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You need this book! It's chock-full of highly relatable examples and tips, and a must-read for anyone who has emotions. Dr. Veilleux uses cutting-edge science and her trademark humor and clinical wisdom to explain what emotions are, and how we can decipher the messages they have for us about how to become our best selves.

–JAMES GROSS, PhD, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY,
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction: Mail, or Junk Mail? *3*

Chapter 1. Emotional Sensitivity *7*

Chapter 2. Emotional Awareness *27*

Chapter 3. Clarify Your Values *53*

Chapter 4. Emotional Labeling *81*

Chapter 5. Coping Ahead *105*

Chapter 6. Opening the Envelope *131*

Chapter 7. Actively Regulating Emotions *163*

Chapter 8. Expressing and Sharing Emotions *191*

Chapter 9. Putting All the Pieces Together Flexibly *225*

Afterword *253*

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Glossary of Key Terms 255

References 263

Index 293

About the Author 309

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CHAPTER 1

EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY

Consider two wildly different people, the Princess and the Detective. The Princess is extraordinarily sensitive, in both emotion and physical sensation. She is so sensitive, in fact, that she is able to feel a tiny pea hidden beneath 20 downy mattresses.

The Detective, however, is extraordinarily logical. He solves crimes by ignoring emotion and examining the facts and then pointing out how the answer was elementary all along.

The Princess and the Detective represent two ends of the sensitivity spectrum. In the classic children's story *The Princess and the Pea* (Andersen, 1835/1985), sensitivity is desirable: It is the Princess's sensitivity that marks her as fit to marry a prince. But to Detectives, like Sherlock Holmes, emotional sensitivity is undesirable. Emotions reduce logic, and rationality reigns supreme.

Which is it? Is sensitivity good or bad?

The answer, of course, is neither. There is nothing inherently wrong with either the Princess or the Detective. Yet people on both poles of the sensitivity spectrum tend to get feedback that their sensitivity is wrong. Perhaps the Princess left her own kingdom because she was told that she was "too touchy" and that she should "just calm down and stop complaining." No doubt someone told Sherlock Holmes that he was "uncaring" or "a cold fish."

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Emotional sensitivity matters because it reflects a personality-like tendency that provides the backdrop for how emotions are experienced in daily life. How people experience emotions is core to who they are, and some people are simply more emotional than others. Two people who land on a different part of the emotional sensitivity spectrum experience the emotional world differently, and there are different pros (and cons) to being high versus low in sensitivity.

There are two overarching lessons to take from this chapter. Remember going to birthday parties as a kid and you got a gift bag to take home? The first lesson of this chapter is that even though the purpose of this book is to help you understand, cope with, and manage your own emotions, the "gift bag" to take with you is a greater compassion for other people's emotions. Your spouse, neighbor, best friend, and parents experience the emotional world differently than you do, and that's just as OK as the way you experience your own emotions.

The second lesson is that even though it sounds like emotional sensitivity is a long-standing, stable, inborn trait, sensitivity can indeed change. Yes, emotional sensitivity is a biologically based part of personality that is evident in infancy (Rothbart et al., 2000). If you were a baby who was easily frustrated or scared, you're probably still easily frustrated and easy to scare! However emotional sensitivity is not set in stone. Traumatic experiences (e.g., sexual violence, war, a natural disaster, watching a family member die) can alter emotional sensitivity. So can small events, like getting cuddled and snuggled, having opportunities to explore new surroundings (Fu & Depue, 2019), experiencing racism, or living in poverty (Myin-Germeys et al., 2003).

If emotional sensitivity can change because of life events, it can also be changed intentionally, whether with therapy (Sauer-Zavala et al., 2017) or with the kind of reflection and learning that are included in this book. As a therapist as well as a professor who

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teaches new therapists, I've had the privilege of watching many people change the way they deal with emotions.

Let's get started by learning about your own emotional sensitivity. But before we do that, you first need to understand what exactly emotions are.

WHAT IS AN EMOTION?

