Supporting highly sensitive clients through systemic coaching

THE COACH'S APPROACH AS A KEY DRIVER OF TRANSFORMATION

Understanding sensitivity.
Honoring the pace.
Unlocking potential within the system.

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1. Introduction

Hypersensitivity, often referred to in the scientific literature as *Sensory Processing Sensitivity* (SPS), was conceptualized by Elaine Aron and Arthur Aron in the late 1990s[1]. It refers to a personality trait linked to heightened sensitivity in the processing of internal and external stimuli. This trait is neither a disorder nor a pathology. Rather, it describes a particular way of perceiving, processing and integrating information.

It is important to phrase this point precisely. To say that highly sensitive people 'struggle' in a changing world would be too general and scientifically questionable. Research does not show that high sensitivity automatically leads to difficulty. Rather, it indicates that people with a high level of sensitivity may be more reactive to their environment. In other words, they may be more affected by unfavorable contexts, but they may also benefit more from supportive, clear and reassuring contexts. This nuance is essential to avoid a deficit-based view of hypersensitivity.

In today's professional environments, characterized by complexity, organizational change and an information overload, some hypersensitive clients may nevertheless experience situations of overload. This overload is not an automatic consequence of their sensitivity. Rather, it arises when certain personal characteristics, such as depth of processing or a keen perception of subtle cues, encounter an environment that is poorly structured, unstable or ambiguous.

It is precisely here that the systemic approach offers a relevant perspective. It does not seek to locate the difficulty solely within the individual, but to understand how it emerges in the interaction between an individual's functioning and a given system.

[1] Vgl. Aron & Aron, 1997

The question is therefore not: 'Why does this hypersensitive person not adapt?' but rather: 'In which interactions, with what expectations and under what conditions does this functioning become a burden or, conversely, a resource?'

This work focuses on the coach's approach when supporting a client exhibiting characteristics of hypersensitivity. The coach's approach is central, as it influences how the situation is interpreted. An approach that is too focused on individual adaptation risks reinforcing the feeling that the client is the problem. A systemic, supportive and resource-oriented approach, on the other hand, allows the difficulty to be placed in its proper context, reduces guilt and supports the emergence of concrete options.

The guiding question of this work is therefore as follows: to what extent does the coach's approach enable the articulation of a scientifically nuanced understanding of hypersensitivity with a systemic perspective, in order to support concrete transformations in the client? To answer this question, this work draws on the contributions of Elaine Aron, a systemic interpretation of the difficulty, and the analysis of a specific, anonymized case drawn from coaching practice.

2. Understanding hypersensitivity: Elaine Aron's DOES model

Elaine Aron proposed the DOES [2]model to make hypersensitivity more understandable. This model is based on four dimensions: *Depth of Processing*, *Overstimulation*, *Emotional Reactivity and Empathy,* and *Sensitivity to Subtle Stimuli*. It is not simply a list of isolated traits. The model describes a holistic mode of information processing, in which the different dimensions can influence one another.

2.1 D: Depth of Processing

Depth of processing is one of the central elements of the model. People with a high level of sensitivity tend to process information in depth. They analyze situations, make connections, anticipate consequences and seek to understand the meaning of events. This way of processing information can be a significant asset.

[2] V Vgl. Aron, 1996; Aron, o. J., https://hsperson.com/faq/evidence-for-does/

In a professional context, it can translate into a capacity for detailed analysis, a broad perspective, attention to detail and the ability to anticipate risks.

However, this depth can become a hindrance in certain environments. When faced with frequent changes, shifting priorities or implicit expectations, a person may seek to understand all the elements before acting. This approach can then increase the cognitive load. This is not a weakness, but a potential mismatch between a thorough processing style and a context that demands speed, ambiguity or constant adaptation.

2.2 O: Overstimulation

Overstimulation refers to reaching a saturation point more quickly when the quantity, intensity or complexity of stimuli becomes significant. It is linked to the way information is perceived and processed. Overstimulation can manifest as mental fatigue, difficulty concentrating, a need to withdraw or a feeling of being overwhelmed. It is important not to confuse overstimulation with incapacity. A highly sensitive person can perform very well in a suitable environment, with clear priorities and a sustainable pace. Difficulties arise mainly when the informational or emotional load exceeds the regulatory capacities available at that moment.

2.3 E: Emotional Reactivity and Empathy

The third dimension concerns emotional reactivity and empathy. Highly sensitive people may experience situations with intensity and perceive the emotional state of others with great sensitivity. This ability can support the quality of relationships, cooperation and an understanding of interpersonal dynamics.

