

Sensitivity: Roots, Leaves, Branches, and Seeds



MICHAEL JAWER

OCTOBER 12, 2025



Our Topics

“Roots”: Different concepts of sensitivity; how they overlap

“Leaves”: My own work on sensitivity, health, and anomalous perception

“Branches”: Sensitivity in organizations and in leadership

“Seeds”: How deeply sensitive people can influence our threatened (and threatening) world

Conversation and experience sharing throughout





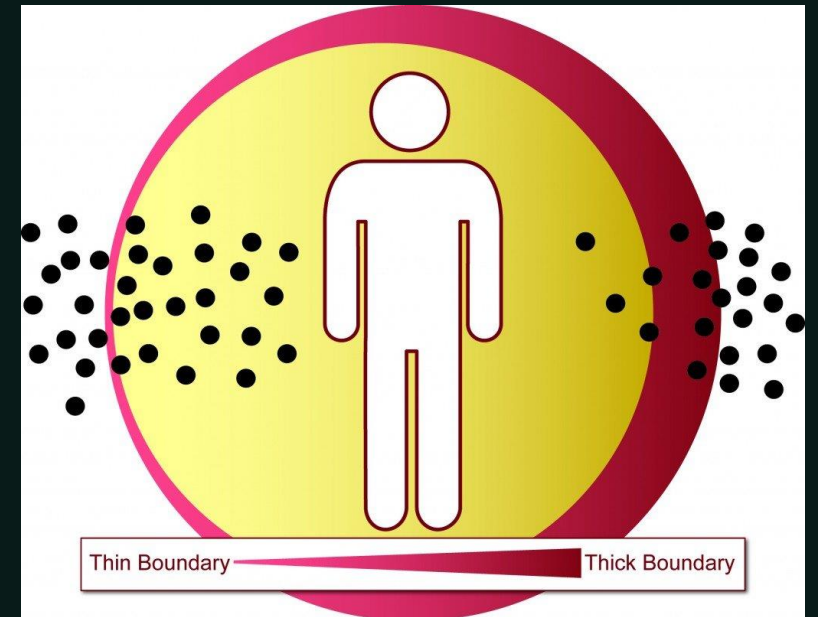
We invite you to explore with us the contours, depths and meanings of your sensory and internal worlds (they overlap :-)

Parallel Concepts of Deep Sensitivity

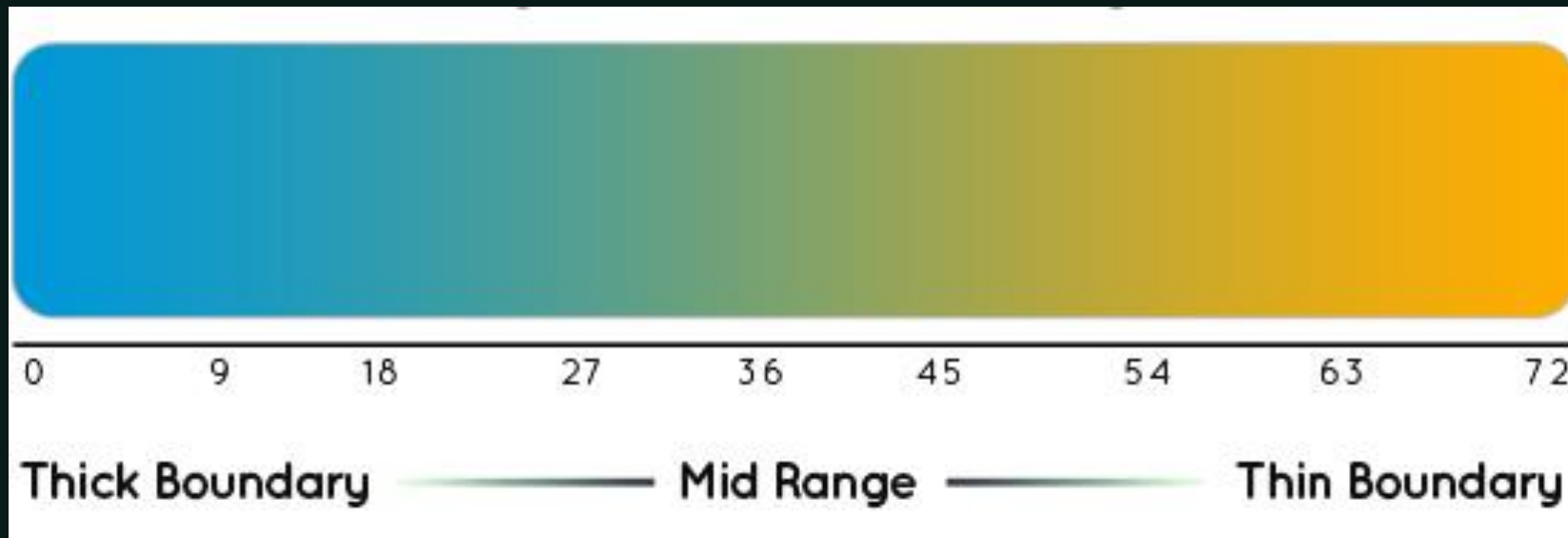
- **Thin Boundaries**
- **Hyper- and Hyposensitivity**
- **Absorption**
- **Intense World Hypothesis**
- **Monotropism**
- **Transliminality**

