

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules
Episode #175: Finding the Strength of Your Sensitive Heart

Cheri:

So Amy, what kind of insults and putdowns did you hear when you were a kid? Like, things that you tried to avoid but you kept on hearing after all?

Amy:

Well, okay, before I answer, I have to tell you that even processing this as a 52-year-old was painful. I don't know if you felt that way, but I was like, "Oh my goodness." Okay. So the least painful one is that my maiden name was Dohm, D-O-H-M. I have German heritage. Can I just say that I was really glad ...

Cheri:

Oh no...

Amy:

Well ... I hope my mother's not listening ... I was glad to get rid of my maiden name, nobody knew how to say it ... so in elementary school, I was "Amy ***dumb***".

Cheri:

I had never thought of that. Oh, I'm so sorry.

[Amy laughs]

Amy:

One that I earned with my perfectionistic self was “goody-goody”. I got called that all the time ‘cause you know I was going to be perfect and I was going to help you to be perfect, too.

Cheri:

So, so I gotta stop you on that. Did that ever make you feel? Just a little proud?

Amy:

[Pause]

Um ... no.

[Amy laughs]

Cheri:

Okay. So that was always an insult. Okay.

Amy:

I had to think about it, just to be honest. But it always made me feel on the outside, so that was hard. Um, but then the one that is still, just ... I was, like, Oh! I got teased about my turned-up nose and I couldn't even, I won't even say what the slur was. It was *really* mean.

Cheri:

Oh, that's just wrong!

Amy:

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So anyway, I know my little pug nose.

[Amy laughs]

Cheri:

You give me those names. I will take care of those people!

So, mine are just so run of the mill. My maiden name was Elder and so I got called “elderberry”. That was just the most non-creative one they could come up with. And then, one year the boys decided that instead of Elder it was “smelled her”. So I was, Cheri Smelled Her. Then I got glasses in third grade. I was one of the first among my peers to get glasses. So of course: “four eyes”. And I got called goody-two-shoes, and I had no idea what it meant. Like I always wanted to ask, “What?” ... I knew that it was not a compliment, that much I was able to pick up on, but I had no clue what it actually was.

But then I have an older brother—John is seven years older than I am—and I also have four older male cousins. And so, the biggest one was “crybaby “and being “too sensitive”. That's the big one that I was labeled, and I don't think I've outgrown it. Being a crybaby and being just too sensitive.

Amy:

Well, kids are just mean. Can we just say? They're mean to each other. But one of our listeners said something similar. She said, “I was made fun of almost my whole life because I was so sensitive. That's all I heard growing up. Stop being so sensitive. Don't be a crybaby. Be glad you have brothers who tease you.”

Cheri: What?

“I asked God to take away my sensitivity and help me not to care anymore, but he has not. He showing me how to temper my emotions, but it's taking me a long time to see a difference.”

Cheri:

Well, this is Cheri Gregory.

Amy:

And I'm Amy Carroll.

Cheri:

And you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules — the podcast that equips you to lose who you're NOT, love who you ARE, and live your ONE life well.

Amy:

Today I'm interviewing Denise J. Hughes and Cheri Gregory co-authors of *Sensitive and Strong: A Guide for Highly Sensitive Persons and Those Who Love Them*.

Denise is a teacher at heart who loves to see women's lives transformed by the Word. She's the author of *Deeper Waters: Immersed in the Life-Changing Truth of God's Word* and the general editor for the *CSB (in)courage Daily Devotional Bible*. She enjoys writing for the First 5 app by Proverbs 31 ministries, and she always finds time for peach tea, old books, and a good football game.

Through scripture and storytelling, **Cheri Gregory** delights in helping women draw closer to Jesus—the strength of every tender heart. Cheri is the co-author with Kathi Lipp of *You Don't Have to Try So Hard* and *Overwhelmed*. With Amy Carroll, she's the co-host of the Grit 'n' Grace podcast and the coauthor of *Exhale*. And she's the founder of Sensitive and Strong, the place for HSP Christian women to find community.

Amy:

Well, I'm kind of excited to be in charge of interviewing both Cheri and Denise today! Tell us how the two of you came together to write *Sensitive & Strong*.

Cheri:

Well, it feels like all my stories begin with a failed book proposal so I don't know what that's all about.

