

Shrink Rap Radio #213, The Highly Sensitive Person
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Ted Zeff
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Erika Steeves)

Excerpt: *One thing that’s so important is because so many sensitive people growing up were told they were bad and wrong, it’s easy to get a victim consciousness. I mean, I’ll never forget this lady who called me and she was so upset. She was living in New York City and the people upstairs from her were making so much noise it was giving her a nervous breakdown. She quit her job, and I said, “Why don’t you move?” And she said, “Oh, I can’t move. It’s a rent-control building and I like this neighborhood.” So I see that sometimes that tendency to be a victim because they were told they were bad and flawed. It’s so important for me, in my role as a counselor, to really empower the highly sensitive person.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Ted Zeff. Ted Zeff, PhD. is the author of two books on the highly sensitive person: *The Highly Sensitive Person Survival Guide* and a workbook titled, *The Highly Sensitive Person’s Companion*. He’s currently working on a third book, *The Highly Sensitive Boy: Helping your Son Become a Strong, Confident, Emotionally-Healthy Man*. Dr. Zeff received his doctorate in psychology in 1981 from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California. He currently teaches workshops on coping techniques for highly sensitive people. He’s taught stress reduction and insomnia management for over fifteen years at various hospitals and medical groups as well.

Dr. Zeff has recently been giving many radio interviews throughout the United States and Canada at such stations as NPR affiliate KCLU in Santa Barbara, California, Cable Talk CRN with Jack Roberts in Los Angeles, WTMD in Baltimore, and WZLX in Boston. In addition, he’s been interviewed on the popular TV show Good Morning Bay Area. Now here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Ted Zeff, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Ted Zeff: Thank you, David.

Dr. Dave: One of my listeners, Sean Davis, wrote me to say you would make an excellent guest for the show. So thanks to Sean for the suggestion and to you for accepting.

Dr. Zeff: It’s my pleasure.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. So to get started, tell us a bit about your personal background and academic training.

Dr. Zeff: I actually have a PhD in Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco.

Dr. Dave: Oh yes. I know them.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. And I've been both a private therapist and teaching classes on highly sensitive people as well as teaching classes on healing insomnia for Kaiser and Hill Physicians Medical Group.

Dr. Dave: Ok, and where does the idea of the highly sensitive person come from? Is that your own or did you get that from somewhere else?

Dr. Zeff: Elaine Aron, who's an excellent research psychologist, coined the term "highly sensitive person" back in 1996. What's interesting is when she first came up with the idea and she wrote the book, everyone said, "No one would be interested in buying a book about highly sensitive people!" Subsequently, her first book has sold over a million copies worldwide and it's a top bestseller. It was an idea waiting to happen because basically 20% of the population of the entire world has a finely tuned nervous system. And so you're looking in America about 50 million Americans have it. People with a finely tuned nervous system have trouble screening out stimuli, can be easily overwhelmed by noise, crowds, and time pressure. The highly sensitive person, or what we call HSP, tends to be very sensitive to pain, the effect of caffeine, violent movies. Highly sensitive people are made extremely uncomfortable by bright lights, strong smells, and changes in their lives.

This whole topic has taken off. I've written two books on this subject: *The Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide* and *The Highly Sensitive Person's Companion*. I'd say about a third or more of the people who are purchasing my books and inquiring from my website are from countries all over the world other than the United States. So it's really a worldwide movement at this time.

Dr. Dave: Well that's fascinating. Now, I'm curious about what drew you to this particular specialization and of course I'm speculating that maybe you're a highly sensitive person. Is that what drew you to this?

Dr. Zeff: You hit the nail on the head. When I read Elaine Aron's book, I'd been actually working my whole life on ways to deal with high sensitivity. My doctoral dissertation was about methods to reduce type A behavior. I'd been working on ways on stress reductions and when I took the little test Elaine Aron has to determine whether one is highly sensitive, I answered Yes to every one of the questions, realizing that in effect this is what I was.

Probably one of the most important things of this new terminology "highly sensitive person" is I get so many emails from people all over the world saying, "I thought there was something wrong with me my whole life and now I realize I just have a finely tuned nervous system." I myself felt that when I finally realized that, wait a minute, I have a finely tuned nervous system and I need to do things a little differently than other people. It's a neutral trait but in this society that favors aggressive, pushy behavior and kind of shames people for being sensitive or shy. Although 30% of HSP's are extroverts, it makes it very difficult for the highly sensitive person to feel like they're really fitting in with society. For example, a highly sensitive person would tend to want to do quieter things at

home rather than go out to loud concerts or movies on a Saturday night. It could be a challenge sometimes, but we have to learn that people with a sensitive nervous system have to learn ways to compromise and adopt with an 80% society that is not highly sensitive.