Thin Boundaries

- Developed by Ernest Hartmann: views everyone on a continuum of ‘how much they let in’
- **Thick boundary people** come across as solid, organized, thick skinned, less excitable. Less aware of what they’re feeling, less colorful or memorable dreams. See things in black and white; “a place for everything”
- **Thin boundary people** come across as open, vulnerable. Emotionally as well as environmentally sensitive. Things for them are fluid. Empathetic, highly affected by feelings, have vivid dreams. See things as “shades of grey”
- From an early age, more affected by events and experiences - and more likely to recall these in detail in later life
- A penchant for immersing: in a relationship, memory, imagination



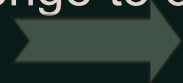
Where Are You on the Boundary Spectrum?



www.youremotionaltype.com/boundaries/quiz.html

Hyper- and Hyposensitivity

- Characteristic of people on the autism spectrum
- **Hypersensitivity:** highly acute senses; sometimes find them intrusive, uncomfortable or painful (e.g., notice small particles, bothered by clothing, bright lights, ringing phones - for me, revolting popcorn startle at sudden sounds or things falling)
- **Hyposensitivity:** sensation is blocked (e.g., may not feel pain or temperature) or sought out in its absence (e.g., stare at bright lights and reflections, touch objects continuously, hug tightly, lick or smell things, crave strong odors, make loud rhythmic sounds, rock back and forth)
- **Proprioceptive and vestibular challenges:** Difficulty identifying where a touch is coming from or knowing where objects are around one's body, uneven balance, left and right sides of body may be uncoordinated, challenge to change directions or learn new movements



Result: disorientation, overwhelm, confusion, frustration



Absorption



- The capacity to become totally attentive and fascinated, immersed and impervious to distraction
- The line between imaginary and manifestly real can become blurred; the interior experience takes on a heightened reality
- Such deep experiences can be perceived as mystical or transcendent
- It's also dissociative: an early coping mechanism for overstimulation?

Intense World Hypothesis

- Too much sensory or emotional input leads to behaviors that, ironically, seem to indicate a lack of empathy (e.g., avoiding touch and eye contact, rocking back and forth, focusing relentlessly on details)
- The infant experiences sensory overload because her/his brain is hyper-connected
- The world becomes “a barrage of chaotic, indecipherable input”
- As interactions with the outside world become minimized in infancy and childhood, the growing brain’s diet of social, linguistic, and emotional interactions is lessened



Monotropism



- Characteristically narrowed 'beam' of attention on a given interest - vs. a polytropic 'lantern' shining on many interests
- Lends itself to intense experiences, deep thinking/insights, and enjoyable flow states
- “The paths of our thoughts always leave an imprint in our minds, and autistic ones leave deeper grooves” (Fergus Murray)
- **Monotropic Split:** meltdown / shutdown / burnout that can result from having to switch gears too fast or devote attention to more than one has the capacity for
- Repetitious behaviors are seen as the reaction - an attempt to regain control and promote calm. A form of self regulation
- Deeper, more intense engagement is obviously a strength, however, and flow states have their own rewards

Transliminality

- “Liminal” relates to a threshold (as in “subliminal” consciousness)
- Transliminality: the tendency for psychological material to cross thresholds in or out of consciousness
- What we recognize as psychic, mystical, numinous, creative
- People range on the transliminality scale just as they do on the boundary spectrum
- Many studies connect high transliminality with anomalous perception





Does some of this describe you? Questions and Conversation

Our Topics

“Roots”: Different concepts of sensitivity; how they overlap

“Leaves”: My own work on sensitivity, health, and anomalous perception

“Branches”: Sensitivity in organizations and in leadership

“Seeds”: How deeply sensitive people can influence our threatened (and threatening) world

Conversation and experience sharing throughout



My Findings: Environmental Sensitivity and Psi

- 2006 study in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research
- Came out of my office building indoor air quality work, which introduced me to multiple chemical sensitivity and electrical sensitivity
- Survey took shape through conversations with parapsychologist William Roll
- 114 subjects: 64 self-described sensitives and 50 controls. Results:
 - ➡ Sensitives 3.5x likelier to say they'd had an apparitional experience
 - ➡ Sensitives 2.5 likelier to point to an immediate family member being affected by similar health conditions as their own (e.g., allergies, chronic pain, chronic fatigue, migraine, depression, or sensitivity to light, sound, or smell)

Other Key Survey Findings

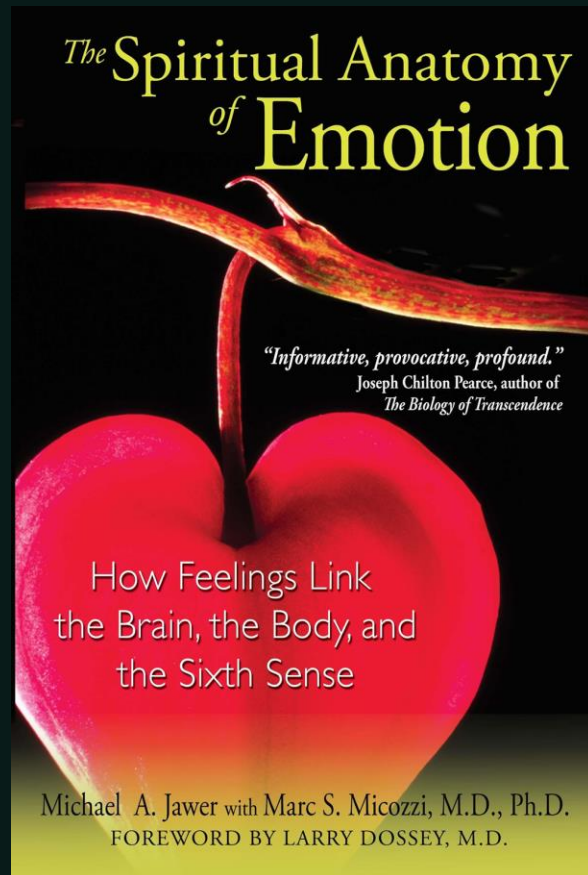
Of the 54 factors asked about, 8 found to be significant:

