity*. Did you know that up to 20% of the population in North America are considered to be HSPs – Highly Sensitive People. Are you a HSP? Today's seminar will help you find out.

Our speaker today is uniquely qualified to speak on the topic, having helped thousands of people in more than thirty years to survive sensitivity. Ladies and gentlemen, expert counselor and Gosling International Counseling Director, Mrs Karen Gosling.

Karen Gosling:

Thank you very much Mike for that very kind introduction. I must say that today, this topic of the Highly Sensitive Person – I do feel qualified to talk about because in fact, I am a Highly Sensitive Person – and so today, I'm going to be talking a great deal from my own experiences.

Sensitive people really do exist. Statistically, about 20% of the population is considered to be sensitive and amongst those, probably about 11% to be highly sensitive. We abbreviate the Highly Sensitive Person to being an HSP. So all of you people out there who have ever heard the comments, "Oh, stop being so sensitive. Stop going on and on about things." All those

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times that you've considered yourself flawed, then just know that you are flawed no longer, because being a Sensitive Person is a very real trait.

What being sensitive actually means is that you have a nervous system that is very easily and readily aroused with Adrenalin whenever there is a suggestion that your body, your organism, is somehow in danger. It's to do with the threat that your brain perceives that you might be in. What the Sensitive Person does is picks up subtleties in their environment from any source that may in fact be considered dangerous. The brain ends up being on guard just in case there is a problem and so, what the Sensitive Person does is, constantly feel on guard for noise or sound or taste or feel or textures that might be uncomfortable and therefore arouse the nervous system.

Because this is a biological thing, it is very likely that if you are a nervous person, then one or both of your parents also are nervous. One or both of your parents are sensitive.

Because of the subtleties in the environment that a sensitive person picks up, if they are exposed to the stimuli for too long or the stimuli are too great or there are too many all at once, the nervous system becomes so aroused that the person feels very, very uncomfortable. And that uncomfortable feeling is a trigger that there is some thing wrong and to do something about it. The HSP cannot filter out these stimuli even if he or she wants to. Very often they are aware that things are going wrong and that they are feeling over aroused and that they are feeling uncomfortable, but they don't know how to switch it off. That's simply because the brain is not able to calm down because of the threat of danger.

For example, if you were a HSP on the bus, you are going for a bus ride and you might be travelling with a partner. As an HSP, you will be aware of the mood of the driver when you get in. You will be aware of the mother having trouble with her son down there. Of this couple over here that are talking together quietly – obviously in love. Of the man over there with the skin condition. And when you get off the bus, you will say to your partner, "Did you notice that man with the skin condition? Did you notice that naughty boy down at the front of the bus?" And your partner will go, "No. Where?" And you will think to yourself, "Were we travelling on the same bus? Did we experience the same ride?" Two people can actually be in the same environment and experience it differently. One an HSP and one a non-HSP.

Different cultures feel very differently about sensitivity. There are some cultures – for example, the Chinese culture – that gives great esteem to children who are considered to be sensitive. They are perhaps quieter, shy, a little bit more nervous. And these children are respected. In the western culture, children on the other hand are expected to be, and in fact trained to be a little bit more outgoing. To speak up. To be more assertive and not to be these shy, quiet children. And so different cultures give different importance to these sensitive traits.

Very often, the HSP feels that being sensitive is somewhat of a disability. They feel that there's a lot of negatives about being sensitive and that's simply because of the comments that they have grown up with during their lives. Comments like, "Let it go. Whatever's wrong with you? Stop being so sensitive." But there are indeed some really wonderful, positive traits about being sensitive. If you're sensitive, you're not going to make the best test pilot, you're not going to make a very good sales person because there are way too many stimuli in those

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situations that are going to cause you this feeling of discomfort. It's going to be way too stimulating for you.

However, there are going to be many other jobs that you are well suited for. Let me refer to my notes and let you know what some of the very positive aspects of being sensitive are. An example – HSPs are much better at spotting errors and avoiding making errors. They make really good editors and proof-readers and copy-writers because they are very good at just scanning a page and spotting grammatical and punctuation errors. HSPs are able to concentrate deeply and they are highly conscientious. This is very much linked with the fact that the HSP doesn't like the feeling of doing things wrongly, doesn't like the feeling of doing things improperly or only half-hearted and so they are indeed very conscientious. HSPs make very good employees because they are very thorough and they are very unlikely to skive off and have a sick day.