I truly wish I could provide you with a clear, precise definition of an emotion that you can remember easily and share with your family at the dinner table. However, no such simple definition exists. In fact, there is no one universally agreed-upon definition of "emotion," even by scientists who study emotion (Izard, 2010; Russell, 2012). Instead, experts think of emotions as personally relevant states that have multiple components. Let's break down exactly what that means.

First, emotions are **states**, a temporary change in the mind and body in response to a situation (Scherer, 2005). States, which shift and change over time and across situations, stand in contrast to **traits**, which are more stable characteristics. Emotions come and go; in fact, they tend to be fairly brief. They last a few seconds or a few minutes, rarely longer than a few hours (Verduyn et al., 2009).

Emotions are also personally relevant. A situation has to be interpreted as relevant, salient, and important to a person for them to have any kind of emotional response (Lazarus, 1984). This element is crucial because, again, people can't have emotions about things that don't matter to them.

Emotions have multiple components. Emotions activate parts of the brain that call out to the body to prepare for what might be needed next. Subjectively, this feels like a change in heart rate, sweaty palms, or a clenched stomach.

Emotions also include expressions—people imbue their body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone with their feelings.

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Emotions have action tendencies (Frijda, 1988), which means that emotions prompt people to do things that are consistent with a particular feeling. Happiness and joy prompt people to play, fear prompts a retreat to safety, anger prompts an attack to correct a perceived injustice, sadness prompts reflection and comfort-seeking. It is certainly possible to ignore these action tendencies and act differently than what the emotion prompts, but the action tendency is, in essence, baked in to the emotion.

Finally, emotions have thoughts attached to them, with different patterns of thoughts associated with different types of feelings. We'll dig into the thoughts associated with each emotion in later chapters, but it should make sense to you that you have different kinds of thoughts when angry ("How dare that *@#%$% cut me off in traffic!") versus when guilty ("I really shouldn't have done that. . .") versus when anxious ("What's going to happen? Is he going to be OK?").

These components together—the combination of physiological changes, expression, action tendencies, and thoughts—coalesce into what we think of as a subjective feeling (Izard, 2010; Scherer, 2005), such as "upset" or "happy" or "disappointed-but-also-grateful."

TERMS OF EMOTION

Many people use the term "feeling" as a synonym for emotion, but there are actually several different terms that scientists use to refer to emotion: **emotion**, **mood**, **feeling**, and **affect**. Feeling tends to refer to the subjective experience of an emotion, whereas emotion covers all of the components of an emotional state. Affect is an umbrella term that covers basic feelings of pleasantness (e.g., positive affect) or unpleasantness (e.g., negative affect). For the purposes of this book, we will ignore the small distinctions among feelings, emotions, and affect.

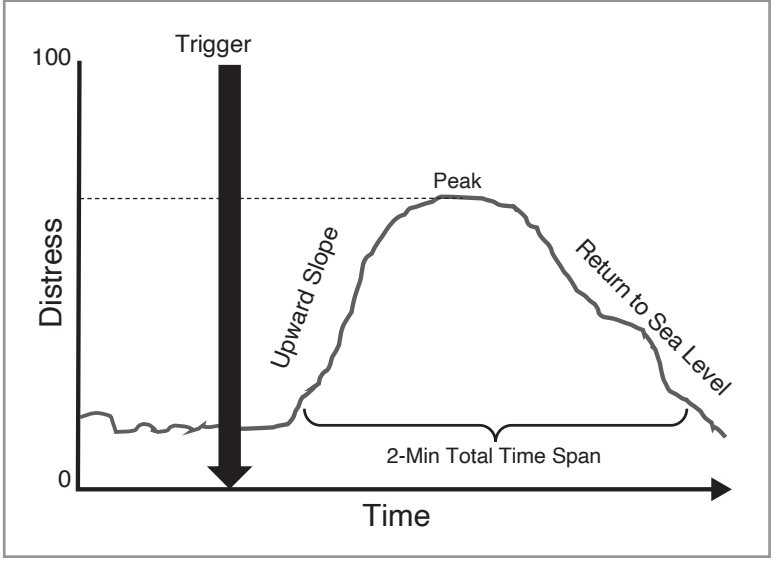
The distinction between emotion and mood, however, is important. Emotions happen in response to some kind of situation or stimuli (Gross, 1998b; Scherer, 2005), whereas moods are free-floating.