- Being female
- Being a first born or only child
- Being single
- Being ambidextrous
- Appraising oneself as imaginative
- Appraising oneself as introverted
- Recalling a plainly traumatic event (or events) in childhood
- Maintaining that one affects – or is affected by – lights, watches, computers, or other electrical appliances in an unusual way

Also: synesthesia (overlapping senses) was reported by 10% of the sensitives but none of the controls. *Could apparitional perceptions themselves stem from an underlying “biology of sensitivity”?*



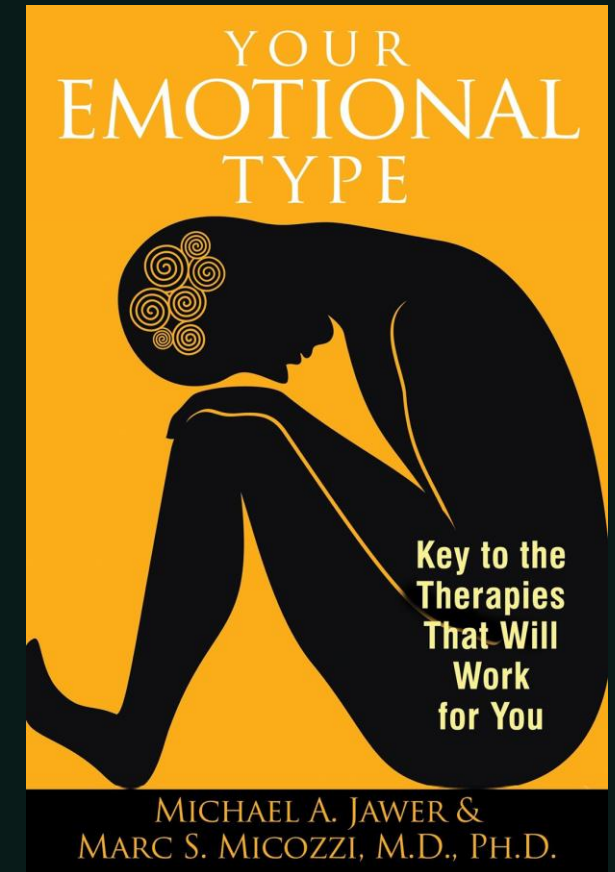
Led to 2009 Book Exploring Emotion and Psi



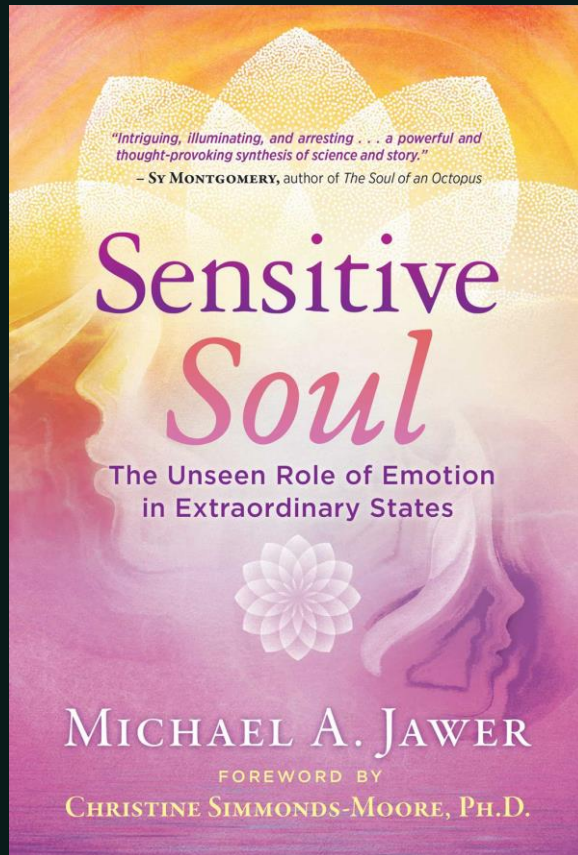
- Reintroduced “bodymind” (Dychtwald) to illustrate the unity of mental and physical, psyche and soma...everyone is psychosomatic!
- Proposes that feeling is energetic (**e-motion**), flowing more rapidly and directly in thin boundary people
- Suggests that thick boundary people are more likely to ‘create’ anomalies; thin boundary people are more like to register them
- Argues that the ability to feel and express feelings (especially empathy or ‘fellow feeling’) is at the core of spirituality
- The book’s greatest benefit: helping people who are psychic gather that their abilities have a genuine bodymind foundation; they’re not crazy