HSPs are often thinking about their own thinking and this is not actually self-centredness – it may sometimes come across as self-absorption – they are actually just thinking through, reflecting on, dwelling on the different exchanges that people have and trying to analyze, "How did that person interpret that? How did I come across to that person? Did I hurt that person when I said that thing?" They are constantly thinking about their own thinking.

HSPs learn without being aware that they have learned, simply because they are always picking up things in their environment. I've got a good example of this. I remember when my son was still going to child care. He wasn't even three years old yet and I was driving him to child care one morning. It was a regular occurrence and he was sitting in his car seat in the

back. It was an overcast morning and this little voice from the back seat said, "Mum, those lights must be faulty."

And I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "That street light is on and usually when we drive to child care, all the street lights are off."

I was really quite amazed because this child of mine, a sensitive boy who was always scanning the environment and aware of dangers, had actually noticed that the street light was different. I hadn't noticed that but he had observed on previous mornings that as we drove to child care, the lights were usually off and this morning, one light was on. It was of course because it was still an overcast morning and it hadn't triggered the lights to go off. I must also add that I wasn't even aware that my son knew the word 'faulty' at that particular time. He had learned words by listening, that I didn't even know that he knew.

So, in order to understand what sensitivity is, we actually have to go back to biology. Sensitivity is a neural trait. It's to do with the brain and its interpretation of threat in the environment. In the first seminar that I gave about the brain, I spoke about Adrenalin arousal and for those of you who've not heard the first seminar, I'd like to just briefly describe again about the brain.

This is my cartoon sketch of the cross-section of a brain. The two main parts of the brain is the Cortex that does the thinking and the Limbic System that does the feeling. Whenever a stimulus is received by the brain, it is first assessed by the Limbic System for danger and the Amygdala in the Limbic System is our fear centre – this is a Greek word that means almond – it just describes the size of this fear centre in the brain. So, when the stimulus comes into the

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brain, it is initially appraised by the Limbic System for any possible danger. The fear centre kicks off a stress response, it orders the Sympathetic Nervous System in the body to produce Adrenalin. That's that startled feeling that we first have for example if you hear a thunderclap and you have a slight flinch. At the same time, there is a message from the Amygdala that goes up to the Cortex in order for the brain to think, "Is this situation dangerous or not?" This is our cognition – our Cortex is doing thinking. And so, when there is a recognition that no there is no danger, that is simply a thunderclap and therefore is a storm happening, the awareness of no danger puts on the brakes and now the Parasympathetic Nervous System - which is the opposing system – stops the flow of Adrenalin and restores the body to calm. And so you calm down again once you have an awareness that there's no threat.

If, however the brain recognises that there is a threat, then that awareness of something possibly threatening happening, will send more messages down to the Sympathetic Nervous System so that more Adrenalin is produced. An example of this happening is on the morning of the Tsunami. When people became aware of danger, saw the threat, saw the wave coming, produced so much Adrenalin, that they were able to run like they had never run before and climb trees when they had never climbed a tree before to get away from the danger.

When you are a Sensitive Person, what is actually happening is that your Limbic System is highly sensitised to danger. It is more finely tuned to danger than somebody else. That means that the Limbic System is constantly going to be appraising the environment for threat and kicking off a stress response, just in case there is danger. So, an example is, for external stimuli, that you may have an Adrenalin response to things that are too hot or things that are too sticky or things that are too noisy or things that are too tight. The Sensitive Person might

have an irritation to tags on t-shirts or to tight elastic on a pair of shorts or to shoes that are rubbing. And yet they may not worry somebody else so much.

These external stimuli trigger an Adrenalin response, which causes a feeling of discomfort, which is actually alerting the person to the fact that something is wrong. But, if the brain then catches up and thinks, "What is wrong?", it's not necessarily anything that is terribly dangerous. It's just that the feeling has been one of high-alert.