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Emotions are triggered. The trigger could be something that happens in your environment, for example, a deer running in front of your car at dusk. Triggers do not have to be big events. People feel emotions when listening to music, seeing a social media post, or having a conversation. The trigger could also be internal, like when you spontaneously remember a funny skit you saw on YouTube last week. Emotions are anchored to triggers, which start the emotion off, but each emotion also has a middle and an end. Like waves, they rise up, crest at the peak, and then come back down.

Look at the chart in Figure 1.1. This is an emotional wave chart of a former client of mine, Regina (Reggie). She was an artist, and she had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. She was also a recovering

FIGURE 1.1. Reggie's Emotional Wave Chart Depicting Her Reaction to Her Mother's Question



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alcoholic. On this particular day, which was about a year into our working together, she'd had a strong emotional response to a discussion with her mother. Before she talked to her mother, she had been feeling pretty good. This is the baseline level, and Reggie's chart is pretty typical. Most people walk around feeling mildly positive most of the time (Yik et al., 1999).

The *y*-axis in Figure 1.1 represents a simple emotional rating scale like ones I often use in therapy, on which 0 represents no distress at all and 100 indicates extreme distress, the worst it could possibly be (Tanner, 2012). Reggie's baseline was about a 15 here, which is pretty typical. In my research and my clinical practice, when I ask people to chart emotions, they usually report a low level of baseline distress (10–15 is common).

Reggie had a strong emotional response when her mother asked her when she was planning to settle down and have kids. This was a hot-button issue for Reggie, who very much wanted her boyfriend to commit to her, but she also wasn't sure if she even wanted to be married, or to have kids. Reggie experienced all the components of emotion here—she felt her face flush, her heart started racing, she felt the urge to hang up on her mother, and she started thinking what she called "unhinged" thoughts.

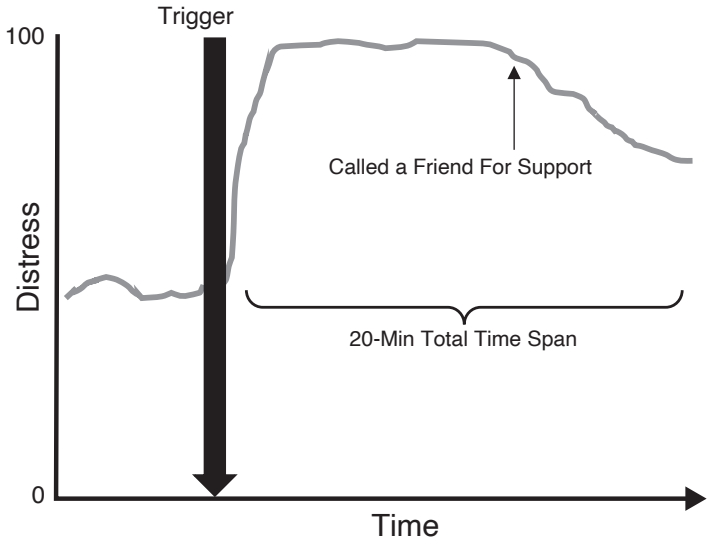
The components of emotion all coalesced quickly into a strong subjective feeling. Her mother got the sense that her question had upset Reggie, and she changed the subject, where the emotion quickly returned back to what I call "sea level."

Unlike emotions, moods are free-floating feeling states that are often not triggered by anything. A person can just be in a good mood or in a crappy mood. Mood states tend to be less intense than acute triggered emotions. Think of it this way: If emotions are waves, then moods are the tides.