[Amy laughs]

Cheri:

But I did, in fact, have a failed proposal, seven years ago now, for a book for, highly sensitive Christian women. I had read Elaine Aron's book and, well, I read *Quiet* by Susan Cain, which lead me to Elaine Aron's book, *The Highly Sensitive Person*. And then, when I wanted to find a book from a specifically Christian worldview, there was nothing on the market. And so, I was really excited, and I was gonna wave the HSP banner. And I was going to write the first book for highly sensitive Christian women. And, it did not happen.

And so, I was discouraged and thought, "Well, maybe this isn't meant to be." And then, Denise and I ended up having lunch – and I actually tracked down the exact date – on February 10th, 2016, we sat down at the Cheesecake Factory and I had already emailed her. It was the year that my word of the year was "ask," and I had just, out of the blue, emailed her and said, "Denise, this is really weird, we don't know each other this well, but would you ever consider writing a book with me?"

And I never say things – you guys know me, I'm not one to always say, "God impressed me to do this or say this." I don't tend to lead with that, but it was what happened. And so we sat down at Cheesecake Factory, and I didn't even have a topic in mind. I had no agenda whatsoever.

Amy:

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Well, that's amazing. And, Denise, how did it come about for you? I mean once Cheri asked – did you want to write a book for HSPs? What was your reaction to that?

Denise:

You know, it's really funny, because it wasn't so much the topic grabbed me as much as the idea of collaboration excited me. And what Cheri didn't know was I had just gone to, kind of, an author gathering here in Southern California. And I had met two women who had just co-authored a book, and they were talking all about it. And I had just finished a couple of huge projects, publishing projects, where I spent so many hours in total isolation. And as I was hearing these two women talk, I thought, "Oh, that sounds really nice, to actually go through the whole process with someone!" And not a month afterward, Cheri had contacted me. And so, it was just good timing all the way around I thought.

Amy:

You two have found that women tend to have one of two very different reactions when they take the quiz and learn that they're an HSP.

How did each of you react when you found out?

Cheri:

I could not have been more thrilled. Like, I immediately texted everybody I could. I put it on Facebook. Like, if I could have bought the t-shirt and the pom-poms, I would, because for me, it explained so many things. Because I've been studying the personalities since I was 16. And yet, I felt like there was still this missing piece, like, I was a failed extrovert. I have always felt not just different but defective. And so, reading that there is this thing – and when I took Elaine Aron's quiz I scored almost a perfect score – not that there is a perfect score. It, just – so many things that had never made sense were suddenly explained, so I was thrilled.

And I thought that would be everybody's reaction. And that's the approach I took to that original book proposal. It was going to be nothing but a, "YAY! We're HSP, let's celebrate!" book. And it turned out it was really important to learn that there was another possible reaction.

Denise:

And that would be my reaction when I learned about it. I thought “Ok, that’s interesting, that explains some things, but I’m just gonna tuck that away and keep that to myself.” And the reason being, I can remember – if you remember in elementary school, every week there was a vocabulary test where you would be given a list of vocabulary words. And I can remember – I don’t know which grade it was – but I remember, specifically one week, one of the vocabulary words was the word “idiosyncrasy” and it meant “a mode of behavior that is peculiar to an individual.” And as I saw that vocal word I thought, “Oh! I have a lot of idiosyncrasies and I didn’t know there was a word for it!”

And so, I just kinda tucked that away as, “Ok, I just, you know, have to learn how to embrace my own,” – what I called “my inner weird,” you know, I just have my little idiosyncrasies. I don’t like tags in my clothes. I don’t like bright lights. I just have little things that just always felt like a quirk for me.

So when I read about sensory processing sensitivity, a lot of light bulbs went off metaphorically, and I thought, “Ok, so that explains a lot of my idiosyncrasies. That explains why scientifically and genetically I have certain responses physiologically to certain stimuli.” So it helped make some things make sense. It helped bring a “why” to my idiosyncrasies.

But, again, it wasn’t really anything I’m gonna go out there and share with the world about, primarily because of the word “sensitive.” I didn’t like the word. I did become a writer and so word choice and precision is very important to me. And as much as I have grown to really appreciate Dr. Elaine Aron’s research, I will forever maintain that she named it wrong when she called us “highly sensitive people,” because there’s just this aversion I have to even that label. I’m much more comfortable with the more scientific explanation of it and that is sensory processing sensitivity. To me that encapsulates what we’re talking about much better than the moniker HSP, highly sensitive person, because the word sensitive just has other meanings and connotations in our society that are very misleading, and so when people hear the phrase “highly sensitive person,” they’re automatically going to think highly emotional person or something else.