The Sensitive Person is usually also experiencing a lot of stimuli in their internal world. Your internal world is all the things that go on inside of your body and your brain. When you're thinking things like, "I haven't studied very well for this exam. Is that person finding me boring? What if that person doesn't like me? I wish that person hadn't come to the seminar today." If the Sensitive Person is thinking those things in their brain, that too becomes an internal threat because the brain is thinking those things and Adrenalin is being produced. That stimulus creates an internal feeling of discomfort and then extends the thinking into, "What if they get up and leave? What if he dumps me if he doesn't like me?" And so these internal thoughts go on and on.

These are the sorts of Adrenalin arousals that the Sensitive Person has all of the time. They never seem to be free of them and because there is a general build up of Adrenalin in the sensitive Person's body, only at this level initially – before the Cortex starts actually thinking about it – is what causes the Sensitive Person to constantly feel anxious. This Adrenalin feeling is actually an anxious feeling and it's a feeling of always being on guard. The way I describe it often to people is if you see a Meerkat on sentry duty – head up, eyes around, all

alert, looking for danger. That's a bit like how the brain and the body feels in the Sensitive Person.

As the Sensitive Person experiences more and more of these Adrenalin arousals, Adrenalin increases, thereby depleting in the body a chemical called Serotonin. Many of you may be aware of this chemical. Serotonin is our good feeling chemical. It alters our mood. It is our chemical of well-being. And so as your Adrenalin levels rise, your thinking becomes more and more impaired because of lowered Serotonin.

As the brain becomes more aware of increased levels of Adrenalin, it starts to search for reasons why this fear chemical is present and so then it starts to search for what the danger might be. This cycle then becomes very debilitating because the more you have the feeling, the more you have the negative thought. The more you have the negative thought, the more you have the negative feeling. And so, Sensitive People generally find that they're producing so much Adrenalin - simply by their thoughts going around and around - and when they have a stress response, when they're aware of that feeling of fear in their body - that Adrenalin arousal - their thought will always go to the thing in their life that they are most vulnerable about.

Sometimes it will be their health. "What's wrong with me? What's that lump? What's that pain I can feel?" Or it might be about the relationship, or it might be about the job, or it might be about the money. If you're worried about money, you'll always be worried about not having enough. "What if I don't have enough money when I'm older?" And so, for the Sensitive

Person, this cycle of dwelling and ruminating and staying on a negative track is what becomes debilitating for them.

Physically what happens is that as the Adrenalin increases, it stores in our muscles. The moment Adrenalin is produced, it goes to our muscles and constricts our muscles. For example, if you see a spider you get a shock and immediately, your muscles constrict. When the spider runs away again, your muscles relax and you restore to calm. But, when you're a Sensitive Person and you're producing a lot of Adrenalin and it's continuous and your thoughts are negative, what happens is that your muscles constrict and you stay constricted. And so it is very common that the Sensitive Person will say things like, "I feel so tired all of the time." Because they genuinely do feel fatigue.

A Sensitive Person might say, "I feel exhausted. I feel like I've been hit by a bus." And do you know what? The feeling is the same as if you've been hit by a bus because if you've been hit by a bus, your body will flood with adrenalin because it has been a trauma and the Adrenalin will slowly release once the trauma is over. Often I say to people that it would be easier to be hit by a bus than to be a Sensitive Person. Because for Sensitive People, they feel as though the trauma is never over. They feel as though the bus keeps on hitting them.

Sensitive People typically feel as though they are in the minority. They feel as though they are out of step with the rest of the world. One of the reasons for this is because, just in every day situations, Sensitive People find that others speak to them as they wouldn't speak to others. The Sensitive Person is so aware of other people's feelings and so keen not to hurt other

people's feelings that they speak kindly to them and they speak without irritability and without harshness because they know that impacts on another person.

And so, when a Sensitive Person has people speaking to them with irritability or with harshness or with cross words, they have an Adrenalin arousal for two reasons. One is because it feels like an attack and secondly because it feels so unjust. "Why do you speak like that to me when I wouldn't speak like that to you? And so Sensitive People do feel hurt. They have wounded feelings and so what they typically do is they withdraw to reflect on the exchange and to try and sort out what's going on and to assess if there is actually danger.

