

The HSD questionnaire

The Highly Sensitive Dog (HSD) questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert scale or scoring system to rate each of 32 statements about your dog, which span these three overlapping yet distinct categories:

1. Easily excited
2. Easily overwhelmed
3. Emotionally sensitive

For each statement, assign a score between 1 (strongly disagree; does not apply at all) and 7 (strongly agree; applies completely).

Four of the statements (items 3, 4, 9, and 30) are worded in such a way that highly sensitive dogs will score lower than average on these ones. For all other statements, 1 = very low sensitivity, and 7 = very high sensitivity.

Don't sweat these four anomalous ones. Just give every statement a score that best describes your dog, otherwise it may affect the accuracy of the final HSD score.

Add up the scores for all 32 statements — the total will be somewhere between 32 and 224 — and then divide that number by 32 to get the average, which is your dog's HSD score. It will be somewhere between 1 and 7.

In the validation study,¹ HSD scores ranged from 1.4 to 6.7, with an average ('mean') score of 4.0 for the whole group. For us science nerds, the standard deviation of the mean was 0.9, so around two-thirds of the dogs had a score between 3.1 and 4.9.

In other words, we can consider a HSD score between 3 and 5 to be average for domestic dogs. (More on that in Chapter 2 of *The Highly Sensitive Dog*, 2nd edition.)

HSD questionnaire

Give each statement a score between 1 and 7.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree; does not apply at all	disagree	somewhat disagree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree; applies completely

A. Easily excited	Score
1. My dog is easily stressed, is easily overwhelmed by situations.	
2. My dog gets nervous quickly or is often nervous.	
3. My dog is generally relaxed, can cope well with stress.	
4. My dog is emotionally stable; <i>i.e.</i> , is mostly even-tempered and not easily unnerved.	
5. My dog tends to be uncertain and/or careful.	
6. My dog startles easily.	
7. My dog has problems adapting to changes in everyday life (<i>e.g.</i> , changes in routine, visitors) and/or bigger changes in life (<i>e.g.</i> , change of partner, rearranging furniture, going on vacation, moving house).	
8. My dog tends to be mistrustful.	
9. My dog easily adapts to new environments and can relax there.	
10. My dog has trouble when people touch her or when things touch him (<i>e.g.</i> , harness, coat, wet leaves).	
11. My dog needs a sense of security.	
12. It takes a long time for my dog to calm down after an arousing event.	
13. My dog has problems when left alone outside and I move out of sight.	

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B. Easily overwhelmed	Score
14. My dog is always on alert, always has his/her “antennae up.”	
15. My dog observes everything that is happening around him/her.	
16. My dog seems to absorb everything that is happening around him/her.	
17. My dog is easily excitable, be it through positive or negative stimuli.	
18. My dog is reactive; <i>i.e.</i> , quickly perceives small stimuli and reacts quickly and/or strongly to them.	
19. My dog reacts strongly to visual stimuli.	
20. My dog has subtle perception; <i>i.e.</i> , notices a lot or almost everything.	
21. My dog tends to be restless.	
22. My dog is demanding.	
C. Emotionally sensitive	
23. My dog is sensitive.	
24. My dog reacts to small changes in voice; <i>i.e.</i> , changes in intonation and volume.	
25. My dog reacts strongly to punishment.	
26. My dog is emotional; <i>i.e.</i> , reacts strongly to positive and/or negative events.	
27. My dog reacts when we [people] argue at home.	
28. My dog is attentive.	
29. My dog notices small changes.	
30. My dog is biddable (obedient, docile, amicable).	
31. My dog seems thoughtful.	
32. My dog is intelligent.	
Total	
divide (÷) by 32	
HSD score	

Interpreting your dog's HSD score

As I mentioned, the average HSD score in the validation study was 4, and most dogs scored somewhere between 3 and 5, so highly sensitive dogs would have scores between 5 and 7.

What if your dog has a score of exactly 5? Interpretation of that number is up to you. How many of the 32 statements did you agree with in some way?

The more of those you have, particularly if the 5+ scores are spread across at least two categories (and don't include those four anomalous questions), the more likely it is that your dog is generally sensitive, rather than simply being strongly reactive to one or two things, based on his or her unique life history.

what if s/he is not my dog?

You can still use the HSD questionnaire if the dog does not belong to you, as long as you know the dog well. In the validation study, the correlation between HSD scores determined by the dog's person and separately by another person familiar with the dog, such as a close friend or family member, was good ($r = 0.65$; $P < 0.001$).¹ The two scores differed by an average of only 0.04 point — that's a fraction-of-a-fraction of a point.

what about puppies?

Dr Bräm has reported that the HSD score in puppies 9–12 weeks of age was significantly correlated with the HSD score in those same dogs at 16 months of age, so the HSD questionnaire also has predictive value in young dogs.²

References

1. Braem M, Asher L, Furrer S, *et al.* Development of the “Highly Sensitive Dog” questionnaire to evaluate the personality dimension “Sensory Processing Sensitivity” in dogs. *PLoS ONE*, 2017; 12(5): e0177616.
2. Braem M. Sensory processing sensitivity and the importance of individuality and personality in veterinary medicine. *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice*, 2024; 54: 181–193.