It can also become a burden when the relational context is tense, ambiguous or insecure. In such cases, the person may internalize tensions that do not entirely belong to them, feel responsible for the system’s equilibrium, or struggle to maintain emotional distance. Here again, the difficulty lies not solely with the individual, but in the interaction between their emotional reactivity and a given environment.

2.4 S: Sensitivity to Subtle Stimuli

The final dimension concerns the ability to perceive subtle stimuli. These may be sensory details, but also relational cues: a change in tone of voice, a hesitation, an inconsistency between what is said and what is done, or an underlying tension in a meeting. This sensitivity to weak signals can be a valuable resource. It enables a nuanced reading of the environment and the ability to anticipate. However, it also increases the amount of information to be processed. If the environment is consistent, this nuanced perception can become an advantage. If the environment is contradictory or ambiguous, it can increase mental load.

2.5 Context-dependent dynamics

The DOES model is most useful when understood as a dynamic process. Sensitivity to subtle stimuli can fuel the depth of processing. The depth of processing can increase mental load. This load can lead to overstimulation. Emotional reactivity can amplify the experience. But this dynamic is not automatically negative; it depends heavily on the context. A supportive, clear and respectful environment can enable sensitivity to become a resource. Conversely, an unstable, unclear or relationally tense environment can exacerbate the overload. This nuance is essential for systemic coaching work.

3. Contributions and limitations of an individual interpretation of hypersensitivity

The concept of hypersensitivity, as described in the scientific literature under the term Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), provides a better understanding of certain inter-individual differences in information processing. The seminal work of Aron (1996) and subsequent empirical research[3] show that this trait is associated with heightened sensitivity to context, rather than a dysfunction in itself. From this perspective, it is essential to avoid overgeneralization. The studies do not demonstrate that people with high sensitivity systematically develop shame, self-blame or psychological difficulties.

[3] Greven et al., 2019.

However, they do indicate that these individuals may be more strongly influenced by the quality of their environment. In contexts perceived as negative, ambiguous or unstable, they may experience greater stress or intense emotional reactions. Conversely, in supportive environments, they may also derive greater benefits, particularly in terms of learning, adaptation or well-being.

Thus, reactions such as doubt, feeling overwhelmed or self-criticism should not be interpreted as intrinsic characteristics of hypersensitivity. They should be understood as the result of an interaction between individual characteristics and a specific context. This distinction is central to coaching. An approach focused solely on the individual could implicitly reinforce the idea that the person needs to change how they function. A more nuanced approach, on the other hand, allows us to recognize that certain reactions are understandable in a given context, without generalizing them.

4. The systemic approach: understanding interaction[4]

The systemic approach proposes shifting the analysis from the individual level to that of interactions. It considers that difficulties arise within a system composed of relationships, explicit and implicit rules, organizational constraints and expectations.

In the case of hypersensitivity, this approach helps to avoid a reductive interpretation. It is not a question of determining whether a person is 'too sensitive', but of understanding under what conditions their way of processing information becomes taxing.

For example, environments characterized by a lack of clarity, frequent changes or conflicting expectations can increase the cognitive and emotional load. In such contexts, a person with a high depth of processing and sensitivity to weak signals may be faced with a greater amount of information to process, which can contribute to a feeling of overload.

[4] Vgl. Greven et al., 2019

Conversely, structured, explicit and supportive environments can allow these same characteristics to become resources. Sensitivity can then foster a better understanding of situations, the anticipation of risks and improved interpersonal relationships.

This systemic approach thus allows us to place the difficulty within a broader context and identify levers for action that are not limited to the individual level.

5. Presentation of the anonymized case study

The case presented concerns a 28-year-old client working in a rapidly changing professional environment. The organization is characterized by frequent changes, shifting priorities and expectations that are sometimes unclear.

The client expresses feelings of fatigue, confusion and difficulty in finding her footing. In particular, she conveys the impression that “everything is changing all the time” and that she does not always know whether her actions meet expectations.

Her initial coaching objective was to learn how to set boundaries in her professional context. This request, phrased in practical terms, might have suggested a one-off intervention. However, from the very first sessions, it became clear that the complexity of the situation required more in-depth support.

In total, the process spanned four coaching sessions. This decision was made with a view to adapting the pace of the support to the client’s workload. In a context already perceived as demanding, an intervention that was too rapid could have exacerbated the overload.

The support was therefore structured around a principle of progression. The aim was not to achieve a result quickly, but to allow for a gradual clarification of the situation, whilst respecting the client’s pace. Furthermore, elements of grounding and intuition were utilized to support better self-regulation and more direct access to feelings. This approach aimed to complement the cognitive work with a more experiential dimension.

The Inneres Team model [5]was introduced at a later stage, following an initial phase of listening and stabilization. This decision was made to avoid additional overload and to respect the client's pace. The tool then helped to structure certain internal dynamics, as discussed in the following section.