Moods can make emotional waves feel stronger. Figure 1.2 is another of Reggie's charts from earlier in our therapy. She understood

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FIGURE 1.2. Reggie's Wave Chart After Fighting With Her Boyfriend When She Wanted to Drink



her feelings a lot less at the beginning of therapy, and she tended to be in bad moods more often. On this day, her mood, or her tide of distress, had started higher, at a baseline of approximately 40–45. She was feeling generally anxious about the direction of her life—not about anything specific; she just felt uneasy quite often. Then she had a fight with her boyfriend, and she really wanted to drink alcohol. Her distress level shot up to a 98. It stayed there because she kept thinking about the fight and her urge to drink until she thought to call a friend to help distract her, which is when her distress started to decrease.

Emotions can also resolve into moods. In the first situation, with Reggie's mom, if her mom hadn't recognized what was going

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on and changed the subject, Reggie might have stayed in a funk after the conversation for the next several hours, just feeling blah and off.

Sometimes when I ask therapy clients (or participants in my research studies) how long a particular emotion of theirs lasted, I get the answer "days." I understand what people mean when they say this. Maybe they felt cranky (i.e., were in a bad mood) for days on end. Or—and this second one is more likely—the person had multiple emotional waves related to the same trigger.

For example, if Reggie had replayed the conversation with her mother over and over in her mind, she would actually have experienced repeated emotions, not one long-lasting emotion. The first emotional wave was triggered by the conversation itself, and the subsequent waves were triggered by Reggie's memory of the conversation. But the emotion itself doesn't last for days. The physiological responses, action tendencies, thought patterns, and expression components that are baked in to the emotion are fleeting, not long lasting. Reggie might find herself caught in an emotional storm with multiple waves.

Why, exactly, does the distinction between moods and emotions matter? It matters because emotional sensitivity is much more about the experience of emotion than of mood.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY?

Now that we have an understanding of emotion, it's time to dig into the main topic of the chapter: **emotional sensitivity**.

Emotional sensitivity refers to (a) how quickly a person experiences an emotion in response to a trigger, (b) how intense their emotion becomes, and (c) how their long emotion lasts (Nock et al., 2008). These are the same parameters that are shown in the emotional charts from my former client Reggie (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). In these charts, the speed is indicated by the upward slope, the intensity is the

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peak, and longevity is the return to sea level. People who are highly emotionally sensitive tend to experience emotions easily and quickly (e.g., a strong upward slope), and they have strong and intense feelings (e.g., a high peak) and the emotions stick around for a while (e.g., return slowly to sea level).

To use a different metaphor, picture a hollow body filling with orange juice. How quickly does the juice level rise, how much of the body is filled, and how long would it take for the juice to drain out? People who are highly emotionally sensitive have juice faucets that turn on quickly and fill the body fast. The body is filled all the way to ear level (or higher!) with juice, the drain spout doesn't work well, and it takes quite a while for the juice to fully drain out.

In contrast, someone who is not very emotionally sensitive might have a delayed-onset emotion faucet that doesn't turn on quickly. Or the emotion juice level might rise only to their knees, and/or the drain spout empties out the juice quickly.

Emotional sensitivity specifically refers to the internal feeling of having an emotion, not whether the emotion is observable to an outside eye. However, people who are highly emotionally sensitive do tend to show their emotions more readily (Veilleux et al., 2024). If the body is too full of emotion juice, it's going to leak out somewhere, right? Like out of the eye sockets, perhaps, in the form of tears?

However, it is also possible to hide or mask feelings (Shapero et al., 2016), which some people get quite good at (Cheli & Cavalletti, 2021). Picture someone who is walking around doing things, but their insides are filled to the neck with emotion juice. Unless the person is shaking, crying, talking about their feelings, or otherwise acting on their emotions, an observer would never know just how much emotion is sloshing around inside that body.

Emotional sensitivity is about the feelings going on inside yourself, not what you do with the emotion you're feeling.

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THE SPECTRUM OF EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY

You probably know if you are emotionally sensitive. But just in case you don't, a brief measure of emotional sensitivity is included in Exhibit 1.1. Rate yourself honestly on all of these items with the scale provided and add up your responses.