Led to 2011 Book Tying Boundary Type to Health

- Proposes that many chronic illnesses are associated with a person's boundary type, not germs or genes
- Offers integrative treatments for each condition (collaborated with integrative health authority Marc Micozzi)
- The **"Dozen Discomforts"**: allergies, asthma, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, migraine, phantom pain, PTSD, rheumatoid arthritis, skin conditions (eczema, psoriasis), and ulcer
- The **"Super Seven" Therapies**: acupuncture, biofeedback, guided imagery, hypnosis, meditation, relaxation techniques, and yoga
- Explores 'crossover' when a thin boundary person dissociates



2020 Book Delves Into Highly Intriguing Capacities



- Examines a variety of exceptional capacities, types of people, and experiences, considering their emotional roots and implications

PTSD / alexithymia	Déjà vu
Extreme empathy (e/g., migraine, phantom pain)	Synesthesia
Autism	Savantism
Child prodigies / gifted children	Kids who remember past lives

- Suggests that extraordinary sensitivity is determined in the womb – a ‘thread’ that, unspooled, takes us back to the possible foreground of life
- Illustrates the commonality of feeling and ‘soulfulness’ in a variety of animals
- Proposes that trauma and death trigger anomalies (involving people and other animals) through the resonance of emotion through space-time

Takeaways from My Work

FEELINGS AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

- Across the boundary spectrum, people process their feelings differently.
- Some are more reactive, vulnerable and open, while others are more stoic, thick skinned and guarded.
- Thin boundaries have upshots for health and illness.

FEELINGS AND BODYMIND SENSITIVITIES

- Our minds, bodies and spirits are connected through feeling. All can be seen as sides of one coin.
- People who are sensitive emotionally are also sensitive physically, and prone to conditions such as allergy, migraine, IBS and PTSD.
- People who are less aware of their feelings are susceptible to other conditions: chronic fatigue, hypertension, ulcer and rheumatoid arthritis.

Takeaways from My Work

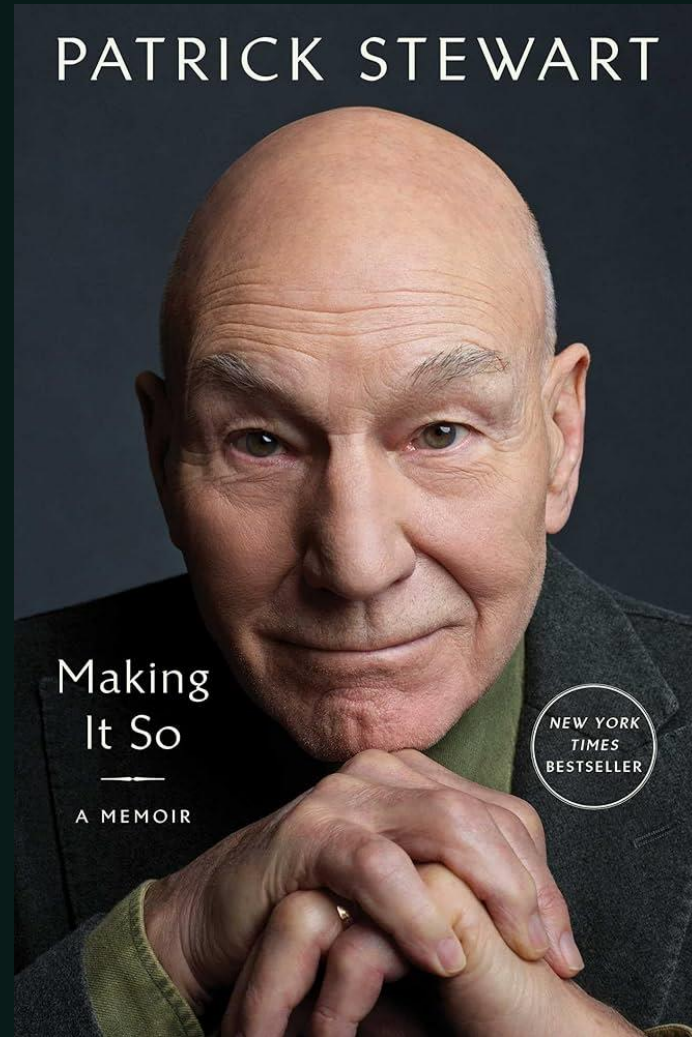
FEELINGS AND EXTRAORDINARY STATES

- Some types of extraordinary people have transcendent perceptions and abilities.
- Synesthetes, prodigies, savants, psychics, and individuals with autism are all sculpted by hidden emotional dynamics.
- We can learn a great deal about human development by taking their perceptions seriously.

FEELINGS AND NATURE/SOUL

- Sentience – the ability to feel – is at the heart of connectedness.
- This is as true of other animals as it is for humans: when we play, when we sympathize, when we're awestruck, when we grieve.
- Through emotion, we evidence soul. Each of us is a 'soulful' part of the natural world.

And Now a Word from Sir Patrick Stewart



Why is All this Important?

