

JUDITH ORLOFF, MD

THE
EMPATH'S
SURVIVAL
GUIDE

Life Strategies
for Sensitive People



sounds True
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Chapter 1

ARE YOU AN EMPATH?

Introduction to Empathy

I'm a physician with fourteen years of conventional medical training at USC and UCLA. I am also an empath. In my medical practice of over two decades, I specialize in treating highly sensitive people like myself. Though there is a spectrum of sensitivity that exists in human beings, empaths are emotional sponges who absorb both the stress and joy of the world. We feel everything, often to an extreme, and have little guard up between others and ourselves. As a result, we are often overwhelmed by excessive stimulation and are prone to exhaustion and sensory overload.

I'm so passionate about this topic both professionally and personally because I've had to develop specific strategies to manage the challenges of being an empath myself. These allow me to protect my sensitivities so I can maximize their benefits—and there are *so* many! I want to share with you how to become a balanced, empowered, and happy empath. To thrive, you must learn ways to avoid taking on the energy, symptoms, and stress of others. I also want to educate your loved ones and peers—family, coworkers, bosses, parents, and romantic partners—on how best to support and communicate with you. In this book, I will show you how to accomplish these goals.

I offer *The Empath's Survival Guide* as a resource for kindred sensitive souls to find understanding and acceptance in a world that is often coarse, heartless, and disdainful of sensitivity. In it, I challenge the status quo and create a new normal for how to view sensitivity, wherever you are on the spectrum. There is nothing “wrong” with being sensitive. In fact, you are about to discover what’s most “right” about yourself. Through this book, its companion audio program, *Essential Tools for Empaths*, and my workshops for empaths, I want to create a community of support so that you can find your tribe, be authentic, and shine. I want to support a movement of people who honor their sensitivities. Welcome to a circle of love! My message to you is one of hope and acceptance. I encourage you to embrace your gifts and manifest your full power on the empath journey.

WHAT IS AN EMPATH?

Empaths have an extremely reactive neurological system. We don't have the same filters that other people do to block out stimulation. As a consequence, we absorb into our own bodies both the positive and stressful energies around us. We are so sensitive that it's like holding something in a hand that has fifty fingers instead of five. We are truly super responders.

Research shows that high sensitivity affects approximately 20 percent of the population, though the degree of one's sensitivity can vary.¹ Empaths have often been labeled as “overly sensitive” and told to “get a thicker skin.” As children and adults, we are shamed for our sensitivities rather than supported. We may experience chronic exhaustion and want to retreat from the world because it often feels so overwhelming. But at this point in my life, I wouldn't give up being an empath for anything.

It lets me sense the secrets of the universe and know passion beyond my wildest dreams.

However, my empathic abilities haven't always felt this incredible to me.

GROWING UP AS AN EMPATH

Like many empathic children, I never fit in. In fact, I felt like an alien on earth waiting to be transported to my real home in the stars. I remember sitting in my front yard looking up at the universe and hoping that a spaceship would take me home. I was an only child, so I spent a lot of time by myself. I had no one to relate to who could understand my sensitivities. No one seemed to be like me. My parents, who were both physicians—I come from a family of twenty-five physicians—said, “Sweet-heart, toughen up and get a thicker skin,” which I didn't want or even know how to do. I couldn't go to crowded malls or parties. I'd walk in feeling fine and walk out exhausted, dizzy, anxious, or suffering from some ache or pain I didn't have before.

What I didn't know back then was that everyone has a subtle energy field surrounding their body, a subtle radiant light that penetrates and extends beyond it a distance of inches or even feet. These fields communicate information such as emotions and physical well-being or distress. When we are in crowded places, the energy fields of others overlap with ours. I picked up all of these intense sensations, but I had absolutely no idea what they were or how to interpret them. I just felt anxious and tired in crowds. And most of all, I wanted to escape.