6. The coach's approach as a lever for transformation

In this coaching process, the coach's approach was a central element, directly linked to the client's specific situation.

A first aspect concerned listening. Active listening, combined with precise rephrasing, helped to clarify the client's experience without interpreting it prematurely. This approach contributed to a better understanding of the situation and a reduction in the initial confusion.

A second aspect centered on respecting the pace. In the context of overload, the pace of the coaching proved to be a decisive lever for intervention. Asking questions too quickly or immediately steering towards solutions could have increased the cognitive load. Conversely, an adjusted pace supported reflection and encouraged a gradual internalization of the elements being worked on.

A third dimension concerned non-pathologization. The aim was to avoid interpreting the client's reactions as deficits. Recognizing that certain reactions could be understandable given the context helped to reduce the tendency towards self-blame and to open up a more nuanced space for reflection.

A fourth dimension involved the introduction of a systemic approach. The questioning focused on expectations, interactions and the dynamics of the professional context, which helped to broaden the understanding of the situation beyond a strictly individual perspective. Finally, a fifth dimension concerned empowerment. The aim was not to absolve the client of responsibility, but to identify realistic scope for action, considering both her functioning and the constraints of the context in which she operated.

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[5] Vgl. Schulz von Thun & Stegemann, 2019, S. xx ff.; InKonstellation Coaching Ausbildung (2025), Modul „Konflikt".

7. The use of the Inneres Team in the coaching process

The Inneres Team model, developed by Schulz von Thun (1998), was employed as a tool for clarifying internal tensions, in response to the nature of the difficulties expressed by the client.

Initially, the client described her experience in broad, undifferentiated terms, expressing a sense of confusion and difficulty in finding her bearings. This lack of differentiation is common in situations of high cognitive and emotional load.

The Inneres Team is based on the hypothesis that different 'internal voices' coexist within a person and may convey needs or demands that are sometimes contradictory. In this case, this work helped to highlight several internal dimensions with, notably a demand for performance, a need for rest and a tendency towards self-criticism.

The relevance of this tool lies in its ability to transform an experience perceived as homogeneous ("I am lost") into a differentiated experience. This differentiation had a structuring effect, reducing confusion and facilitating a better understanding of internal tensions.

Furthermore, this model aligns with the characteristics of hypersensitive functioning. The depth of processing can result in a multitude of internal perspectives, which, without structure, can become difficult to organize. The tool therefore helps to give shape to this complexity. Similarly, emotional reactivity can be better regulated when different internal experiences are acknowledged and put into words.

The use of this tool also made it possible to link internal dynamics to the external context. Certain voices could be linked to organizational expectations perceived as implicit or contradictory, which supported a more systemic understanding of the situation. Thus, the relevance of the Inneres Team in this case rests on its ability to structure a complex internal experience, as well as on its suitability for the client's specific issues and level of stress. It is also worth noting that the coach's approach can be influenced by their own characteristics. In this context, high personal sensitivity can be both a resource and a point of vigilance.

It can foster keen listening, empathy and an awareness of the client's pace. However, it also requires conscious regulation to avoid over-identification or overload. This dual dimension highlights the importance of the coach engaging in reflective practice.

8. Critical discussion

This work highlights the importance of combining an understanding of individual functioning with an analysis of the context. The DOES model allows us to describe certain characteristics, but it is not sufficient to explain the emergence of difficulties. An exclusively individual interpretation could lead to excessive simplification. Conversely, an exclusively systemic interpretation could overlook the specificities of individual functioning. The coach's approach appears to be a central element in this integration. It enables a nuanced understanding and helps to avoid generalizations.

9. Implications for practice

The coach must avoid any generalizations regarding hypersensitivity and adapt their support to the client's context and pace. Incorporating a systemic perspective helps to identify levers for action that are not limited to the individual level.

The use of tools must be tailored to the process and the client's level of stress.

10. Conclusion

Hypersensitivity describes a specific way of processing information, which can be a resource or become a burden depending on the context.

The difficulties observed arise from the interaction between an individual's functioning and a given environment. In this context, the coach's approach plays a decisive role in fostering a nuanced understanding and facilitating the emergence of appropriate responses.

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Other

Scientific conference

- As part of this work, participation in the conference *High Sensitivity: Brain, Mental Health and Society* (16 April 2026) enabled the theoretical contributions drawn from scientific literature to be supplemented by a current research perspective. This conference, led by Corina Greven (Radbout University), a recognized specialist in *Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)*, highlighted the links between hypersensitivity, brain function and mental health. The presentations emphasized that high sensitivity should be understood as increased reactivity to the environment, rather than as a vulnerability in itself.

Audiovisual resource

- Harper, W. (2015).
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