Some Sensitive People, may be Reactive People and fly off the handle because when we have this Adrenalin in our body, we are either fight or flight in terms of our response. Some Sensitive People will feel this Adrenalin Arousal and then get angry back again very quickly, or smash something on the ground, or thump the wall. But typically however, the Sensitive Person is an Avoidant Person. Typically, the Sensitive Person is one who feels taken aback with their Adrenalin Response and internalises that Adrenalin and builds it up and withdraws and goes quiet while they try and assess what's going on.

Because of the phenomenon of accumulation of Adrenalin and because the Sensitive Person's brain is so sensitised to threat, it commonly occurs that the Sensitive Person becomes over-aroused. What this means is that if the person is in a situation where they are receiving too many stimuli that are too intense or for too long, and they can't have a break from it to settle down their nervous system again, they have this flooding of Adrenalin which feels like and over-arousal. The over-arousal of the nervous system feels like over-whelmed. So, it's a very

common feeling of a Sensitive Person to feel overwhelmed and to feel immobilised and to not know what to do next. It's a shock feeling, it's a taken aback feeling, it's an anxious feeling.

It may be simply because of the environment and that there's nothing really to be anxious or worried about. So, let me give you an example. A few weeks ago, I took my children to the theatre to see the musical, "We Will Rock You." It was a great evening. We bought the tickets, we were looking forward to it, we had good seats and I love Queen music. Even so, when I was actually at the theatre, while the kids had a really good time and they were grooving away, I found the whole environment way too stimulating because the music was really loud and the vibrations were coming right through into my body and there was strobe lighting flashing and there were crowds of people and there had been a crush trying to get into the theatre doors. We had been running late so I'd been a bit rushed and bit worked up about perhaps not getting there in time. And so that situation is what we call an over-stimulating situation.

When it came to the intermission and the kids wanted to go out and get a drink, I sent them off and said, "You go." I actually needed to stay by myself, in my own seat and not talk to anybody and just calm down as much as I could during intermission because there was going to be a second half and I knew the second half was going to be equally as loud and equally as stimulating as the first half had been. And yet, as a Sensitive Person, if I have no stimulation at all, I get bored. So, it has to be a fine line. No arousal is not good and over-arousal is not good.

The Sensitive Person needs some arousal of their nervous system to feel as though they're getting some interest out of life. If there is nothing to do, if it's boring, if it's flat, if there's no

stimulus, that's also bad. We really are a hard breed to satisfy. So again, I'll think of a personal example and I think about when I first came to Singapore and Mike was working and wanted to relax during the weekend. But, I wanted to be out at the weekend doing things and exploring and finding out about the place. We didn't have a car. We didn't know any people so there was nobody to go and visit. So I'd say, "Come on Mike, let's take the kids out for an outing."

And he'd say, "Oh why? It's too hot. Let's just relax at home."

And I'd say, "No, I've been relaxing at home all week. I want to go out."

He said, "Well, you go. I'm happy if you go."

But I really had nowhere to go and so I would just take the children down to the local playground. They were happy to play at the playground. I would come home from the playground, having just spoken to a few other children and a few other parents and I would be perfectly fine. And I can remember thinking to myself, "Is my life here so boring that I feel good just by talking to a few people at the playground?" But very soon, I was able to work out that I just had to do something little – a visit to the park, a visit to the playground, something that was a little bit of stimulus and my nervous arousal would be up, I felt in control of it, I knew what I was doing and I would be perfectly happy.

And that's an example of 'a little bit of stimulus is good, too much stimulus is not good' for the HSP and they actually have to moderate. It also explains, this over-arousal business, it explains why I don't enjoy trips to the beach and I never have. Even when I was a teenager and groups of friends would go to the beach, I always felt the odd person out because I never actually enjoyed it. I didn't like the heat, I didn't like the sand, I didn't like the sun, I didn't like

the hot wind, I didn't like coming home with sand in my swimmers. I couldn't work out why everyone else said they loved it and looked forward to going to the beach. Again, I felt the odd man out. I felt like the one out of step.