As a teenager in Los Angeles, I got heavily involved with drugs to block out my sensitivities. (I'm not recommending this to you!) Then, with my sensitivities numbed, I could cope. I was

able to attend parties and hang out at shopping malls, just like my friends, and would feel fine. What a relief that was! In my memoir, *Second Sight*, I wrote about how I turned to drugs to shut off my intuition and empathic abilities. But after a near-tragic car accident, during which I went over a 1,500-foot cliff in Topanga Canyon at three in the morning in an Austin Mini Cooper, my parents were scared to death and sent me to a psychiatrist.

Naturally, I fought my psychiatrist the whole way. But, in fact, this angel in human form was the first person to help me

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Author Unknown

realize that to become whole I had to embrace my sensitivities, not run from them. This was the start of my healing and self-acceptance as an empath. Since I was so frightened by my childhood empathic and intuitive experiences, part of my evolution as a physician and a woman has been to learn to embrace these abilities. They are precious and deserve to

be nurtured and supported. That's why I specialize in helping empaths in my psychiatric practice and workshops.

Yes, we empaths *can* flourish! Empathy is the medicine the world needs.

THE EMPATH EXPERIENCE

Now let's explore in more detail the empath experience. See if you relate personally or have a loved one or colleague who qualifies as an empath.

First, what is the difference between ordinary empathy and being an empath? Ordinary empathy means our heart goes out to another person when they are going through a difficult period. It also means that we can be happy for others during their times of joy. As an empath, however, we actually sense other people's emotions, energy, and physical symptoms in our bodies, without the usual filters that most people have. We can experience other people's sorrow and also their joy. We are supersensitive to their tone of voice and body movements. We can hear what they don't say in words but communicate nonverbally and through silence. Empaths feel things first, *then* think, which is the opposite of how most people function in our overintellectualized society. There is no membrane that separates us from the world. This makes us very different from other people who have had their defenses up almost from the time they were born.

Empaths share some or all of the traits of what psychologist Elaine Aron calls Highly Sensitive People, or HSPs. These traits include a low threshold for stimulation, the need for alone time, sensitivity to light, sound, and smell, plus an aversion to large groups. In addition, it takes highly sensitive people longer to wind down after a busy day because their system's ability to transition from high stimulation to quiet and calm is slower. Empaths also share a highly sensitive person's love of nature and quiet environments.

Empaths, however, take the experience of the highly sensitive person further. We can sense subtle energy, which is called *shakti* or *prana* in Eastern healing traditions, and we absorb this energy into our own bodies. Highly sensitive people don't typically do that. This capacity allows us to experience the energies around us in extremely deep ways. Since everything is made of subtle energy, including emotions and physical sensations, we

energetically internalize the feelings, pain, and various physical sensations of others. We often have trouble distinguishing someone else's discomfort from our own. Also, some empaths have profound spiritual and intuitive experiences, which aren't usually associated with highly sensitive people. Some empaths are even able to communicate with animals, nature, and their inner guides. But being a highly sensitive person and an empath are not mutually exclusive: you can be both at the same time.

To determine if you are an empath, see if you relate to one or more of these types.

GENERAL TYPES OF EMPATHS

Physical Empaths. You are especially attuned to other people's physical symptoms and tend to absorb them into your body. You also can become energized by someone's sense of well-being.

Emotional Empaths. You mainly pick up other people's emotions and can become a sponge for their feelings, both happy and sad.

Intuitive Empaths. You experience extraordinary perceptions such as heightened intuition, telepathy, messages in dreams, animal and plant communication, as well as contact with the Other Side. The following includes the different types and how they function:

- **Telepathic Empaths** receive intuitive information about others in present time.

- **Precognitive Empaths** have premonitions about the future while awake or dreaming.
- **Dream Empaths** are avid dreamers and can receive intuitive information from dreams that helps others and guides them in their own lives.
- **Mediumship Empaths** can access spirits on the Other Side.
- **Plant Empaths** can feel the needs of plants and connect with their essence.
- **Earth Empaths** are attuned to changes in our planet, our solar system, and the weather.
- **Animal Empaths** can tune in to animals and communicate with them.

