A Reflective Review on the Relationship Between Highly Sensitivity and Depression

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Abstract. This review provides an in-depth exploration of the intricate connection between Highly Sensitive Person Syndrome (HSPS) and depression. It delves into a comprehensive definition of HSPS, elucidates its root causes and intricate psychological traits, and subsequently delves into whether gender disparities and other factors exert an impact on the intricate interplay between high sensitivity and depression. Furthermore, this review expounds upon the underlying mechanisms that underscore the relationship between HSPS and depression. Ultimately, this article underscores the imperative to tailor depression interventions to the unique needs of highly sensitive individuals. The role of interpersonal sensitivity in shaping one's reaction to environmental stimuli and psychological interventions is an intriguing factor that deserves more in-depth investigation. This highlights the importance of specific treatment approaches and the acknowledgment of individual differences.

Keywords: High-sensitivity, depression, interpersonal sensitive, hypersensitive.

1. Introduction

Depression is a common and typical mental health issue. High-sensitivity individuals have special sensitivity and response to depression to some extent. Hypersensitivity is a personality that refers to an individual's high sensitivity to environmental stimulation. Past studies have shown a link between high sensitivity and depression. Uncovering the connection between high sensitivity and depression can significantly enhance our understanding of high-sensitivity individuals. Moreover, exploring whether there are differences in the occurrence and severity of depression among high-sensitivity individuals is of great importance for personalized depression treatment. However, research on the relationship between high sensitivity and depression in individuals still needs further development. Therefore, this review aims to investigate the manifestation and impact of depression in individuals with high sensitivity. This article will focus on the following questions: (1) What are the causes of high sensitivity in individuals? (2) Are there differences in the occurrence and severity of depression among high-sensitivity individuals? We intend to gain a deeper understanding of individuals with high sensitivity.

2. Method

The literature for this review came from three main databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, and JSTOR. Keywords used in the search include "highly sensitive," "high-sensitivity," "depression," "highly sensitive and depressed," "interpersonal sensitive," and "hypersensitive." Data limits are not used in the research process to ensure maximum coverage of relevant research.

After the preliminary collection of articles, we imposed certain selective standards. The articles had to be original research pieces published in accredited academic journals undergoing peer-review processes and needed to supply sufficient details for us to assess the quality of their research methods and results. Moreover, it needs to be related to the two most important keywords we have studied, namely, highly sensitive population and depression. Using these standards allowed us to sift out articles that were non-original, irrelevant, or lacked enough information.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Highly Sensitive Individuals

3.1.1 Definition

Clinical psychologist Elaine Aron popularized the term "Highly Sensitive Person" (HSP), which is also known as Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS). HSP refers to individuals who are more sensitive to external stimulation, exhibiting more detailed processing of information but also being more susceptible to the impact of external stimuli. Sensory Processing Sensitivity involves heightened sensitivity to various stimuli, emotions, cognition, and behavior responses, including intense positive and negative emotional reactions, deep cognitive processing of stimuli, and empathetic behavior [1]. It is not a medical condition but rather an inheritable personality trait, estimated to occur in about 15-20% of the population [2, 3].

3.1.2 Causes

Regarding the causes of high sensitivity, highly sensitive may be a genetic trait, but it is also influenced by factors such as the social environment and early life experiences.

Highly sensitive individuals have a more sensitive nervous system compared to the average person, allowing them to perceive subtle changes in their surroundings [3-5]. Therefore, they are more prone to discomfort in highly stimulating situations [2]. It suggests that some highly sensitive individuals had unpleasant childhood experiences compared to the average person. These individuals tend to score higher in emotional and social introversion. This indicates that highly sensitive individuals might have been shaped by experiencing more pain in childhood, which was not expressed or released enough.

3.1.3 Psychological Characteristics

Highly sensitive individuals exhibit strong perception and insight into their external surroundings and often quickly notice slight cues in various situations. It displays several characteristics, such as heightened sensitivity to stimulation like sounds, smells, lights, and touch; a strong ability to perceive details; heightened sensitivity to others' emotions; and increased attention to both people and the environment [1]. Additionally, highly sensitive individuals often demonstrate exceptional abilities, such as creativity, insight, passion, and compassion [6].

Moreover, emotional abilities may be different for highly sensitive individuals. In Jadzia Jagiellowicz's initial study, it was shown that highly sensitive individuals (referred to as "high SPS") tend to have stronger emotional evaluations and heightened responses to emotional stimuli in pictures compared to others [7]. They display more attention to the emotional content in the pictures, indicating that highly sensitive individuals are more perceptive and respond more intensely to external stimuli [8].

3.2. The Relationship between High Sensitivity and Depression

3.2.1 Risk Factors

The research carried out by Yano et al. demonstrates a positive linkage between sensory-processing sensitivity and the presence of depressive symptoms, regarding it as a plausible risk for depression [9]. They further highlighted the moderating role of a sense of coherence, a perception that stressors are comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful, in the relationship between high sensitivity and depressive symptoms.