So I would pretend, and I would pretend that I enjoyed it and I would make the effort to go and I would use my brain to go, "It's all right. I can get through this. Be like everybody else." And yet when I came home at the end of the day at the beach, I needed time to calm down again and to calm down my nervous arousal. There was no way I could shower and change and go out again and yet everybody else seemed to be able to do that. They'd come home, change and go out and party. I couldn't do that and it was because my nervous system had had enough for the day and the Adrenalin in my body had aroused my nervous system enough. I needed to calm down, have a quiet evening at home and get ready for the onslaught of more Adrenalin arousals that were going to happen the next day. Because, every day brings more Adrenalin arousals.

When a Sensitive Person walks into a room, they are immediately able to pick up subtleties in the environment. Again, it's this brain picking up an awareness of what's around them and picking up a registration of, "Got to be on guard. Could be something dangerous here. Be prepared just in case." And so a Sensitive Person will walk into a room and be immediately aware of vibes in the room. Not just how many people are in the room, but also the moods between them. A non-HSP is likely to go into the room and to notice the layout of the furniture and how many people are present, but the HSP will go into a room, pick up the mood, be immediately aware of whether the curtains are tidy or not, of whether or not there are threads on the rug, whether or not there's dust on the furniture, they'll observe if the

pictures are crooked. And they won't judge these things, it's not a matter of right or wrong, good or bad, but the Sensitive Person will be aware of these things and they'll notice – just in case.

This happened to me when I first came to Singapore. I was aware of so many different stimuli around. First of all, my body was aroused with Adrenalin simply because of the heat and the smells and I was sticky and hot because of the humidity. We didn't have a car so we were walking everywhere and so my body was feeling that stickiness. My children were young, but too big for the strollers and so they would walk and they would get tired and they'd get cranky and they'd whine and they'd complain and they'd want to hold my hand. And I had to hold their hand because otherwise they would run into the road. We would have to walk up the steps to cross over the roads on the walkovers and walk down the steps again.

All of these different stimuli caused me to be constantly irritable and annoyed and I had to work very hard at keeping those Adrenalin levels down because I knew that living in this country with these different stimuli – complaining wasn't going to make any difference – but what was really interesting is that my kids would say, "Mum, you don't love us anymore."

And I'd say, "What do you mean?"

They'd say, "Because you don't like to hug us anymore."

Because when I was feeling aroused like that with environmental things, I didn't want something else, I didn't want someone to come and give me a hug. And these kids of mine observed that when we went to Australia on holiday and I was cooler, I hugged them more and so they felt more loved.

This arousal, this Adrenalin arousal, feels like anxiety, but it isn't. It's not to be confused with anxiety. That's one of the most important things for an HSP to learn to distinguish – the difference between an Adrenalin arousal and anxiety. Anxiety occurs when thoughts are added in. An Adrenalin arousal occurs at this level when the brain is kicking off a stress response which then gets stored in the body because of its awareness and its reaction to environmental things or to internal thoughts. And when this feeling becomes a thought, becomes a 'what if?' "What if I'm not going to pass that exam? What if the plane is going to crash?" Then the arousal becomes an anxiety and the anxiety creates more of an arousal.

But it is very important to not get those two things confused. This is actually one of the main reasons why the Sensitive Person thinks that they're going crazy. They feel the feeling in their body, they recognise it as a feeling of anxiety and yet they know intellectually that there is nothing actually happening in their life or in their environment to be anxious about. And so it's this constant feeling of, "I must be going crazy. I don't know what on earth is wrong with me." It's because of this incongruity between intellect and feeling.

I recall some years ago, I saw an American lady in the Counseling room and she came to me to try and manage her anxiety about flying. And she had already done some previous Counseling and some therapy about her flying fears. I discussed with her what she had done and she seemed to have a really good grasp on her anxiety so we went over things, I felt satisfied that she had a good grip and she also felt that she was done with her anxiety. As the weeks drew nearer to the summer holidays when she intended to fly again to America for her summer holidays, her anxiety started to grow again. Whilst I expected a little bit of anxiety to

rise, she seemed to be becoming overwhelmed again with her anxiety. Again we went through strategies and again she said, "I think I'll be okay."

About a week before she was due to fly and the tickets had already been booked, she came into therapy in an absolute panic and she said, "I can't do it. Karen, I can't get on that plane. I've told my husband he has to go alone with the children."

I said, "What's happening?"

She said, "I have so much fear, I feel as though something bad is going to happen, I just can't do it. I can't get on the plane. I can't go with them."