Dr. Dave: I was interested in your remark about, I think you said 30% being extroverts, because you had written highly sensitive people have trouble screening out stimuli and can be easily overwhelmed by noise, crowds, and time pressure; they can be extremely uncomfortable by bright lights, strong smells, changes in their lives, and that made me wonder how much overlap there might be with Jung's concept of introverts, because in a lot of ways it sounds like introversion.

Dr. Zeff: It's similar but it's not identical, although Carl Jung himself was a highly sensitive person. You'll see a lot of psychologists, a lot of people in the helping professions. Historically, the highly sensitive person was a priestly advisor in olden times. The highly sensitive people are intuitive, have very good counseling skills, but you can't categorize them all one way. As a matter of fact, you could be a highly sensitive person and only have two or three out of the say twenty factors of being highly sensitive, but you have it very strongly. Let's say crowds don't bother you but loud noise drives you crazy. Then you could still say you're a highly sensitive person. There's also a thing called the high sensation seekers, so you could be a highly sensitive person and also be a high sensation seeker, which means you like exploration, travelling, and that's a little bit of a challenge because people who are highly sensitive they like the excitement of new adventures, but then they still need that downtime, that quiet away from stimuli.

Dr. Dave: That's interesting. Now I'm sure some of my listeners are probably wondering if they fall into this category because most of us can probably identify with one or two pieces of what you've said. How can someone tell if he or she is one?

Dr. Zeff: Well, basically some of the major things: There's a little test you can take that's in my book *The Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide*. It's on the website and in Elaine Aron's book, but more importantly than that, you just notice are you the kind of person that noise bothers. Like some people can hear a siren go by and they don't even here it, and another person will jump out of their seat. So you're the person who tends to notice things like that. Do you have a really hard time with job pressure? Do you have a boss who stands over you and gets you more nervous? Or someone who can just tune it out? "Oh, it doesn't bother me if somebody up above demands certain pressures on me." So people who are just more sensitive. People who don't like movies that are violent, you know, they have a hard time.

I just am completing a book now about the highly sensitive male. And virtually all the men said when they were growing up as boys they would avoid fighting, for example. So you're seeing these characteristics of people who tend to be more advisors, artists, counselors, people in the helping professions. You're not going to see a lot of highly sensitive people in the army or CEO of corporations.

Dr. Dave: Well I personally can identify with a lot what you've said, so I think I might fall into that category. You know you mentioned the sensitive nervous system, so

I'm wondering with all the new instrumentation that's available for studying the brain, etc., has there been any research on neural correlates of the sorts of things that you're speaking about?

Dr. Zeff: Well interestingly, Michael Gurian, who's written many books about boys and emotional health, he's talking about – it's just starting, it's new in terms of the research, but he's saying that for example if a mother during pregnancy had a lot of stress, it might have affected the testosterone levels and he hypothesizes that maybe some people who have a sensitive nervous system—males with sensitive nervous systems—might have a lower testosterone level, but we don't know yet. It's mostly at this point we're seeing it as a neurological, finely tuned nervous system. It's a neurological trait. It's a little different where you just feel things deeper on every level.

Dr. Dave: Ok. Now I think...

Dr. Zeff: Emotions too, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, emotions too. Now you've sort of touched on this but you might have more to say, about the role that culture plays in how highly sensitive people feel about themselves and how they cope with the pressures of everyday life.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, it's interesting. There was a study done and they showed that the highly sensitive children in North America were the least liked and least respected, but in the same study they went to China and they found highly sensitive children in China were the most popular and most respected. What's interesting is in the animal kingdom, for example a horse that could sense dangers, more sensitive to the environment and tuning in to the danger, the other horses will follow the lead. That's probably why in tsunami there are virtually no animals killed because the highly sensitive animal (it's also in the animal kingdom you're getting 20%) are the ones that sense danger and moved away and people followed them.

