When little John was about a year old, his parents noticed very thin fibers protruding through his pores. After another few months the fibers had extended themselves. They began to form curls. The condition alarmed his parents, so they took little John to a doctor. The physician, after examining him carefully, called in several specialists. They, in turn, summoned their colleagues and, after conferring for several hours, announced: Little John was unique in medical history—his ganglia were growing outside his skin.

Since there was no record of this having happened before, it was not clear what the ultimate effects of such a condition would be, and since little John was otherwise
in excellent health, it was decided to do nothing for a while but observe.

Of course, one immediate problem was little John's rapidly developing, extreme sensitivity to everything and everyone around him. The doctors alerted his parents, warning them that they must be supersensitive to his every move and touch. Being very sensitive people anyway, they readily agreed.

As little John grew, so did his ganglia, until they trailed about him as he walked. While it was not a pretty sight, surprisingly it turned out to have some advantages.

He learned from the very beginning, for example, first from his ever-concerned parents and then from others, that he could always count on someone watching out for him. Indeed, he learned early in life that anyone who came into his orbit would always pay attention to his every move for fear of hurting him. He found that he could plough a path through any group of friends by just walking toward them. People would always retreat at his advance for fear of "stepping on his feelings." When he engaged in sports, or when he just wanted to be first in line, all he had to do was start in the direction he chose, and his approach itself proved to be an "open sesame."

Sometimes he encountered people who had not been forewarned about his condition, and then he had to point it out as early in their relationship as possible. Once they understood, however, they never tried to get in his way.

All of this is not to say that individuals never felt resentment toward little John. Some of his classmates, and one of his brothers in particular, who were most competitive with him for certain goals, felt handicapped by his handicap, but they never spoke it aloud. All manage to quiet their resentment with self-reprimands about their own insensitivity.

And so it went. Little John graduated high school (having done fewer homework assignments than any other child who ever attended), and he obtained a secure job, though less qualified than most of those seeking the same position.

One day he met a woman whom he liked. Being extremely shy and not having enough confidence or experience to refute her own poor image of herself, she was thrilled at the advances of this very attentive, if somewhat strange, creature. She treated him with the utmost deference, and her pity soon became love. Everywhere they went she watched out for him. In time, the guiding principle of her life became, "How can I help this man avoid pain?"

But after they had been married a while, she began to tire. Still she tried, for this poor man could not help himself. But it became increasingly difficult for her to be constantly mindful of his needs. She decided to confess her increasing insensitivity to her friends. She mentioned it to her family, to her minister, to her doctor. She sought professional help. All comforted her and sympathized but could offer little practical advice, and so they urged her to be more patient. She tried again to shape her existence to his needs. Then the headaches started. Then the little tic in her eye. Soon she found she was losing weight. Colitis further restricted her freedom, and it was not long before her thoughts were bordering on suicide. She dared not tell little John, of course, for fear of hurting him. Why, if he knew that all of this was due to his condition, he would be inconsolable.

One day, as she was walking home, she chanced
upon a mother cat giving suck to her newborn kittens. As they scrambled over one another in their thirst, the mother carefully guided each one to its turn, stretching out a firm but gentle paw as she lay contentedly on her side. Then little John’s wife noticed that one of the kittens had been born lame; its leg had not been fully formed, and it had more difficulty maneuvering than the others. Strangely, it was also the most aggressive. While the other kittens, when satisfied, went off to sleep, this one kept coming back to wiggle its way in front of thirsty others. Each time, however, the mother cat pushed it away, at first gently, and then with successively harder whacks.

Little John’s wife watched the poor kitty and the “inhuman” mother. But when she returned home, upon finding her husband reading in a room, she planted herself in the doorway and began to stare. A little while later, little John, desiring to enter another room, marched straight for the doorway that framed his wife. She did not budge. Closer he came, closer, never thinking actually to ask her to move (after all, he had never had to ask anyone to get out of his way before). Suddenly, he stopped, confused. What should he do? First he assumed his most wounded look. Then he tried one that was more winsome and boyish, but his wife was like a rock. In desperation, he finally spoke. “Move. You know I cannot squeeze by.” Nothing. “What’s the matter with you?” he yelled. “What are you trying to do to me? This is like a trap.” Then she did begin to move, not aside, but rather directly toward him. He retreated. She continued on. He moved back faster, but still on she came. Soon he was cornered.

“Have you lost your mind?” he said incredulously. “Careful there, you almost hurt me,” he said pa-
A Nervous Condition

MORAL: Beware the insensitivities of the sensitive.

1. If the wife had come to you for advice, how would you have given her “insensitivity training?”

2. How would you get this man to take responsibility for his own feelings?

3. How can the wife continue to keep her husband’s ganglia sheathed?

4. Was their marriage a good match?

5. Why are people able to control others by being easily hurt?

6. When is adaptation to another healthy and when is it destructive?

7. In what ways can being concerned for oneself be freeing for another?

8. In what way can it be empathetic to put another in pain?

9. How does challenge convey confidence?

10. How might the approach that the wife finally took be translated into running organizations? A whole country?