- Deeply sensitive people tend to be open to experience – much needed in a divisive world
- The abilities to immerse and conjure vivid imagery are essential to insights and creative solutions
- Recognizing that everyone is on a ‘continuum of personality’ can foster understanding and temper the inclination to pathologize or villainize
- Science – mostly developed/practiced by men – can be broadened by ‘sensitive’ women
- Sensory and emotional sensitivity opens a door to spirituality and an appreciation (rather than fear) of the anomalous



Our Topics

“Roots”: Different theories of sensitivity; how they overlap

“Leaves”: My own work on sensitivity, health, and anomalous perception

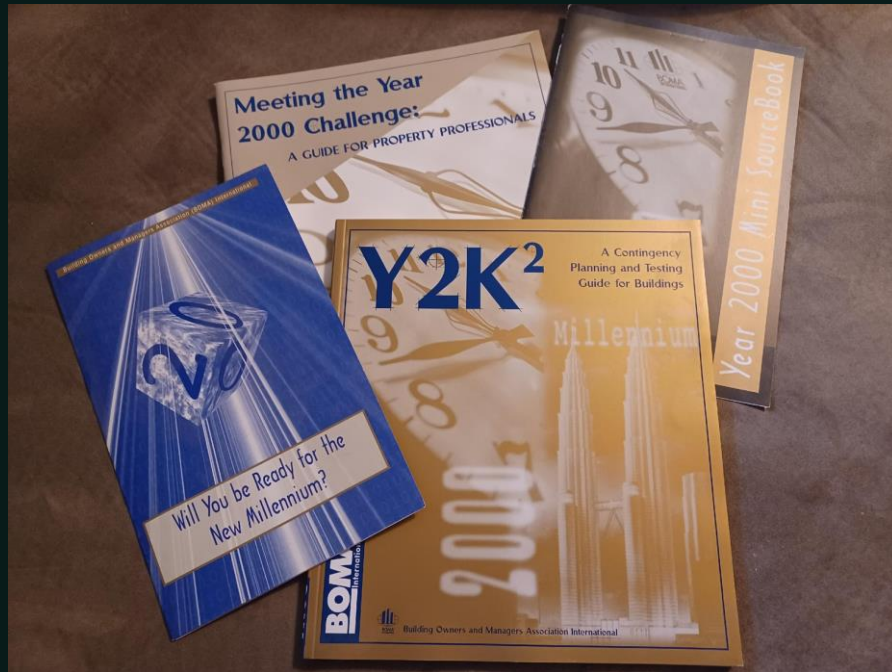
“Branches”: Sensitivity in organizations and in leadership

“Seeds”: How deeply sensitive people can influence our threatened (and threatening) world

Exercises and discussion throughout



Sensitivity in Organizations (Two Personal Recollections)



Four Domains of Team Strength

EXECUTING	INFLUENCING	RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	STRATEGIC THINKING
People with dominant Executing themes know how to make things happen.	People with dominant Influencing themes know how to take charge, speak up, and make sure the team is heard.	People with dominant Relationship Building themes have the ability to build strong relationships that can hold a team together and make the team greater than the sum of its parts.	People with dominant Strategic Thinking themes help teams consider what could be. They absorb and analyze information that can inform better decisions.
Achiever Arranger Belief Consistency Deliberative Discipline Focus Responsibility Restorative	Activator Command Communication Competition Maximizer Self-Assurance Significance Woo	Adaptability Connectedness Developer Empathy Harmony Includer Individualization Positivity Relator	Analytical Context Futuristic Ideation Input Intellection Learner Strategic

Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

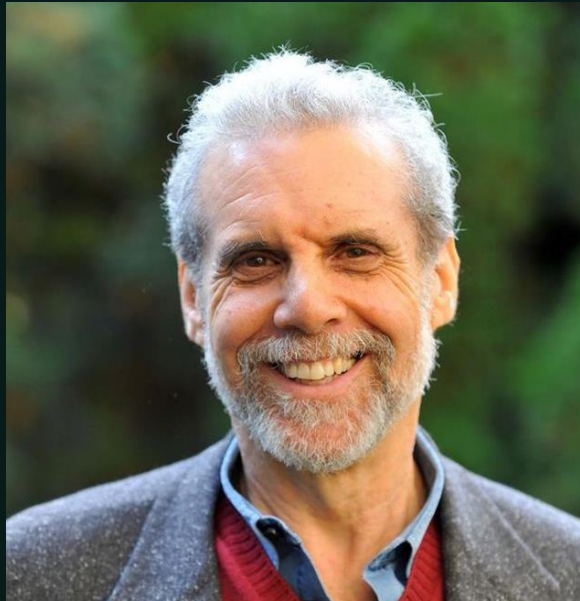
Susan Cain's *Quiet*



- Workplaces are polytropic and built for extroverts. And yet...
- Many CEOs turn out to be introverts (e.g., Bill Gates). Many seem dramatically more comfortable in small groups than in big groups.
- Introverts – because of their inclination to listen to others and lack of interest in dominating social situations – are more likely to hear and implement suggestions.
- More likely to motivate their followers, create “circles of proactivity”
- Steve Wozniak: the ideal workplace is a meritocracy:
 - non-judgmental about your appearance and personality
 - where you can do your best work (less need to play social games)

Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

Dan Goleman's *Working with Emotional Intelligence*



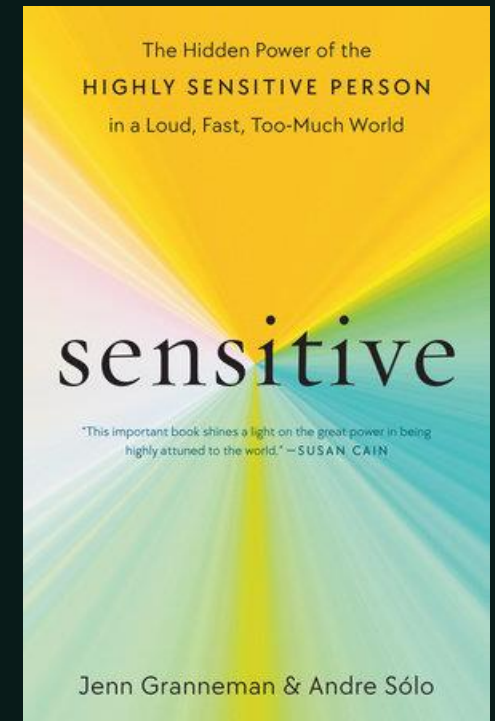
- His Emotional Competence Framework: 1) **Self-awareness**; 2) Self-regulation; 3) Motivation; 4) **Empathy**; 5) Social skills (communication, collaboration, conflict management, leadership)
- “Handling an emotional situation demands...being able to establish trust and rapport quickly, to listen well, and to persuade and sell a recommendation. You need...self-awareness, perspective taking, and a sense of presence.”
- “Emotional competence makes the crucial difference between mediocre leaders and the best.” On average, nearly 90% of leadership success is attributable to it.
- Unsuccessful leaders:
 - Don't admit their mistakes, failing to show openness and conscientiousness
 - Fail to build trust, showing insufficient concern for their colleagues and subordinates
 - Lack empathy and sensitivity (manipulative charm no substitute)

Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

Granneman and Sólo

Deep Sensitivity Advantages

- Ability to process information thoroughly, noticing and incorporating detail
 - “I often see connections among issues or information that others don’t”
- Inclined to be reflective, adding intuitive insights (“Why doesn’t this situation feel right?”)
- Being creative and innovative allows problems to be viewed from many angles and leads to fresh insights
 - “My mind doesn’t stop at shallow answers. I can see the big picture as well as the nitty gritty”
 - “Other people benefit from my insights, advice, and leadership because I bring a different perspective”
- Whereas some leaders only highlight their successes, sensitive leaders try to learn from their failures, taking criticism as constructive and applying it
- “Since I feel things so strongly, anything I do or create carries that intensity”

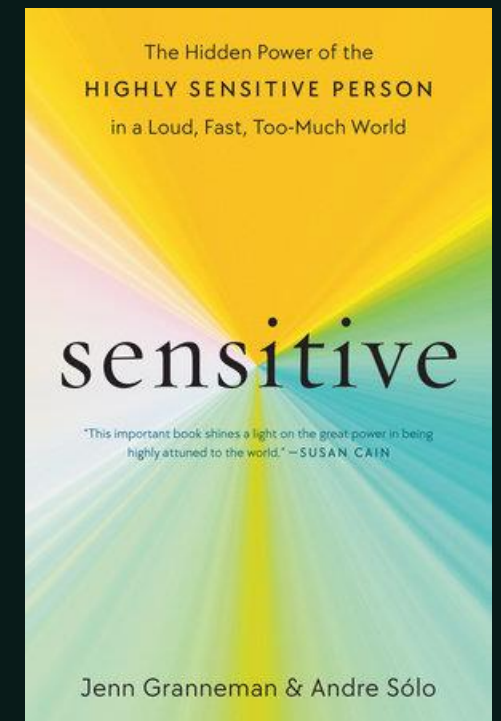


Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

Granneman and Sólo

Deep Sensitivity Disadvantages

- Being unused to picturing oneself as a leader
- Being reluctant to supervise others as it will involve criticism and prompting
- Feeling overwhelmed, especially given multiple tasks and/or deadlines
 - Need to separate the wheat from the chaff, put first things first
- Challenge to filter out distracting stimuli (especially in the office vs. home)
- If something doesn't feel meaningful, an HSP may have difficulty 'doing it anyway'

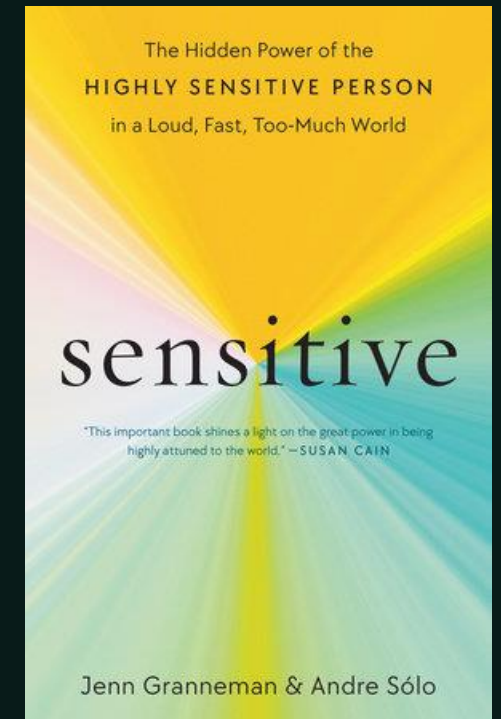


Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

Granneman and Sólo

Observations

- There are many ways to lead. One is simply noticing challenges or opportunities that others might overlook and speaking up about them (Y2K).
 - “I often see team dynamics and staff needs earlier and more accurately”
- We make better leaders than we give ourselves credit for:
 - “The varsity athletes of empathy” – enables us to understand others and their situations more deeply
 - Capable of encouraging innovation, risk-taking, and collaboration
 - Employees empowered in this way are more likely to model what they see
 - Such employees are also more likely to stick around
 - The workplace ends up feeling more inclusive and engaging

