

## Highly Sensitive Dog questionnaire

In 2014, researchers in Switzerland and the UK conducted a study in which they adapted the criteria for high sensory-processing sensitivity in people (*Highly Sensitive Person* and *Highly Sensitive Child* questionnaires) to dogs.<sup>1</sup>

They refined the list of personality traits/behaviours associated with highly sensitive dogs (HSDs) and divided them into three overlapping yet distinct categories:

1. Easily excited (arousability, ease of excitation)
2. Easily overwhelmed (perception-reactivity, low sensory threshold)
3. Emotionally sensitive (emotionality, aesthetic sensitivity)

In the following three tables are the HSD personality traits or behaviours that made the final cut:

### Group 1. Easily excited

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 not relaxed and does not cope well with stress.
4. My dog is not emotionally stable; <i>i.e.</i> , is not even-tempered, and is 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, <i>etc.</i> ) and/or bigger changes in life ( <i>e.g.</i> , change of partner, rearranging furniture, going on holidays, moving home, <i>etc.</i> ).
8. My dog has a tendency to be mistrustful.
9. My dog does not easily adapt to new environments and has trouble relaxing there.
10. My dog has trouble when people touch her/him or when things touch her/him ( <i>e.g.</i> , harness, coat, wet leaves, <i>etc.</i> ).
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.

(This group is similar to the subtrait *Ease of Excitation* in Highly Sensitive People.)

## Group 2. Easily overwhelmed

1. My dog is always on the alert, always has her/his “antennae up.”
2. My dog observes everything that is happening around her/him.
3. My dog seems to absorb everything that is happening around her/him.
4. My dog is easily excitable, be it through positive or negative stimuli.
5. My dog is reactive; <i>i.e.</i> , quickly perceives small stimuli and reacts quickly and/or strongly to them.
6. My dog reacts strongly to visual stimuli.
7. My dog has a subtle perception; <i>i.e.</i> , notices a lot or almost everything.
8. My dog tends to be restless.
9. My dog is demanding.

(This group is similar to the subtrait *Low Sensory Threshold* in Highly Sensitive People.)

Note that several of these traits are often considered undesirable and may even be punished.

## Group 3. Emotionally sensitive

1. My dog is sensitive.
2. My dog reacts to small changes in voice; <i>i.e.</i> , changes in intonation and volume.
3. My dog reacts strongly to punishment.
4. My dog is emotional; <i>i.e.</i> , reacts strongly to positive and/or negative events.
5. My dog reacts when we (people) argue at home.
6. My dog is attentive.
7. My dog notices small changes.
8. My dog is not biddable (obedient, docile, amicable).
9. My dog seems thoughtful.
10. My dog is intelligent.

(This group is similar to the subtrait *Aesthetic Sensitivity* in Highly Sensitive People.)

Note that several of these traits are often considered desirable and are among the things that make these dogs a joy to have as companions. We must take the “bad” with the “good” in these dogs, just as we do in other people (and ourselves).

In the study, which analysed questionnaires for 3,647 dogs, the response for each trait was graded on a 7-point scale, from 1 (“does not apply at all”; a dog with normal sensitivity) to 7 (“applies completely”; a highly sensitive dog).

For each trait, the higher the dog’s score, the more likely the dog is to be highly sensitive, particularly if the dog is scored at 4 or above for that trait.<sup>2</sup>



Although the HSD questionnaire involves giving the dog a score from 1 to 7 for every one of the 32 traits, *not every trait applies equally to the same dog*. Some HSDs will score > 4 for most or all traits; others will score > 4 for only some traits.

But if your dog scores 4 or above for several of these traits, chances are you have a HSD. If so, then celebrate! They are *wonderful* dogs!!

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### Footnotes

1. Braem M, Asher L, Furrer S, *et al.* (2017) Development of the “Highly Sensitive Dog” questionnaire to evaluate the personality dimension “Sensory Processing Sensitivity” in dogs. PLoS ONE 12(5): e0177616. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177616>
2. In this study, the researchers added up the individual scores for each of the traits and then calculated an average HSD score for each dog. They then calculated the average HSD score for all 3,650-or-so dogs. The average HSD score was  $4.03 \pm 0.9$  (standard deviation). In other words, about two-thirds of the dogs had a HSD score between 3 and 5. It ranged from 1.41 (not sensitive) to 6.74 (*highly* sensitive).