Scores on this measure can range between 0 and 24. Emotional sensitivity is a spectrum or dimension. There are people with scores of 0, people with scores of 24, and people with every score in between.

EXHIBIT 1.1. The Brief Emotional Reactivity Scale

Look at each of the items below and rate them on this scale. Add up your total score.

0 Not at all like me	**1** A little like me	**2** Somewhat like me	**3** A lot like me	**4** Completely like me

_____	1.	I tend to get very emotional very easily.
_____	2.	When I feel emotional, it's hard for me to imagine feeling any other way.
_____	3.	Even the littlest things make me emotional.
_____	4.	When I am angry/upset, it takes me much longer than most people to calm down.
_____	5.	My moods are very strong and powerful.
_____	6.	I often get so upset it's hard for me to think straight.

Note. From "Development and Validation of a Brief Version of the Emotion Reactivity Scale: The B-ERS," by J. C. Veilleux, R. E. Schreiber, E. A. Warner, and K. H. Brott, 2024, *Current Psychology*, *43*, p. 12597 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-05323-4). Copyright 2024 by Springer Nature BV. Reprinted with permission.

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My graduate students and I have given this test to thousands of people, and the average score is an 8. Scores of 15 and above would be considered very emotionally sensitive (only 15% of people score in that range), and scores of 2 and below would be considered very emotionally nonsensitive.

Before you take your score on this little test as gospel, there are a few caveats to keep in mind.

First, there are emotionally sensitive people who wouldn't score highly on this test because they are aversive to the word "emotional." For example, I once worked with a client named Garrett who was quite emotionally sensitive. I could tell because whenever he got emotional in a therapy session—which was essentially every week—he would start to squint as if he were trying to stop himself from crying, and he would try to change the subject. I eventually called him out, and he vehemently denied experiencing any kind of emotion. Instead, he would say that he was "stressed." Now, "stress" is a term that conveys a kind of overwhelmed and anxious feeling. For Garrett, stress was a word that was acceptable to him as a businessman and a father, whereas "emotion" was a word he associated with weakness and hysteria. It took a considerable amount of discussion before Garrett acknowledged that stress was a kind of emotion and that, because he was sensitive to stress, maybe he was emotionally sensitive, too.

Second, perhaps you struggled to answer the statements in Exhibit 1.1 because your responses "depend on the day." This measure, and others like it, assesses trait-like tendencies. They try to determine how you usually are. But people do vary. I am definitely more emotionally sensitive when I've had less sleep, when I'm sick, or when I'm already overwhelmed. In comparison, it takes more to rile me up when I'm rested, healthy, and keeping up with all of my tasks. If you are also someone who varies in your emotional sensitivity, that's OK.

Third, there are different flavors of emotional sensitivity. The measure in Exhibit 1.1 refers to emotions but really asks about

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unpleasant feelings, not pleasant feelings. This is a test of **threat sensitivity,** sometimes called "punishment sensitivity" (Pickering & Corr, 2008; Smillie et al., 2006; Waller & Wagner, 2019), covering sensitivity to all negative (i.e., unpleasant) emotions, including anxiety (Taylor, 2003), disgust (van Overveld et al., 2006), and social rejection (Chapman et al., 2012).

It is also possible to be sensitive to pleasurable stimuli, which is called **reward sensitivity** (Fu & Depue, 2019; Torrubia et al., 2001; Waller & Wagner, 2019). People who have a higher level of reward sensitivity tend to have stronger experiences of wanting or anticipating future rewards and get more enjoyment (i.e., liking) out of pleasant activities (Berridge et al., 2009; Fu & Depue, 2019). Those who are extremely high in reward sensitivity can be vulnerable to engaging in thrill-seeking and impulsive behaviors (e.g., substance use, risky sexual behaviors; Bresin & Mekawi, 2022). Those who are very low in reward sensitivity are vulnerable to depression (Carver et al., 2008).