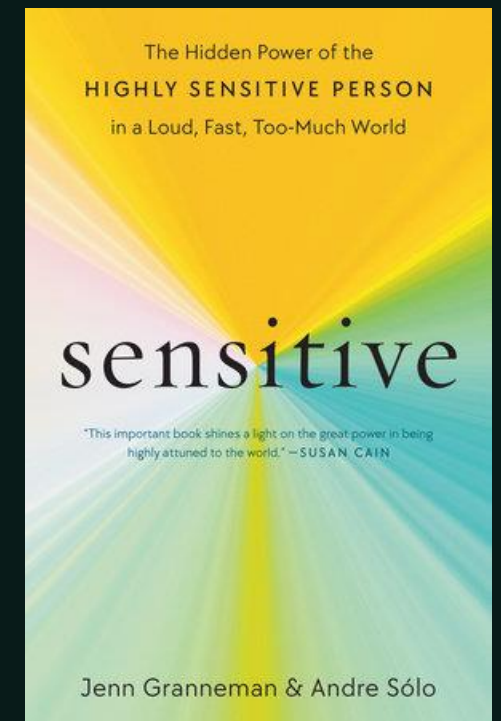


Increasing Sensitivity in Organizations

Granneman and Sólo

Advice

- Deeply sensitive people need to rest and reflect – vs. ruminating on problems
- Benefit from “slow productivity”: the art of doing fewer things well
- It’s a strength to show vulnerability – bravery and sincerity vs. perceived “weakness”
- Displaying vulnerability, at least on occasion, invites other people to be more genuine and empathetic themselves



“Double Edged Swords”

KIRSTY ALLAN

- High self-awareness yet anxiety and self doubt
- Need for depth and meaning; impatience with smaller stuff
- Knowing that high sensitivity is a strength but feeling different or misunderstood in a more extroverted, less sensitive culture

MIKE JAWER

- ‘Deep diving’ into something means sometimes failing to pay attention to others
- Attention to detail can veer into perfectionism and OCD
- Seeing the big picture is great; others not latching on to my vision can cause impatience or resentment

Sensitive Leadership Model at the VA

- Lead with empathy, modesty (“leave rank at the door”)
- Genuinely acknowledge each person as unique and valuable
- Demonstrate humanity through humor (even the corny kind)
- Identify shortcomings or errors without blaming
- Praise in public, counsel or correct in private
- **Commitment to candid communication** (active listening, open, honest, tactful, *continuous*)
 - ➡ Recognize that employees who raise concerns may be in the best position to identify solutions
 - ➡ Commitment to fostering a climate of trust and transparency



How ought we to embrace and support sensitivity
in organizations?



Our Topics

“Roots”: Different theories of sensitivity; how they overlap

“Leaves”: My own work on sensitivity, health, and anomalous perception

“Branches”: Sensitivity in organizations and in leadership

“Seeds”: How deeply sensitive people can influence our threatened (and threatening) world

Exercises and discussion throughout



What could the future be like?



Four Future Possibilities

1



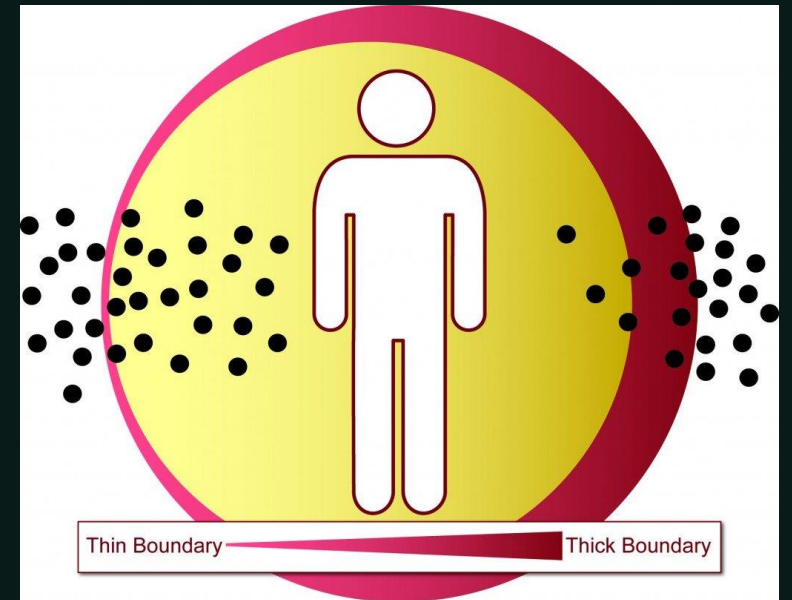
2

3

4

1) There will be greater appreciation for the fundamental fact that people process their feelings differently