I said to her, "Sit yourself down. Tell me what is your goal? What do you want to be able to do?"

She said, "I want to be able to fly like a normal person. I want to be able to get onto a plane without having to take a Valium and to fly and to enjoy myself. Because when I come back from the trip away, I never have to take a Valium."

I said, "Excuse me? Could you just repeat that please? Did I hear you correctly that you need a Valium to fly and you don't need a Valium to come back again?"

And she said, "Yes that's right. When I have forced myself to go on flights in the past, I just figure that the journey is half over and I'll be okay coming back and so I don't need a Valium on the way back."

I started thinking to myself, "This doesn't make sense. It's a twenty hour flight from Singapore to America and there's a twenty hour flight back again. This isn't anxiety. This is an Adrenalin arousal."

So, I said to her, "Tell me what's been happening in your life in the past few weeks."

She said, "Oh, the past few weeks at home have been absolutely chaotic. There's been the lead up to exams for my boys (she had three teenage boys attending at the American School), we've done the exams, we've had all the end of year functions, we've had the prize giving. For the last week the boys have been on holidays, they've been sleeping in til midday, they have their friends around, the kids are staying up til two am, ordering pizzas at one. They're constantly saying, "Mum how much food have you got? Can we feed them, what have you got to eat?" My whole routine is completely thrown and whilst all this is happening, I'm trying to think about what to take on holidays, what gifts to take, organising who's going to feed the cat, who's going to water the plants, who's going to pick up the paper, who's going to pick up the mail. I'm the only female in the house and I'm the one that has to sort all these things out when we go away for a couple of months."

I said, "Do you know? I know what's happening here. This isn't anxiety. Your routine has completely changed with kids at home on school holidays, gearing up to go away, getting down suitcases, trying to pack things into suitcases, all those things you have to organise before you go away. All of that is resulting in you having an Adrenalin arousal so by the time you get near to getting on the flight, you have all this adrenalin in your body and you are interpreting that as being an anxiety about flying. We need to actually chop this amount of Adrenalin in half and say that this half is an Adrenalin arousal because everything is out of routine and you're rushing to get things done and this half is the anxiety about flying and you're fully capable of using your cognitive strategies to settle that anxiety about flying down."

She thought for a moment and then she said, "Are you trying to tell me that I'm not actually anxious about flying? I'm just having an Adrenalin arousal because I'm a Highly Sensitive Person?"

I said, "You've got it. I give you permission to take a Valium because of all the Adrenalin arousal that you are feeling and use your cognitive strategies to reduce your anxiety about flying and you'll be fine. Because that's the reason you don't need a Valium on the way back. At the end of a holiday it's easy. At the end of a holiday you just open your suitcase, put in all your dirty clothes, they fit easily because all the gifts have been taken out, you zip the suitcase up, you hop on the plane and you come back. There's no anxiety or Adrenalin about that because it's easy. And that's why you don't need to take a Valium when you're coming home again."

That realisation for that woman changed her life. She had not even explored this area of Asia, even though she had been here with her family for three years because she found it so difficult to get on a plane. Now, she felt really happy about getting on a plane because she was able to say to herself, "I'm not anxious about flying. This is an Adrenalin arousal because I've been gearing up to leaving. I can manage that. If I have to, I'll take a Valium." And for the remaining years that she was in Singapore, she explored a lot of Asia and enjoyed it.

For a Sensitive Person, what in one situation can create a really good feeling, in another situation becomes over-arousal and the key thing to determine which it is going to be – enjoyable or over-arousal – is a matter of degree and whether or not you feel in control. Let me give you an example. Let's say you want to play your music really loud and so you put on

your favourite CD and you turn it up really loud and it's playing away and you feel the vibration of it and it's really great. Wonderful, you really enjoy that and you're in control of it.

If however, your neighbour puts on his CD really loud and opens the window and plays it during the afternoon or worse still, at night; then that noise, because you are not in control of it, or turning it down, is actually going to leave you feeling over aroused and very irritated and very annoyed.