Think about your own sensitivity to threats and rewards. Do you get excited about upcoming events, and can you experience strong joy when things go well? If so, you likely have high reward sensitivity. Are you often fearful of what might go wrong and quick to sense when your environment might be unsafe? Then you likely have high threat sensitivity. A person could be high in both, low in both, or high in only one type of sensitivity. For example, the Princess (of *The Princess and the Pea*) seems highly threat sensitive, but we know little about her reward sensitivity. The Detective seems low in both threat and reward sensitivity.

IS THERE A CORRECT AMOUNT OF EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY?

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the Princess (who is highly emotionally sensitive) may have left her own kingdom because she was told she was too sensitive, too dramatic. Maybe the Detective has been told he is "dead inside" and "an insensitive, callous jerk."

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Perhaps you have been judged for your emotional sensitivity, too, whether high or low. Or both! These types of statements suggest that there is a correct amount of emotional sensitivity. Is that true? No, it is not! It is more common to have a moderate level of emotional sensitivity; about two-thirds of people score between 5 and 11 on the measure in Exhibit 1.1. There is also some evidence that people in the middle tend to feel more satisfied with their lives and generally feel less distress (Rush et al., 2024). However, this doesn't mean there is anything wrong with either very high or very low sensitivity. There are both pros and cons on each side of the spectrum.

High Emotional Sensitivity

There are many positives associated with high emotional sensitivity. Experts think that high emotional sensitivity can be a kind of superpower (Fiori et al., 2023), because people who are highly emotionally sensitive and learn how to manage their feelings well tend to be more emotionally intelligent. People who are highly emotionally sensitive tend to be empathic (Eman et al., 2019), because they can easily tune in to (and feel) the feelings of others. For example, my friend Katie is quite emotionally sensitive. She is someone people often turn to when they are feeling emotional because she asks questions, gets righteously mad on her friends' behalf, and can sit with her friends in their pain. People who are highly emotionally sensitive are also often passionate and deep, and their strong emotions can enhance others' experiences. I personally love going to haunted houses with Katie, because she jumps and screams whenever someone pops out at her. I tend to be more skeptical and amused by haunted houses, but going with Katie makes haunted houses scarier, which enhances the fun.

There are also clear cons to high emotional sensitivity. High threat sensitivity in particular is associated with increased vulnerability

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to a variety of mental health problems, including depression (Bylsma, Morris, & Rottenberg, 2008), anxiety (Keough et al., 2010; Macatee & Cougle, 2013; Michel et al., 2016; O'Bryan et al., 2017), panic attacks (McNally, 2002), posttraumatic stress (Taylor, 2003) and borderline personality disorder (van Zutphen et al., 2015; Wall et al., 2018). Highly emotionally sensitive people also can become overly reliant on alcohol and/or other drugs for coping (Shaver et al., 2013). Strong unpleasant feelings are hard to manage. It is harder to think clearly when experiencing a strong feeling, and strong feelings are just not fun to experience. People who are highly sensitive have to actively learn how to effectively navigate their strong feelings (Southward et al., 2021), which is tricky because there are no mandatory "How to Deal With Feelings" classes in school!

Many people who are highly sensitive consider their sensitivity more of a curse than a blessing. For example, my client Reggie often bemoaned her emotional sensitivity. She said things like, "I shouldn't take this so personally," and "I'm too touchy, too flighty." She internalized things that people told her throughout her life. Other people—her parents, her friends—had told her, both implicitly and explicitly, that her feelings were "too much." What she heard was "Your feelings are more than a normal human being is supposed to have."

Being called "sensitive" has a negative connotation. It means "You're too dramatic," or "You have a thin skin," or "You're overreacting." If you have ever been called "too sensitive," you know full well that these phrases don't feel good to hear. They convey the subtle (or perhaps not-so-subtle) message that you are not experiencing the world correctly.

Being told that your feelings are incorrect or inappropriate is called **emotional invalidation** (Zielinski et al., 2018). Unfortunately, people who are high in emotional sensitivity tend to experience quite a bit of emotional invalidation (Wall et al., 2018). Emotional

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invalidation can also turn inward: Over time, people who are frequently invalidated by others begin to self-invalidate themselves and feel less worthwhile as a person because of their emotionality (Schreiber & Veilleux, 2022).