- The concepts of *neurotypical* and *neurodivergence* point toward a greater appreciation of how people differ.
- The thick-to-thin boundary spectrum offers a way to picture personality differences as a continuum – with neither ‘type’ seen as better or worse
- Boundary differences will be more readily acknowledged to play out in culture and politics
- What is considered right or wrong, moral or immoral, acceptable or outrageous isn’t so much defined by external authorities as based on the very personal sense of “*me/not me*”
- To what degree that line is fixed or permeable offers a fascinating glimpse into boundary difference among contending individuals, political parties, and schools of thought



2) “Health” will be evaluated in light of the way different people process their feelings

- Scientists and health professionals will recognize that body and mind, the physical and the mental/emotional are two sides of the same coin
 - Everyone is psychosomatic: what a concept!
 - Doctors, scientists initially didn't believe patients with ME/CFS (DecodeME study 2025)
- Whole person health will become the norm for a variety of chronic illnesses
- Doctors will be trained to truly listen to their patients so they can gather essential input about their diet, exercise, daily stressors, and emotional 'state of mind'
- Combined with a recognition of the way the energy of feelings works within us, **personalized medicine** will reduce the need for drugs and surgery



3) The habit of disparaging and rejecting reports of anomalous experience will be reined in

- It will be recognized that certain people (thin boundary/highly sensitive/ highly transliminal) are disposed to perceptions that are not the norm
- Not too long ago, synesthesia was not taken seriously, and the claims of people with chronic fatigue were dismissed
- Comparison with people on the autism scale, synesthetes, savants, and prodigies: 'legitimate' ways of being and richly deserving of research
- As with synesthesia, psi experiences will be considered valid – offering path-breaking insights into the nature of the mind, **if not reality itself**

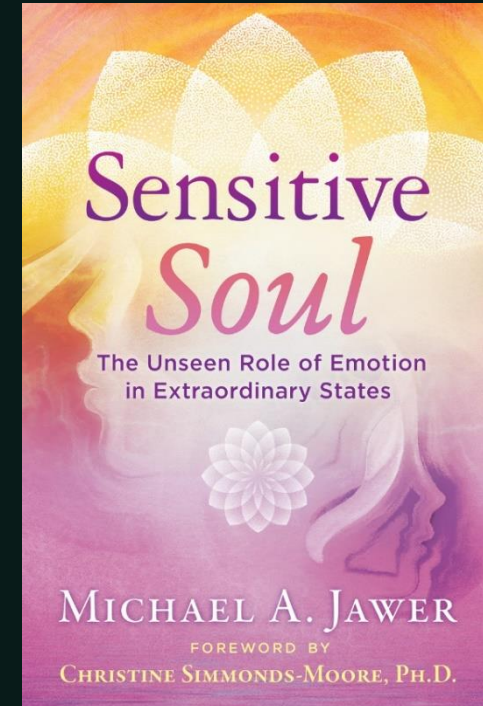
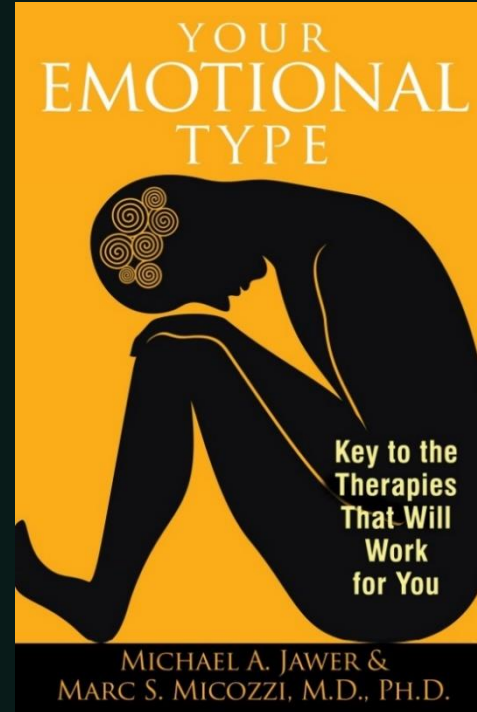
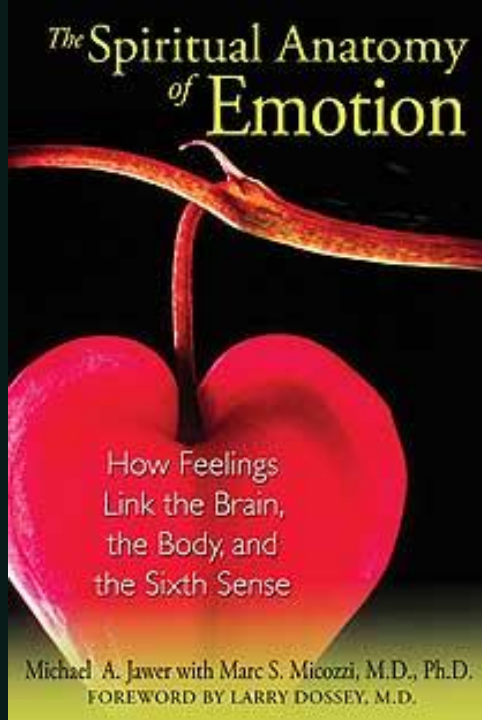


This doesn't mean automatic, uncritical acceptance of all claims
– but for anomalous perceptions in general to be taken seriously

Sensing the future together?



Thank You!



Further info: www.MichaelJawer.com