Similarly, whilst the noise of banging might on one occasion drive you crazy because of the constancy and the irritation of the sound of the banging, on another occasion might be a very pleasant experience, particularly if it's your husband putting up the bookshelves that you've asked him to for the last four weeks. That would be a very pleasant sound. So, what the external stimulus is, is perceived differently and received differently depending on the intensity of the sound, of the experience, and whether or not you feel in control of it.

If an HSP feels as though they are a victim or if there is a sense of injustice, this will also be adding to the over arousal. So, in the example of the neighbour playing his music and playing it loudly, as well as the external sound, there is also the thinking going on which might go something like, "That neighbour is so inconsiderate. I wouldn't play my music that loud if it was me and I knew that they were at home with their family." So, it's a combination of the actual stimulus, the feeling of whether or not you are a victim, a sense of whether or not it is unjust and all of these things accumulate together to add to the sense of over arousal.

Sensitive people tend to have a very strong sense of injustice. They get very worked up and very impassioned when things don't seem to be fair. And so, for a lot of world events, it's very often Sensitive People with their sense of passion, with their sense of injustice that will go and do something about it. So, we need passionate people to go and save the whales, or work in the aid organisations helping the children in Africa.

We also have to be careful about how we deal with our over arousal. Not so long ago. In the daily paper here, The Straits Times, there was report about a man who approached four lads at three o'clock in the morning who were playing their music loud. He went and knocked on their door and asked if they could please reduce the volume. That man was attacked by the lads. He was kicked and he was punched and he was beaten and he had a brain haemorrhage and he died. When I read this article in the paper as the court case was under way and the four culprits were hauled into court for in fact being responsible for this man's death, I remember thinking, "I bet that man was an HSP and I bet he was trying to reduce the external stimulus so that he could settle and sleep, or maybe take care of other people in the environment. He may have been concerned about other neighbours." And should he have approached those lads? Hard to say but that man paid the price.

I've had other clients from the Counseling rooms who recently have had to move house because of the neighbours roosters. They had refurbished the house and moved into it. The neighbour had roosters that crowed at three o'clock in the morning and crowed pretty much non-stop til seven every morning. And these people went and spoke to the neighbours, asked them if they could do something about reducing the noise and even suggested eating the roosters – compensating them for the roosters. The neighbour was not interested and said, "I

have as much right to have my roosters as you have to live there." This constant noise and sleep deprivation caused so much angst with this couple and then started causing so many arguments and so much ill feeling between them and their neighbours, that eventually this couple actually rented out their place and went and lived somewhere else.

So, sometimes we actually have to recognise when we have reached a threshold of managing the stimulus and when it gets to be too much stimulus and we become over aroused or overwhelmed with it, we may have to change our environment completely.

There was also another situation where a family were living next door to a construction site. They were very happy with their home and the neighbourhood, but the construction going on next door, they had anticipated would be another year or so. Both the husband and the wife were Highly Sensitive People and the wife would complain to the husband about how this noise from the construction site would affect her during the day. And the husband said, "It's not so bad." Because what happened was that he would come home at the end of the day and have only about an hour of it before the noise stopped and the workers finished for the evening and he was not appreciative of the fact that the wife had had eight hours of it during the day. And so again, it's to do with intensity, constancy, the length of exposure, your sensitivity to it, the intensity that you feel it and whether or not you have ways to deal with and recover from that Adrenalin arousal.

The HSP is not constantly aroused however. The arousals in their nervous system fluctuate depending on situations. So, the HSP will have an over arousal if they are exposed to new and prolonged stimulus – for example, going to a crowded shopping mall and staying there for a

long period of time. It also depends on how their particular nervous system reacts to different subtleties in the environment because different people have different reactions to different things. For example, I have an arousal to heat, to crowds, to noise. Others might have an arousal to bad smells or to tight clothing or to textures in their mouth. For example, some people can't eat food with bones in it – fish or chicken, crab or lobster – because they can't stand the feeling of biting into bone or shell.

So, Sensitive People have different reactions to different things. Typically however, it should be noted here that the Sensitive Person, because of the build up of Adrenalin that they have, is slow to recover and to get over things. If your body has a lot of Adrenalin in it, then it's going to be much harder to recover from the Adrenalin arousal. This also explains why Sensitive People feel things with such an intensity.