Reggie engaged in self-invalidation. She had thoughts like "My emotions make me a weak person" and "I don't have a good enough reason to be as emotional as I am." One of the reasons why people who are highly emotionally sensitive tend to see their sensitivity as negative is because they have internalized the "too sensitive" messages given to them by others.

Low Emotional Sensitivity

What about people low in emotional sensitivity? There are pros and cons here as well. People who are not especially emotionally sensitive tend to be good in a crisis because they can continue to think logically in emergency situations. People who are not especially emotionally sensitive are also less afraid of risks, and they often are good leaders because they can make decisions easily without being swayed by others or by heightened feelings.

However, there is a sizable drawback to low emotional sensitivity. People with low emotional sensitivity can have difficulty connecting to other people. If emotional sensitivity is a kind of superpower (Fiori et al., 2023) then people with low sensitivity lack that power to know themselves and to attend to the emotional nuances of other people.

People with low emotional sensitivity are sometimes called cold-hearted, mean, or uncaring (Waller & Wagner, 2019). These kinds of phrases are also emotionally invalidating, but the message here is that this person doesn't have enough emotion. The feedback that a person with low emotional sensitivity is broken or emotionally deficient can also be internalized: People can begin to view

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themselves as unworthy of love or believe that they're somehow less of a person because of how little emotion they experience (Schreiber & Veilleux, 2022).

EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY AND SUPERTASTERS

How can you respond to people who imply that there is a correct level of emotional sensitivity? To answer this question, we will first take a bit of a tangential journey into discussing *supertasters*.

About 10 years ago, psychology conferences were all about testing people for super-tasting. My friend Katie and I went to a teaching-focused conference together in 2013. Walking down the conference hallway one day, someone asked us if we wanted to know if we were supertasters. The researcher handed us thin slips of paper about the length of my index finger, but slimmer, kind of like a litmus test strip. The researcher said we should place one side of the tip of our tongue. When I followed the instructions, it tasted to me like slightly bitter paper: not delicious, but not awful. I shrugged.

But then I watched Katie put the little super-taster paper on her tongue. She almost gagged. The researcher said, "Yep, you are a supertaster!"[1]

Supertasters have more taste buds on their tongues than the average person (Bartoshuk et al., 1994), and these taste buds are particularly attuned to bitter flavors. Supertasters tend to find most flavors more intense than nonsupertasters (J. E. Hayes & Keast, 2011). Supertasting is also a spectrum on which people vary. Some people (nontasters) can eat pretty much anything and barely taste any flavors. Most people are in the middle, and the supertasters are at the extreme high end.

[1]If you are interested in finding out if you are a supertaster, there are instructions available online. Just go to your browser of choice, type in "are you a supertaster" and follow one of the many sets of directions!

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Despite the parallels to emotional sensitivity, supertasting simply doesn't have the same negative connotations as emotional sensitivity. Both reflect a spectrum on which people vary, and both are a type of sensitivity. But no one is telling a supertaster that they have an incorrect number of taste buds—they just have more taste buds. In essence, a taste bud is a group of receptor cells that provides messages to your nose and mouth about the flavors of the food and drink you consume. Taste buds are like the mailboxes of flavor: People with more taste buds get more flavor messages than people with fewer taste buds. Supertasters are people who are good chefs and food critics because they can taste more of the flavors in a dish. For example, I am personally not someone who can taste a new dish and say, "Hm; what is that I taste in there? Is that . . . thyme?" But supertasters can often do just that.

What if we considered emotional sensitivity as a spectrum where people vary with regard to "feeling buds"? Or, to use the mail metaphor of emotional messages, people with emotional sensitivity just get more mail. Just like some people get more emails than others, and some people are on more mailing lists and get more catalogs than others, some people have more emotional messages. My friend Katie is both a supertaster and a high-sensitivity "super-emoter." I can't know what that's like, but I can certainly understand that she's getting more emotional catalogs than I am.