Empaths have diverse and beautifully nuanced sensitivities. You may be one or more of the above types. In future chapters, I'll also discuss specific kinds of physical and emotional empaths, such as food empaths (who are attuned to the energy of foods) and relationship and sexual empaths (who are attuned to their partners' and friends' moods, sensuality, and physical health). As you learn to identify your special talents, you will find they can not only enrich your life but also be used for the good of others.

STYLES OF RELATING: INTROVERTED AND EXTROVERTED EMPATHS

Physical, emotional, and intuitive empath's can have different styles of socializing and interacting with the world. Most empath's are introverted, though some are extroverted. Other empath's are a combination of both.

MANY EMPATHS DON'T
LIKE SMALL TALK.
IT EXHAUSTS THEM.

Judith Orloff, MD

Introverted empath's, like me, have a minimal tolerance for socializing and small talk. They tend to be quieter at gatherings and prefer leaving early. Often they arrive in their own cars so they don't have to feel trapped or dependent on others for a ride.

I love my close circle of friends and mostly stay away from big parties or gatherings. I also don't like small talk, and I've never learned to do it, which is common for the introverted type. I can socialize in groups for usually two to three hours before I feel overstimulated. My friends all know this about me and don't take it personally when I excuse myself early.

In contrast, extroverted empath's are more verbal and interactive when socializing and enjoy the banter with others more than introverted empath's do. They also can stay longer in social situations without getting exhausted or overstimulated.

HOW DOES SOMEONE BECOME AN EMPATH?

Many factors can contribute. Some babies enter the world with more sensitivity than others—an inborn temperament. You can actually *see* it when they come out of the womb.

They're much more responsive to light, smells, touch, movement, temperature, and sound. Also, from what I've observed with my patients and workshop participants, some sensitivity may be genetically transmitted. Highly sensitive children can come from mothers and fathers with the same traits. In addition, parenting plays a role. Childhood neglect or abuse can also affect sensitivity levels for adults. A portion of empaths I've treated have experienced early trauma, such as emotional or physical abuse, or were raised by alcoholic, depressed, or narcissistic parents. This could potentially wear down the usual healthy defenses that a child with nurturing parents develops. As a result of their upbringing, these children typically don't feel "seen" by their families, and they also feel invisible in the greater world that doesn't value sensitivity. In all cases, however, empaths haven't learned to defend against stress in the same way others have. We're different in this respect. A noxious stimulus, such as an angry person, crowds, noise, or bright light, can agitate us because our threshold for sensory overload is extremely low.

THE SCIENCE OF EMPATHY

There are a number of scientific findings explaining the empath experience that I find fascinating.

The Mirror Neuron System

Researchers have discovered a specialized group of brain cells that are responsible for compassion. These cells enable everyone to mirror emotions, to share another person's pain, fear, or joy. Because empaths are thought to have hyperresponsive mirror neurons, we deeply resonate with other people's feelings.

How does this occur? Mirror neurons are triggered by outside events. For example, when our spouse gets hurt, we feel hurt too. When our child is crying, we feel sad as well, and when our friend is happy, we also feel happy. In contrast, psychopaths, sociopaths, and narcissists are thought to have what science calls “empathy deficient disorders” (see chapter 5). This means they lack the ability to feel empathy the way other people do, which may be caused by an underactive mirror neuron system. We must beware of these people because they are incapable of unconditional love.²

Electromagnetic Fields

The second finding is based on the fact that both the brain and the heart generate electromagnetic fields. According to the HeartMath Institute, these fields transmit information about people’s thoughts and emotions. Empaths may be particularly sensitive to this input and tend to become overwhelmed by it. Similarly, we often have stronger physical and emotional responses to changes in the electromagnetic fields of the earth and the sun. Empaths know well that what happens to the earth and the sun affects our state of mind and energy.³

Emotional Contagion

The third finding that enhances our understanding of empaths is the phenomenon of emotional contagion. Research has shown that many people pick up the emotions of those around them. For instance, one crying infant will set off a wave of crying babies in a hospital ward. Or one person loudly expressing anxiety in the workplace can spread it to other workers. People commonly catch other people’s feelings in groups. A recent article in the *New York Times* stated that