

Part II ~

How Emotional Sensitivity Relates to Character and Environment

As is the case with anything that is not properly understood, not only is it taken out of context, it is defined as something other than what it really is, thus the same is true when it comes to understanding the nature of emotional sensitivity. The degree that emotional sensitivity is felt and expressed is often thought to be the cause that adversely affects the dynamics of intimate or non-intimate relationships, often erroneously perceived as a character flaw. However, emotional sensitivity is neither a cause unto itself nor a character flaw. Emotional sensitivity relates to character as a cause and environment as an effect. When this very dynamic interplay of character and environment are properly understood, thus put in context and defined correctly, it becomes clear that emotional sensitivity is neither a cause unto itself nor a character flaw. However, the cognitive effort it takes to understand the nature of emotional sensitivity is like trying to search for unknown missing puzzle pieces. Knowing where to find them can be challenging and frustrating. However, the mental effort is well worth the while because once the missing pieces are found and the puzzle is fully assembled, the nature of emotional sensitivity is put in proper perspective. Hence, the purpose of this essay is to explain how emotional sensitivity relates to character and environment by identifying and assembling the missing puzzle pieces, thereby connecting the related causes and effects, which incidentally, is a very liberating experience.

How emotional sensitivity relates to character is that character determines emotional sensitivity and as character traits are inborn, they are innately experienced. Likewise, emotional sensitivity is also innately experienced. However, the degree of emotional sensitivity is not necessarily determined by character but is an effect that relates to environment. As there really is no sure means of avoiding early in life environmental conditioning, which begins from birth, even a minimally conditioned environment is no less a conditioned environment, thus there is no escaping the affect of early in life environmental influences. As there is no sure way of discerning to the extent environmental influences affects the actual degree of emotional sensitivity, there is no doubt that early in life environmental conditioning as well as the affect of many other external influences does indeed alter emotional sensitivity.

Besides being a reaction to early in life conditions, the degree of emotional sensitivity is an ongoing reactionary response to like kind or similar conditions, circumstances and events, whether real or perceived as real. As the affects can be very damaging, especially when it comes to relationships, it is essential to understand the nature of emotional sensitivity, not as a cause unto itself, but as a cause relating to character and an effect relating to environment.

Emotional sensitivity is not an internal coping mechanism that operates independent of any other internal forces or external influences. The degree of sensitivity is the result of an interacting and very dynamic interplay between character and environment. Sometimes they act as opposing

forces, working against each other rather than working with each other. Thus, the resulting effects appear to be random events occurring independent of one another, thus appear to be disconnected causes and effects. However, they are neither random nor disconnected occurrences nor are they independent of one another but are related causes and effects linked together by way of the dynamic interplay between character and environment. As character is the internal force that predetermines emotional sensitivity and environment is the external force that alters the degree of emotional sensitivity, over time becomes a habituated reactive internal mechanism in response to real or perceived as real adversities. The problem is that once this internal force sets in as a habituated coping mechanism, it predetermines outcomes, whereby the same or similar circumstances continue to play out relationship after relationship.

Although the emotional gap between less sensitive people and highly sensitive people is not very wide, the difference in reactionary responses to triggering events is significantly different. Whereas less sensitive people tend to react and respond less strongly to triggering events, mostly because they do not perceive them nearly as threatening if at all, which is where character comes into play, highly sensitive people tend to react more strongly, thereby causing their emotional pendulum to swing too far out of balance. The result is often a long string of undesirable causes and effects that appear to be disconnected events, though they really do relate to one another.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the sharp contrast between non-sensitive and highly sensitive people. The gap in degree of emotional sensitivity is so wide that not only are they not birds of the same feather, they are worlds apart in terms of how they act and react to similar triggering events. Hence, “never the twain shall meet” could not be a more true statement when it comes to the distinct differences between highly sensitive people and non-sensitive people. Unlike highly sensitive people who are highly stimulated by environmental influences, thus are highly emotionally reactive, non-sensitive people are not sensitive to the environment nor are they over stimulated by the environment. From their non-sensitive non-emotional perspective, there simply are no triggers, thus no reason for emotional reactions. Hence, they do not experience wide swings of their emotional pendulum. Their defense mechanism is that they simply avoid situations that threaten to unbalance them in any manner of speaking, which incidentally, is often an indicator of deeper psychological issues attributed to social or personality disorders. Emotional avoidance is a conditioned state of mind, a learned trait for the sake of self-preservation, that although it can be traced to a root cause or causes as the case may be, is a state of mind not easily changed or altered, if ever at all.