To be clear, I am not making any claims about what is actually happening in the brain here, because there is mixed evidence for whether people high in emotional sensitivity have more brain activation in response to emotional stimuli (van Zutphen et al., 2015). Instead, I'm saying that if we talked about emotional sensitivity the way we talk about taste, perhaps people very high or very low in emotional sensitivity would not feel as invalidated. Perhaps if we talked about how people high in emotional sensitivity are super-emoters, then having high sensitivity would actually feel more like a blessing and less like a curse.

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All of this is important because emotions are personal. We can try to put ourselves in other people's shoes and imagine what their emotions are like, but we cannot really step into someone else's body and feel things the same way they feel them. You can only be you.

I suspect that people with low emotional sensitivity sometimes look at those who are high in emotional sensitivity and think, "But you are asking for these messages. You could just ignore them. Or don't sign up for as many catalogs!" This is a form of blaming, isn't it? Yet, haven't you ever found yourself getting emails or catalogs you never signed up for? I once woke up to find that more than 400 emails had landed in my inbox overnight, from companies that got hold of my email address. My inbox was flooded with ads I hadn't asked for and didn't want. It took a long time to unsubscribe from those messages. We just can't assume that people are feeling emotional on purpose. Perhaps that's why thinking about emotion *receptors* or *buds* is less invalidating, because it feels like less of a choice.

Exhibit 1.2 provides some suggestions on what you can say the next time someone tries to invalidate your emotional sensitivity.

REFLECTING ON EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY

Truly, it is OK to be anywhere on the emotional sensitivity spectrum, whether high, or low, or anywhere in between. Whether you are someone who experiences frequent, intense, fast feelings that tend to linger, or someone who experiences infrequent, small blips of feelings that barely register, you are worthwhile. Or, if you are more like me, perhaps you have weeks during which you have only small, blip-like emotions and then phases with big, intense, long-lasting waves. That's OK, too. Your emotional sensitivity is part of who you are, but how you experience feelings is not all of who you are, and the point of this book is to help you integrate emotions into your overall sense of self in a healthy way.

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EXHIBIT 1.2. How to Respond to Emotional Invalidation

What can you say when someone implies that you are *too* sensitive, or not sensitive enough? Try these responses!

For Those High in Emotional Sensitivity:

- "Just because I'm really sensitive to emotions doesn't mean that my experiences are wrong. Would you say that someone who has a lot of taste buds tastes 'too much' flavor?"
- "We clearly differ here. I'm feeling something because I'm highly sensitive to emotional situations; maybe you're just different than me. It doesn't mean my experience is wrong."
- "When you imply that I'm dramatic or 'too' sensitive, you are discounting my reactions. Yes, they are stronger than yours. Would you tell a weightlifter they are 'too strong'?"

For Those Low in Emotional Sensitivity:

- "I'm clearly not recognizing the emotional elements in this situation, maybe because I'm lower in emotional sensitivity than you. Help me understand what is emotional for you."
- "I'm not cold or unfeeling; I just have a different sensitivity than you. It takes me longer to recognize when situations are emotional."

SUMMARY POINTS

- Emotions are brief experiences with a trigger that crest and fall like a wave, and they have multiple components (physiological responses, thoughts, action urges, expression, and subjective feelings). Emotions are different from moods, which are longer lasting and more free-floating states.
- Emotional sensitivity refers to the degree to which you experience emotions easily and intensely and how long they last.
- People vary on emotional sensitivity from very low to very high and everywhere in between.

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- There is no correct amount of emotional sensitivity, and there are pros and cons to both high and low sensitivity.
- Perhaps if we thought about emotional sensitivity the way we think about taste sensitivity (supertasters), there would be less stigma against high emotional sensitivity (super-emoters).
- Sensitivity changes with life experiences, which means you can change your level of sensitivity if you want to, or at least come to better accept the amount of sensitivity you already have.