3.2.2 Gender Differences

Several studies have highlighted the differences in interpersonal sensitivity based on demographic variables such as gender. For instance, Nyström et al.'s study of 252 undergraduate students found that women display higher degrees of interpersonal sensitivity and are more likely to use internalized shame coping strategies compared to men. This study also identified a strong correlation between interpersonal sensitivity and shame coping strategies, though no gender difference was found in this

association [10]. The results provide valuable insights for clinicians and researchers in designing, delivering, and evaluating treatments for patients with conditions such as depression and anxiety and those with interpersonal or relational problems.

3.2.3 Underlying Mechanisms

The studies available, including Yano et al., primarily provide hints and directions for further investigation rather than definitive answers. Their research offers intriguing insights, suggesting that the relationship between high sensitivity, also known as sensory-processing sensitivity, and depression may be moderated by an individual's sense of coherence [9]. The sense of coherence is a global orientation expressing the degree to which one has an enduring and dynamic feeling of confidence so that one's internal and external environments are predictable, and it is possible that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected.

The researchers found that a strong sense of coherence could reduce the impact of sensory-processing sensitivity on depressive symptoms. This means that individuals who regard their life stressors as understandable, manageable, and meaningful, even when facing heightened sensitivity to stimuli, exhibit fewer depressive symptoms.

This intriguing finding suggests that the mechanism linking high sensitivity and depression could partly be influenced by one's perception of and ability to cope with life stressors. Therefore, high sensitivity does not necessarily lead to depression; the individual's sense of coherence can serve as a protective factor, buffering the adverse effects of heightened sensitivity.

3.2.4 The Relationship between Interpersonal Sensitivity and Depression

In the quest to discern whether heightened interpersonal sensitivity is a harbinger of depression or a consequence of it, we turn to the pivotal research by de Villiers et al. on vantage sensitivity [4]. This term encapsulates the notion that individuals differ markedly in their responses to positive environmental shifts and psychological interventions, rooted in their inherent ability to perceive and integrate external cues. Their theoretical framework posits that the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity, a trait marked by a keen awareness of, and reactivity to, others' feelings and behaviors-and depression may be multifaceted, influenced by an intricate web of genetic, physiological, and psychological factors.

Their findings suggest that those individuals with pronounced environmental sensitivity-akin to a heightened perceptual and emotional receptivity to the world around them may extract greater benefits from psychological interventions than their less-sensitive peers. This could mean that rather than acting as a simple direct cause of depression, amplified interpersonal sensitivity could boost the impact of the individual's environment and psychological interventions. This emphasizes the intricate interplay between inherent traits like sensitivity and external factors in determining one's mental health trajectory.

To provide a more concrete illustration, let's turn our attention to "Jane", a 25-year-old who is been grappling with depression for a good number of years. Jane's scores on the sensitivity scale indicated a heightened level of interpersonal sensitivity. Her early experiences with standard therapeutic methods were a struggle as her increased sensitivity seemed to intensify her depressive symptoms. However, once this pattern was acknowledged, her therapists customized her treatment to better accommodate her sensitivity profile. This adjustment led to a significant upswing in Jane's response to therapy, successfully converting her high sensitivity from an apparent drawback into a vital component of her mental health improvement.

This specific instance solidifies the argument that taking into account individual differences in sensitivity can greatly optimize the personalization and efficacy of therapeutic approaches. Further, it emphasizes the pivotal role that sensitivity plays, not just as a trait of interest but as a variable that can shape therapeutic outcomes.

4. Implications

4.1. Caring for Highly Sensitive Individuals

Attending to the needs of highly sensitive individuals requires a comprehensive understanding of their sensitivity characteristics and the creation of an environment that accommodates these specific needs. Given the substantial impact of this trait on how one interacts with and perceives their surroundings, it is crucial to provide the necessary care and support.

Furthermore, there exists a significant correlation between interpersonal sensitivity and both self and others' behavioral patterns, indicating a link between interpersonal sensitivity and attachment insecurity. Moreover, it has been observed that highly sensitive individuals often have a connection with childhood experiences of overprotective and emotionally controlling parenting by their caregivers [11]. This suggests a potential lack of secure attachment formation during their early years. Consequently, highly sensitive individuals might exhibit a certain degree of dependence on others to uphold positive self-attention, which, unfortunately, can lead to the emergence of separation anxiety.

To mitigate or alleviate their separation-related distress, highly sensitive individuals tend to display an elevated degree of vigilance towards the feelings, consciousness, and interpersonal dynamics of those around them. This heightened awareness stems from their innate inclination to preserve a sense of harmony within their interpersonal interactions and maintain a delicate equilibrium between their personal emotions and their connections with others.

This review underscores that enhancing self-awareness and social cognition among highly sensitive individuals is paramount. Doing so would not only serve to alleviate personal and emotional struggles arising from excessive pressure but also play a crucial role in safeguarding human resources. It is evident that the intricate interplay between high sensitivity and its psychological implications warrants a tailored approach to depression treatment for individuals with HSPS. By acknowledging the unique challenges and potential advantages linked to high sensitivity, we can contribute to a more inclusive and effective mental health intervention strategy.