Amy:

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Right. And it's funny because my niece is HSP and she says – she hates it too, Denise, she hates the label, because she says, "It makes me sound like I'm precious." And I think there are some of those negative connotations that are attached to the word "sensitive" – easily offended or even some people take it that you're a narcissist like everything has to revolve around you.

So I know you've mentioned a couple already, but what are some of the common misperceptions about highly sensitive people?

Denise:

Well, right away the word "sensitive" just implies fragile. So people think highly sensitive people are highly fragile people, and that's not it at all. It's not about fragility. It's not about emotionality. It's not that a highly sensitive person is automatically a highly emotional person. There's a fine line there because HSPs do tend to feel things very deeply, but an inward emotion is different from an outward expression. And I think we need to be careful to delineate the two, just because I feel something deeply doesn't mean I'm gonna have an outward reaction or expression that someone else is gonna translate as highly emotional.

One of the strengths of being an HSP is being a processor, someone who needs time to go and process things. And that's especially true when I feel something very deeply, and I'm having an emotional response to something. I'm not gonna have an immediate reaction. I'm gonna need to go and sit with my pen and paper, and I'm gonna need to process what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling before I can even have what I would consider an authentic expression. I need to sit with it for a while and process it for a while. So, I think one of the biggest misconceptions is that highly sensitive people are considered highly emotional people and that's not necessarily accurate.

Another thing is because we are processing a lot of stimuli, more so than the average person, I like to think of it as a colander or a strainer. You know, if you're going to rinse your vegetables and the water goes through the holes in the strainer. Well, it's kind of like that inside of an HSP. We're taking in so much – our holes are bigger, 'cause we're taking in a lot more than other people. So that can lead to fatigue and needing time to rest, needing downtime to process, but that doesn't equate, "I'm just weary all the time, and I can't cope with life." And that's not what it is at all. It's really just knowing where your energy reserves are, and how to better manage your energy reserves by knowing what stimuli drains you and what stimuli recharges you and restores you.

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Amy:

Well, so you told us some of the things that HSPs are not and a couple of things that they are, that there's this depth of processing, that you receive more of kind of this flood of stimulation. Cheri, do you have anything to add to that?

Cheri:

When it comes to the overstimulation – this is what, this is what so many people, I think, fail to recognize, and when they take the quiz it's a huge "Aha!" for them – just go through the five senses: loud sounds. I startle so easily if there's loud sounds. In fact, my adult kids – they know if they're gonna run the blender, they're like "Mom, there's about to be a loud sound!" I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that, because otherwise if they're blending a smoothie and there's ice in that blender and they hit puree, I hit the ceiling! And it's not something I mean to do, but there's the adrenaline, and there's the cortisol... and, of course, I come back down. It didn't traumatize me or anything, but it is so nice when they say, "Hey, mom, loud sound alert!" and – no problem!

So, sounds, smells – I happen to be especially scent-sensitive. And so, people who love me know to go fragrance-free. I mean my laundry detergent and all that kind of stuff is fragrance-free. When I taught junior high and the girls were experimenting with cheap perfume and the boys were wearing AXE, I mean, it was – it was a nightmare. I would get headaches, and it was nobody's fault, but I wish I had known. I wish I had known back then, 'cause I didn't, that this is just how I'm wired.

For some people, it's bright lights. I think Denise and I are alike in that we have multiple pairs of sunglasses everywhere just because we just know. We know that we're probably going to need them. Denise mentioned cutting out the label from her clothes, so textures, textures are really irritating or overstimulating for some; and then for some people, strong flavors.

This episode is airing during the holiday season, so you can imagine that as much as we might want to join the fun and the celebrations, the holiday season is a time where we ramp up all of these things that fill our senses. There's more lights. I won't speak for anybody else, but for me, the Christmas decorations on people's lawns that do the strobe kind of stuff. Those aren't my

favorite. Or if there are the LED lights, I like the – it's just much easier for me to really appreciate the warmer, soft glow of lights that don't do so many things.