When it comes to relationship dynamics, especially intimate relationships, wide gaps in emotional sensitivity tends to draw a not so fine line of demarcation in the sand that can seriously undermine the stability of the relationship. Consequently, the less room there is for differences in emotional sensitivity, the quicker intolerance and impatience moves in, eventually squeezing the life right out of the relationship. Survival of the relationship requires a great deal of patience, tolerance and above all – acceptance, which is paramount to the stability of the

relationship. As acceptance is the fundamental means by which the relationship can withstand a wide gap in emotional sensitivity, where there is acceptance, there is trust.

The difficulty with acceptance is that it implies responsibility, not just of the highly sensitive person but with the non-sensitive person too. However, because differences in degree of emotional sensitivity relates to differences in perspectives, taking responsibility for differences in sensitivity and hence perspectives is far easier said than done as one tends to stick to ones beliefs as if they were set in stone. As a relationship cannot survive a “my way or the highway” mentality, differences in emotional sensitivity not only requires patience and tolerance, the success of the relationship requires a fair amount of honest introspection along with a broader scope of knowledge, wisdom and insight, all of which is a learning experience if one is willing to broaden one’s horizons. With heightened sensitivity comes the tendency for strong emotional reactions. Thus comes a great deal of responsibility, which isn’t just about being aware of the degree of sensitivity but how that degree of sensitivity is affecting others as well. The same level of responsibility holds true for non-sensitive people given that emotional insensitivity is just as damaging to a relationship if not more damaging. If either side of the emotional sensitivity scale is not in balance, the relationship will eventually suffer, thus acceptance and responsibility go hand in hand.

As emotional sensitivity and even insensitivity brings with it a long string of undesirable causes and effects that do not appear to connect to the degree of sensitivity, the fact of the matter is that they do connect. However, the challenge isn’t in just knowing how the dots of all the causes and effects actually connect as it is in knowing where to begin looking. Although the search for the missing puzzle pieces is a quest few people are willing to embark on, nonetheless, the very undesirable effects can be traced to a root cause. Tracing effects to a root cause is a journey of self-discovery that begins by looking into the past. Given that the root cause of all the subsequent causes and the effects that followed can all be traced to a specific experience, typically occurring in childhood, examining the past for the sake of identification is a worthwhile effort.

However, progress often comes to a halt when such matters are perceived only as they appear on the surface rather than digging below the surface, which is where the causes are found and hence resolved. As things are seldom as they appear on the surface, taking them at face value accounts for why nothing really changes or only changes temporarily but inevitably reverts to history repeating itself just with different people, in different settings and under different circumstances; inevitably the outcomes are very similar. Thus, tracing causes to a root cause that explains all the undesirable effects takes a little more time, patience and cognitive effort, sometimes a lot more time and effort is needed depending on the situation. The reward is that not only are answers found, things that did not make sense before now make perfect sense and things that did not seem to connect now connect.

The payoff for the mental exertion is that with this heightened awareness comes the ability to master emotional sensitivity as opposed to being mastered by it, which is especially important when it comes to relationship dynamics. Awareness of emotional sensitivity, the degree it is felt and expressed in response to triggering events is not only liberating, it is very empowering because it allows the freedom of making conscious choices with respect to how, when and to what degree emotional sensitivity gets to play an interacting role in any relationship or in day-to-day life. Thus understanding how emotional sensitivity relates to character and environment is truly a worthy endeavor.