4.2. Interventions

4.2.1 Original family

The home environment is usually the initial support point for individuals with high sensitivity. Here, signs of high sensitivity are initially identified within the primary social group, and necessary adjustments are made to suit the person’s requirements. Family numbers’ acceptance and recognition of high sensitivity can significantly enhance the individual’s mental health. Families can offer substantial aid by cultivating a peaceful and understanding environment and promoting awareness about high sensitivity among themselves and others.

The home environment often serves as the foundational point of support for individuals displaying signs of high sensitivity. According to Aron, who has written extensively on the subject, individuals with high sensitivity (or Sensory Processing Sensitivity, as it is scientifically termed) are deeply affected by subtleties in their surroundings, and exhibit heightened emotional responses [12]. These individuals, whom Aron refers to as “Highly Sensitive Persons” (HSPs), often process information more deeply and can become easily overwhelmed by stimuli that others might find tolerable [2].

Within the confines of home, it is commonly the primary social group—usually the family-that first notices signs of high sensitivity. This social group's ability to recognize and validate this sensitivity is paramount. Acceptance and acknowledgment by family members can significantly impact the mental well-being of a highly sensitive person. Research indicates that when HSPs feel understood and supported, they are less prone to anxiety and depression, which they are inherently at a higher risk for due to their heightened sensitivity [7].

Furthermore, creating a serene and accommodating environment can go a long way in helping a highly sensitive individual thrive. This entails ensuring that the home setting is not excessively noisy or chaotic, as HSPs can become overwhelmed in such situations. A peaceful environment not only

benefits their physical well-being by reducing sensory overloads but also aids their mental health by minimizing triggers of anxiety or stress [8].

Promotion of understanding and awareness about high sensitivity is equally important. Knowledge can dispel myths and misconceptions, leading to better support for the HSP in the family. Aron suggests that education can help family members refrain from labeling a highly sensitive individual as "too emotional" or "overreactive" and instead appreciate the depth of their processing [12].

4.2.2 Societal and Network Levels

Nonetheless, the obligation does not rest solely on the family's shoulders. The broader community and various associations can also contribute significantly to supporting highly sensitive individuals. A society that embraces and comprehends this sensitivity can make substantial changes. Furthermore, web-based networks can bring revolutionary impact. Internet forums for those with high sensitivity can serve as centers for exchanging experiences, fostering empathy, and offering support. In addition, abundant online resources can empower these individuals to understand their sensitivity more fully and acquire practical strategies for managing their day-to-day existence effectively. According to the vantage sensitivity theory, highly sensitive individuals have more intense actions in a positive environment, so mindfulness is an intervening approach.

Support for highly sensitive individuals, while initially rooted in family dynamics, extends well beyond the household to encompass the wider community and various institutional structures. The community at large plays a significant role in understanding and providing a conducive environment for highly sensitive persons (HSPs) to thrive. Dr. Elaine Aron, who pioneered much of the research on high sensitivity, emphasizes that societal awareness and acceptance are pivotal for HSPs to function optimally [2].

One of the powerful mechanisms of support in our digital age is the internet. Web-based communities, especially forums dedicated to highly sensitive individuals, have burgeoned as platforms where HSPs can share experiences, seek advice, and find solidarity in shared challenges. Such online environments not only foster empathy but also bridge geographical divides, bringing together highly sensitive individuals from across the globe. The online domain also provides a treasure trove of resources aimed at helping HSPs comprehend the intricacies of their heightened sensitivity. Websites, webinars, online courses, and blogs furnish tools and strategies to navigate the challenges posed by their unique neurological wiring [13, 14].

The vantage sensitivity theory provides further insight into the experiences of HSPs. According to this theory, highly sensitive individuals demonstrate intensified responses when exposed to both positive and negative environments. This means that, in positive, nurturing settings, they flourish more than their less-sensitive counterparts. Pluess and Belsky's research on vantage sensitivity reinforces the notion that interventions, like mindfulness practices, can be incredibly beneficial for HSPs [15]. Mindfulness, with its emphasis on present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, provides a practical approach to help HSPs manage their heightened emotions and sensory experiences.

In essence, while families act as the primary support system, the broader society, web-based platforms, and therapeutic interventions such as mindfulness significantly contribute to the well-being of highly sensitive individuals. A collective effort ensures that HSPs can not only manage their heightened sensitivities but also harness them as unique strengths.

5. Conclusion

This evaluation reveals the complex interplay between heightened sensitivity and depression, indicating that such sensitivity does not necessarily contribute to depression. Individual attributes, such as a strong sense of coherence, can decrease the effects of sensitivity, serving as a protective factor.

The role of interpersonal sensitivity in shaping one's reaction to environmental stimuli and psychological interventions is an intriguing factor that deserves more in-depth investigation. This

highlights the importance of specific treatment approaches and the acknowledgment of individual differences.

The role of family and social support systems in assisting highly sensitive individuals is fundamental. These structures can substantially reinforce early detection and preventative strategies. Extensive research is needed to grasp the association between high sensitivity and depression fully. The end goal is to nurture a compassionate community that recognizes and values the experiences of highly sensitive individuals, encouraging them to use their sensitivity as a unique strength.

Author Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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