And then the other thing I'll mention is that HSPs tend to be very empathetic. We pick up on others' emotions and we can often sense what they're feeling and name it before they can. So sometimes we'll pick up on something in a conversation and circle back around a few days later because it keeps kind of niggling in our mind and we wanna check in on that person because everybody else thought they were ok and we have this sense in our gut that maybe they're not.

So those are just a couple other things that are defining characteristics.

Amy:

Well, what you described, we can tell right away is the holidays – our sensory overload, even for average people, who are not HSP. So, what are some of the practical tips that you can give our HSP listeners for navigating holiday season?

Denise, if you'll share, first, from the introvert perspective. And then, Cheri, you can follow with the extrovert perspective.

Denise:

Well, just as Cheri was saying about, the holiday seasons just come with extra lights, extra sounds, extra scents and smells. So, all of that brings with it extra sensory stimuli. But in addition to that, the holidays also usually bring large family gatherings. And that is a whole other layer of stimulation, when you're in someone's house and lots of people are gathered there, and then there are just the family dynamics that are common for all of us, but an HSP can be taking in a lot more in those kinds of settings, and that can be draining. But knowing how to prepare for such an event, by having some downtime and some quiet time before you go, or even while you're there, giving yourself permission to go find a quiet room to sit for a few minutes and read, or do something that's restorative for you before rejoining the large family get-together. So just knowing how to proactively prepare for those kinds of large group gatherings.

For me personally, November and December are not the most taxing months of the year, because I live in a part of California where November/December is when the 100-degree weather has finally subsided. And it's finally – I mean, we have Christmas and it's 70 degrees outside here in Southern California. We will never have a white Christmas, and that's something I lament.

But, I can see how people living in other parts of the country, where the weather is so harsh, and you have extreme winter conditions, on top of all holidays – whereas for me, the summer months are by far the most taxing, because I'm having to deal with just, literally, this constant barrage of 100-degree weather all of the time, day after day, for a stretch of several weeks long. For me, the summer months are the most taxing. But I know for a lot of HSPs, November and December can be more taxing because of where they live and their own constellation of sensitivities.

Cheri:

From a more extroverted perspective, for me, it was the sense that I had to prove I was an extrovert, especially during the holidays that I couldn't say no to any social occasion. That I loved people, and I do energize when I'm around them, and so, it used to be my goal to fill my calendar, you know, like, two or three parties or events a day. If I was invited, I said yes to it. And Denise wrote such a beautiful chapter in *Sensitive & Strong* specifically about self-care, and the term she used – which I think is so much better – is “stewardship.” Being a wise steward of our bodies. Being a wise steward of our time.

And so, about 70% of HSPs are introverts and about 30% are extroverts – a lot of people assume that they're all introverts and that's not actually the case. But for those of us who are extroverted to realize, yes, we can still be out with the people, but we might want to go ahead and leave a little bit sooner rather than later. To recognize before that switch flips. For me, as an extrovert, I can tell when my switch has flipped. Like, I can be out in the mall, and suddenly, I have to go home. Or I can be at a party, and suddenly I'm done.

And so, to be able to pay attention to our bodies and listen to the signals, and leave before we hit the wall, or – and this is something else Denise and I have talked about – sometimes, we, as HSPs, can go into an intentional overstimulation mode, where we're like, “Yep! I'm just gonna

go for broke tonight. I am going to absolutely stay until 1:00 AM. I'm gonna talk to all the people, and I'm gonna do it consciously and intentionally knowing that this is gonna have an impact. And then I'm gonna take care of it afterward."

And Denise – I know this is a little off-topic, but talk about your love of football games. 'Cause I just think it's so fascinating.

Denise:

Well, I grew up in a family with no sisters and two older brothers, and I grew up in Northern California where it was about a 3.5-hour drive to San Francisco. And so, my dad and my brothers used to go see San Francisco 49er football games! And when I was old enough, and I started to go with them to these games – these games meant a 3.5-hour drive there, and a 3.5-hour drive back, and I loved the football games. They were so fun, they – and if you think about 70,000 people sitting in a circle or an oval, screaming, stomping their feet on the ground, which makes your seat vibrate. I mean, a football game is nothing if not loud and colorful and overstimulating, and yet, I loved going to professional football games, partly because it was just something my family did. And that's when I felt really connected to my family. But I also realized – much later on as an adult – that that 3.5-hour drive there and the long drive back gave me quiet time in the car that kind of was a buffer on both ends of such an overstimulating event. So I can enjoy the game, 'cause I know I'm gonna get some quiet time in the long drive home.

