

Turning a 'weakness' into a strength

People sometimes say to me that they are just 'too sensitive', or 'too emotional'. This is often said with an air of self-judgement and dislike, and a bit of despair at having been unable to change themselves. When I enquire a bit further with them, it often turns out that the 'too sensitive/emotional' bit is what their parents and other family members would say to them. Sometimes this would be said explicitly, but often also implicitly, through their behaviour and attitudes, e.g. ignoring the child when they were upset. I personally think that there is no such thing as being 'too' sensitive or emotional, that there is nothing wrong with being more sensitive or emotional than most other people. I think sensitive people are almost always also very lovely, caring and compassionate people who can do a lot of good in the world – because they deeply care. But admittedly, it is often not easy to learn to live with yourself and navigate life when you are more sensitive and emotional than most people around you. Some guidance and mentoring, and learning certain skills, can be very valuable, and prevent a lot of suffering.

I used to be a worrier as a child; I would worry about things in my head that no one else seemed to worry about. Such as bottles of bubbly soft drinks exploding and causing the house to catch on fire. (I had heard about that very unlikely scenario actually happening somewhere and thought it would happen with each soft drink bottle. I could not understand why my mother kept buying them!) I would worry about the girl next door going to hell because she and her parents did not go to church. I would worry about what it would be like when our cat died, an unimaginable tragedy for an 8 year old.

I also used to, and still seem to, feel things much more deeply than most of my family members. I could be really sad about things, but also very happy and excited about others. I used to judge myself terribly for having all these worries and emotions. I felt particularly bad about myself when I was feeling sad – why did that horrible feeling have to creep up on me? I tried to 'be positive' as best as I could. However, in my mid twenties this strategy came to a head, when I went through a painful relationship break-up, and I had no healthy ways for coping with the ensuing grief. I went through a period of about 2 years of quite severe mental health problems. It started off with me being quite hypomanic, followed by a period of being emotionally really unstable, swinging from feeling great to feeling very down within a short period of time. When I realized these mood swings were getting worse and worse, I somehow managed to stabilize myself, but then slid into a long period of feeling quite depressed. With some help, I slowly recovered from that depression, but I came away with being quite tense and anxious. Part of that anxiety was from the fear of becoming depressed (or hypomanic) again: I felt I could not trust my own inner world. That somehow some wild, dark 'monster' could emerge from within me, unbidden. I really wanted to move on with my life though, and I tried to put it all behind me and not think about it anymore.

In my early thirties, I finally had some good psychotherapy, which really helped me to get a lot more in touch with who I really am, and understand myself much better. A few years later, I had the fortune of learning mindfulness meditation, and that turned out to be one of the most beneficial things I've done in my life. Something deep inside of me changed for ever. I lost all fear of my own internal mental emotional states, realising that they are only temporary and also that they are not at all who or what I really 'am'. They are just temporary experiences in my mind and body that I could just allow to happen in the space of my awareness, like a thunderstorm or misty day. I also developed a much clearer, more confident, unquestionable sense of self, that is flexible and fluid at the same time. And probably most important of all, I developed the capacity to open up into a sense of inner peace and wellbeing whenever I want to. This doesn't mean I'm floating around in a sea of bliss all the time, or that I don't feel emotional about some things in life. It does mean I feel totally

okay with myself no matter how I feel, and that I completely trust my ability to be able to cope with life's challenges, no matter what happens.

I also derive a great sense of satisfaction from being able to constructively utilize my sensitivity to help other similarly inclined people to find peace within themselves and to find their way in life.

What often comes with thinking we are 'too' emotional or sensitive, is a dislike of our own feelings, and efforts to try and control them, deny them or push them away. And when we realize we can't, or they keep coming back, we feel like a failure or that there is something wrong with us. This can very easily lead to a negative feedback loop, where the more we try to control our 'negative' feelings and thoughts, the stronger they get, and the worse we feel about ourselves. We are all created differently by mother Nature along the spectrum of sensitivity/emotionality, and then shaped further by life experiences, and coping strategies we develop on the way. Most of that is outside of our control, and not our fault, and it certainly does not mean there is anything 'wrong' with us. Being more emotional and or sensitive than other people means just that – feeling things more deeply and sooner than some other people. I personally love sensitive, emotional people! I see them as bringing more colour and beauty to our world.

So just repeating one more time, there is no such thing as being 'too' sensitive or emotional!