



Sensitivity in the lion's den

by Rick Belden

During the past 25 years, I've had the good fortune to be a participant in a number of men's groups. Some were better than others, but in every case I gained something important and useful from the experience. Among other things, a men's group can provide a great opportunity for a man to explore and express the more sensitive side of his nature and his experience, which may be embodied in a number of ways: vulnerability, tenderness, trust, compassion, grief, deep sharing, deep listening, awareness of self and others, perceptiveness, insight, etc.

For [a man like me who is also a Highly Sensitive Person \(HSP\)](#), a men's group can provide a unique opportunity, perhaps his first, to experiment with the possibility that he can be open with his sensitivity with other men in a safe way. Seeing other men in a group not only accepted and supported, but admired and respected, for owning and expressing aspects of their sensitivity can be deeply healing and even life-changing for a Highly Sensitive Man (HSM) who's been hiding a significant part of himself for fear of being seen as unmanly. But there can also be challenges for an HSM even in a group of men with whom he feels safe, and part of his growth will depend on how he faces those challenges when they occur.

I was once a member of a peer-facilitated men's group. As there was no "authority figure" (counselor or therapist) present, it was up to each of us, as individual group members, to maintain the safety of the group. We began every group meeting by giving each member the opportunity to check in and share whatever was up for him at that time. During one such check-in, I told everyone about an all-day monster headache (I believe I called it a "rhino killer") that had almost convinced me not to come to group that evening. I wasn't fishing for sympathy or praise; I simply wanted everyone to know that I wasn't feeling well, that I wasn't at my best, and that it had been a bit of a struggle to join them that day.

Much to my surprise, one of the other group members responded by telling me to “stop whining and just get on with things.” I was stunned and very upset to receive such a powerfully critical reaction in what was supposed to be a safe environment where we could all be open and honest about whatever we had going on. I felt profoundly shamed and invalidated. Shocked, rattled, and unsure of what I should do, I kept my feelings to myself (as HSPs are often prone to do immediately after what feels like a surprise attack) and completed the meeting as best I could.

Our group met bi-weekly, so I had a full two weeks to process my experience and review my options. I thought about leaving the group, as it no longer felt like the safe environment I’d thought it was, but decided to attend one more meeting and talk about what happened previously as the first order of business. The meeting location for the group rotated from member to member each time, and as it happened, the next meeting was being held in the home of the fellow who’d told me to “stop whining.”

I felt like I was walking into the lion’s den that evening, but I kept my commitment to myself. I spoke honestly about what I’d experienced, defined limits in terms of what I found helpful and unhelpful in terms of feedback, and expressed my expectations for how I was to be treated in the group. The result was a very productive discussion about what had happened during our last meeting, how we all might have handled the situation differently, and what I needed from everyone to continue my participation. Everyone, including the “lion”, expressed appreciation to me for my courage in showing up and stating my position and my needs so clearly. And they all said they’d learned something from the way I did it.

My point in sharing this story is that it’s important for those of us who are HSPs (male or female) to use the skills we have to assert ourselves and our needs when similar challenging opportunities present themselves to us, as they inevitably will in a world that often feels so hostile and unfriendly to our very natures. We need to do this not only for our own sakes, but also for those who may benefit from seeing the strength and clarity that we sensitive folks often hide, even from ourselves. Taking action on our own behalf will not always yield the outcome we desire, but we can only get stronger with practice.

Originally posted at [poetry, dreams, and the body](#) on Feb 18 2013.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).