Anybody who knows, or is in a relationship with a Sensitive Person, will know that they have very intense feelings. Sensitive People feel 'really' or 'very' everything. For them, they don't just feel sad, they feel really sad. They're not just bored, they're really bored. And similarly about positives. They don't just find something good, something was really great. Sensitive people are never just hungry, they're always starving. You can actually tell by their language, because they so often use superlatives, that they are a sensitive person. That's actually one way of detecting a Sensitive Person – is to listen to the way they speak.

To a non-HSP, this form of talking can really get annoying. To a non-HSP they will think that this way of talking about things is really a bit over the top and that's the reason why the non-HSP will say, "Oh, for goodness sake, don't go on and on. Stop exaggerating. Don't embellish

it." But of course the HSP is not embellishing and is not exaggerating – to the HSP, that's actually how they experience things – with this intensity. Of course, if the feeling is a negative feeling, if the Adrenalin causes an emotional wound, it will take them a long time to get over it because it takes a long time for a large amount of Adrenalin to leave the system. And it's also very typical that before that Adrenalin has been released from the system something else will happen and there will be another Adrenalin arousal. This of course is the accumulation cycle.

So, no wonder HSPs feel flawed. Is it any wonder that they feel out of step with the rest of the world and that they're going a bit crazy. Because typically, people around them make comments leaving them feeling dismissed. It's the comments like, "Oh you do go on about things. Oh, you're such a drama queen." And the HSP will think, "That's how I feel, so people don't get me. People don't understand me. People just dismiss me." And then they start to dwell on that and that in turn creates more Adrenalin.

So, the HSP soon learns not to talk about their feelings. They soon learn to keep quiet and to keep their thoughts to themselves in order not to get that criticism and not to feel as though they are criticised or put down by others. Because you see, an HSP actually has a feeling about everything. The HSP will have a feeling about the taxi ride to work or about the birthday party, or about the amount of money that was spent in the last sale. For an HSP, it's never about an event, it's about a feeling. And so what I explain to couples when I am working with them, particularly if there is an HSP within the relationship, I say, "It's the feeling about things in your marriage that is important. It's not the event. It's not whether there is a move or whether the mother-in-law gets sick, or whether there is an inability to bear a child. It's the feeling about those things and whether or not the feelings are acknowledged and heard."

If the HSP withdraws and becomes quiet and no longer talks about their feelings, that doesn't mean feelings are not being experienced. Because it is very common for the HSP to have this accumulation of feelings and have thoughts going around and around inside their head. They're thinking about their feelings but not talking about them and that's when they dwell and that's when they bottle things up. And the way that the HSP can get rid of these feelings is having the opportunity to talk about them in a non-conflict situation to actually release them and to release the Adrenalin. It's all too easy for conflict to occur or for the HSP to feel dismissed or put down if they do try and talk about their feelings and then clam up, shut down and refuse to talk anymore, so that the Adrenalin is actually not released.

So, to finish off, let me say that it is not just negative feelings that the HSP feels intensely, it's also positive feelings. This also can be very confusing to the HSP because they can actually already have a body almost full of Adrenalin and then they have a positive experience. It might be for example, a surprise birthday party that's given to them, or an exciting phone-call that they have. But that positive experience, which also produces some Adrenalin, adds to what's already in the body and then the whole experience together ends up being a massive Adrenalin arousal which is experienced as discomfort. So, it's very puzzling and very confusing to the HSP why they can have a positive experience which then feels uncomfortable and it's often the reason why they don't like surprises.

Again, this adds to the feeling of craziness, adds to the feeling of being weird. And so, you HSPs out there, there is a lot to know about being a Highly Sensitive Person, but once you actually know how your body operates and you know what to avoid and more importantly who to avoid, your life can actually be very manageable.

Dr. Mike Gosling:

Thank you Karen for a most insightful look into the life of a HSP. Having lived with a HSP for more than 31 years, I can tell you, they are very interesting people to have around. The next topic in the twelve part seminar series, *Surviving Life Dramas* is *Surviving Indifference*.

Are you and your partner living as house-mates? Do you feel disengaged? Be sure that you're listening to the next talk by Karen Gosling on *Surviving Indifference*.

I'm Doctor Mike Gosling from the Emotional Wealth Academy.