

UC SANTA BARBARA

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‘Sensitive and in Love’

Being a highly sensitive person isn't easy. Modern life and mainstream culture, with their endless overstimulation and cacophony of superficial and often thoughtless messaging, tend to be unkind to those who experience heightened emotions and sensations.

Sensitive people are often chided for being too serious or melodramatic or derided as “bleeding-hearts” and “snowflakes.”

However, according to UC Santa Barbara social neuroscientist [Bianca Acevedo](#), being highly sensitive is not an aberration, a condition or disorder. Rather it's a neural trait known as Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), in which a person's survival strategy involves a deeper processing of stimuli. Often this results in a highly sensitive individual feeling overwhelmed in response to excess stimuli, or experiencing slower decision-making and higher-than-usual reactivity to the environment.

But it can also lead to more thoughtful decisions, intuitive actions and empathy.

“Individual high sensitivity is determined by both biological factors and environmental influences, including early-childhood development,” Acevedo said.

So how does a highly sensitive individual manage a world that largely is not set up for them? This is the theme Acevedo and colleagues — psychologists Arthur and Elaine Aron — explore in their recently released independent film, “Sensitive and in Love.”

Inspired by the Arons' previous work, "The Highly Sensitive Person," and "36 Questions that Lead to Love," and based on research conducted by Acevedo at UC Santa Barbara, the film follows siblings Rob and Jessica, both of whom have SPS. As they navigate their relationships, each feeling isolated and frustrated, it's as though they were born with an unbearable flaw that prevents them from engaging more fully with their world.

Unbeknownst to the protagonists, who also share a childhood trauma, they aren't alone.

"It's safe to say that roughly 20 to 35% of a given population is highly sensitive," Acevedo said. The trait is also found in more than 100 animal species.

With Jessica's dubious record of failed relationships, and Rob's marriage teetering on the edge of collapse, a family visit turns into moments of reckoning for the siblings, both of whom must face the personal histories and patterns of behavior that have locked them into their situations.

About 1.4 billion people are thought to be highly sensitive, according to the researchers. Because it appears not only in a significant number of humans but also across species, according to Acevedo, the trait might pose an evolutionary advantage.

"Traits are namely thought to be preserved by natural selection when they contribute to individual- and species-level fitness, leading to an evolutionary advantage," said Acevedo, whose book "The Highly Sensitive Brain" is forthcoming this summer from Academic Press.

"Sensitive and in Love," which premiered January 29 at the Directors Guild of America Theater in New York, is aimed at bringing awareness to this often misunderstood trait with the hope of shedding light on SPS and how it affects relationships. More information is available at the film's [website](#).

About UC Santa Barbara

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All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.