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What bothers you? What do others say or do that upsets you? On what topics are you most easily offended? Maybe it takes a lot for someone to offend you, but at some point, on some topic, everyone becomes offended. Everyone dislikes and gives a *thumbs down* to something. Upsetting offenses range from minor grammatical mistakes and erroneous pronoun usage such as people saying *mine* instead of *ours* to more egregious acts such as bullying and physical violence.

People's level of sensitivity to offensive words and behaviors comes from a variety of sources including their innate nature, nurturing during youth, and other life experiences. Through people's development they establish a personality trait referred to as *neuroticism* – the degree to which they experience negative emotions. It characterizes people's tendency to be either calm and composed or easily annoyed and angered.

Is having a high degree of neuroticism good or bad? As with most personality attributes, it depends. Having a tendency to be negative can be good in some contexts. It provides an early warning sign for eminent danger. It balances out others' unrealistic optimism. It challenges conventional thinking and provides the proverbial *devil's advocate* perspective needed when *group think* goes unabated. But negativity in other situations creates frustration and conflict. It generates warnings of threats that aren't real. It inhibits a positive can-do environment and fosters negative attitudes in others.

People's negativity is perhaps most noticeable in the level of political correctness they expect from others. Some require conversations to be as sterile as an operating room to be acceptable. They have a list of offensive terms so extensive that people are afraid to talk to them. People are afraid of being falsely accused of holding perspectives they don't have.

Of course, there should be little tolerance for people who say and do things that intentionally harm others. There should be little tolerance for people who are flagrantly insensitive. Neither should people be unconditionally pardoned for using brutal honesty as an excuse for being rude and disrespectful. However, being overly sensitive can create as much conflict and harm as being overly insensitive.

Contemporary psychology finds that people's sensitivity, and in particular, how easily they feel criticized, to be a leading determinate of mental disorders including depression and substance abuse. The lower people's threshold for and tolerance of others' insensitivity, the more stressed and negative they become. Counterintuitively to sensitive people, the more easily they become upset, the more upset they will be and the more stress they will have. Being overly sensitive and quick to anger causes defensiveness, aggression, revengefulness, conflict, and stress. Studies find that these negative emotions can be so stressful that it reduces people's longevity. Studies also find overly sensitive people are so strongly opinionated that they become closeminded leading to a lack of learning, development, and creativity.



## What's Worse - Being Overly Sensitive or Insensitive?

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If you or someone in your sphere of influence is overly negative or sensitive, consider adopting these seven principles:

1. **Discern** - Don't feel the need to speak up on every matter. Save your energy for the truly important issues worth standing up for. If you decide to speak up, have the patience to think before you speak.
2. **Admire** – Look for what is working as much as, or preferably more than, what isn't working. Identify, appreciate, and acknowledge what is good in addition to what isn't.
3. **Understand** – Ask questions, listen attentively, and seek to know people's motives before judging them. Understand why people think, speak, and act the way they do.
4. **Empathize** – Nurture a spirit of cooperation by relating to people's motives before offering a contrary opinion. Don't validate their thoughts or actions, but relate to their feelings and desires.
5. **Talk** – Share your opinions and feelings without aggression. Maintain diplomacy. Avoid condescending remarks that belittle people and make them feel attacked.
6. **Resolve** – Once a mistake or concern is known, turn your attention to solving rather than dwelling on it. Put your energy into helping create a better future rather than ruminating on and complaining about the past.
7. **Forgive** – Everyone falls short. Once people realize their mistakes, forgive them. Harboring ill will does nothing to help them improve. Nor does it help you forget and move on.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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