Amy:

That's great. And it's a way for people to think about how to frame their events too. "How do I get a little bit of rest before and after?"

Give us some advice for people who are not HSPs. How do we support and love our friends and family who are HSPs during the holidays?

Cheri:

I think the greatest gift that anyone can give me as an HSP is just acknowledgement. Just to ask. "Is there something that you need today to make this work for you?" When I learned about being an HSP, I started taking more responsibility for myself. And so, when people ask me and say "Are you gonna be ok? Are you gonna be able to make this long drive? Do we need to break it up into two days?" Or whatever. I like to rise to the occasion. I just like knowing that they know. And so, that would be the first thing for me.

And then the other thing that I think – and this is gonna be good for anybody, whether they're HSP or not – is to go through your calendar for November and December and make sure there's the occasional empty square. It's not good for any of us, it's not good stewardship for any of us, to just be going, going, going. And so, to make some intentional choices about where those transitional times, where that downtime is gonna be.

And sometimes that downtime needs to be a longer block, but sometimes it can just be five or ten minutes. And so, the other thing I would say is if I disappear, or if I say, "I'll be back in ten minutes." Don't make your loved one feel weird or strange, or "Where are you going? Don't you love us? What's wrong with you?" You know, if they need to go find a back bedroom or go hide in the bathroom or if it's a restaurant hide in a bathroom stall for five minutes just for a little decompression time, just to normalize that. Huge gift. Huge gift.

Denise:

Yeah, I loved what Cheri said earlier about people who love me know and fill in the blank. Like, people who love me, they know what my particular idiosyncrasies might be, so my husband knows when we are going to an outdoor event. We're gonna find shade. And I don't even have to ask. He starts looking for the shade to set us up in the shade. He just knows that about me. And that's just one of the ways he shows care for me.

And so, how can non-HSPs, friends and family support and HSP loved one? I think just knowing what, if you really know someone really well, and you know what particular idiosyncrasies, how can you help accommodate that? But at the same time, I don't have this expectation that everybody at the family gathering is going to accommodate me. And I think it's important that we don't go into a family gathering with that expectation, 'cause that just leads to unmet expectations. My husband is my partner. When we walk in he knows how to care for me, but I don't expect everybody in the room to rearrange the family gathering just for me. It's really – being an HSP is about knowing yourself, knowing what recharges you, knowing what drains you, and how can I go into a situation and be the best version of myself. I think that's important.

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Amy:

That's powerful.

So what closing words of encouragement would you like to leave with our listeners today?

Cheri, you want to start off?

Cheri:

Even if you're not an HSP, you know and love someone who is, because 1 out of every 5 people, so that's about roughly 20% of the population, is an HSP. So they could use your help to write a new story for the word "sensitive." That's what we're trying to do with the book, *Sensitive & Strong*, is write a new story for the word "sensitive." And then, if you are an HSP, remember this: God created you sensitive, and in Christ, you are always strong.

Denise: And I would add that as much as I have loved studying personality frameworks, being an introvert does not define me. My identity is not in being an introvert. My identity is not found in what my love language is. My identity is not found in what my top five strengths are. My identity is not even found in being an HSP. My identity is found in Christ alone. And I know He formed me and He shaped me as I am, but my identity, first and foremost, is always going to be found in Him.

Cheri:

We hope you've enjoyed episode 175 of Grit and Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules.

Amy:

Go on over to our website, GritNGraceGirls.com/episode175

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There you'll find some great bonuses like our transcript, this week's Digging Deeper Devotional, a printable resource that helps you to apply what you've learned in this episode, and links to the SensitiveAndStrongBook.com book website.

Cheri:

We'll be continuing this conversation over in our Facebook group. If you aren't yet a member, search Facebook for Grit N Grace Girls and you'll find us

Amy:

Next week, when we'll be processing together what we're learning about being sensitive *and* strong.

Cheri:

For today. Grow your grit. Embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do. Go right on ahead and...

Amy: 'n' Cheri:
BREAK IT!