One man from Thailand I interviewed who is highly sensitive said that in his country he felt that he was more respected for being highly sensitive, and he was elected president of his class every year because the other students say his as someone – almost like a shaman in historic terms, like Native American culture. So certain cultures and in India also, the people I interviewed from India, they said, well, people weren't, especially the boys, weren't abused or teased or laughed at for being sensitive. They're actually in some ways respected more because they were more attuned with subtle forces, being aware of dangers in the environment, subtleties. But yet in North America, especially in the United States, it's considered, especially writing this book about males, is that that for a male to be highly sensitive, they are humiliated for it. You're supposed to be tough and like Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger and be strong, silent, crush people, as opposed to being sensitive.

It's interesting. I was in Denmark working with some therapists with highly sensitive people last fall and I interviewed many men from Denmark. In Denmark, although it's somewhat similar to North America in some ways, the people in some northern European countries regard sensitivity in a higher esteem. For example, the highly sensitive men

from Denmark might not have felt like they fit in as well, but nobody was really humiliated like they were in North America. So it really depends on the country you're living in, in terms of how people are going to grow up and perceive themselves and their self-esteem.

Dr. Dave: That's really fascinating that there are those cross-cultural differences. Though the difference between China and the U.S., that's not too surprising, you know, given what we know about these two cultures. I think this is pretty closely related, and maybe we're talking about the U.S. here; what effect does being a highly sensitive person have on someone's social life? What are some tips on maintaining a thriving but not over-stimulating social life if you are a highly sensitive person?

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. Very good question. First of all, I just wanted to go back to the cross-cultural part, which is interesting. My theory is that the reason why it's different let's say in Europe as opposed to America is the people who emigrated, who came to the United States, were the non-HSP adventurers who wanted to fight the wilderness or fight the Native Americans, and some of the sensitive people stayed in Europe writing musical sonatas or painting artistic masterpieces, and I think that's why historically the American culture is so individualistic and praises the individual and insensitive values.

Dr. Dave: That's an interesting theory. It makes sense.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, it seems that way. So to go back to your question, "How do you deal with a society that is 80% non-HSP?" So the key is going to be the compromise. Now I always often say in my book that you don't want to become an insensitive sensitive person. It's important to learn how to compromise with the culture. But yet – so for example, if you're in a relationship with a non-HSP and you're a highly sensitive person, so for example let's say your mate wants to go to movies and restaurants and you like to be more inward and do quiet things, so you compromise. You go to maybe a matinee or rent a DVD, or you can get food to go or go in at an early time where it's not so crowded. So you always have to learn how to compromise. Or let's say you have a partner who wants to go rock climbing. You might go with the partner, but you can sit and read a book while they're climbing the rock. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Dr. Zeff: So you just have to, you know, the key really is learning how to compromise. And actually I was just working on this chapter about highly sensitive boys in sports. I think it's important for all children growing up, but especially the boys, because I'm working on the male highly sensitive now, to try and participate as much as they can with other boys in sports (because they would tend to just avoid any kind of interaction). So I think pushing yourself to the point where you feel safe and you feel comfortable, but not to be in situations where you're absolutely overwhelmed. So it's a fine line of setting your limits where you have some stimulation but not getting over stimulated.

Dr. Dave: Now are there certain problems that highly sensitive people are more likely to face in the workplace? And are there solutions that work at work?

Dr. Zeff: Good question again about work. It's a big one because almost all the people in my research a few years ago for my first book said that stress at the workplace was very challenging for them. And I have a whole chapter about how to thrive in your work situation. It's important to – one thing I want to say, first of all, is that highly sensitive people make excellent employees. They tend to be very loyal, very conscientious, very responsible. They notice subtleties in the environment that other people wouldn't notice to make positive changes in the work environment. However, especially for some of these unfortunate people who have to share a large office, and I was just actually talking recently to a highly sensitive woman who works in one of these huge offices with these little cubicles and you can hear all the noise from the other people. And it's very hard, so I would recommend for her to ask her boss, could she do some of the work at home? Can she come earlier or stay later? Can she wear a headset to tune out the other noise? So you have to really be creative.

Also, I had one situation with a highly sensitive person who had an office mate who was very loud talking on the phone, playing music, and the first thing I said – because you kind of have to get a rapport with the person – so you talk to the person about some neutral subject and you tell the person—you don't blame them—but you say, “I happen to have this finely tuned nervous system and I'm wondering if we can compromise? If you can maybe play your music during the lunch hour when I'm gone? Or talk on the phone louder at a different time?” You're always having to work in your work environment to create an environment that works for you. And if it can't work, I really recommend looking into other areas that are more copasetic for a highly sensitive person.

So for example, there was a man who was working as a financial planner now, but he was working for a large company, like a Wall Street type company, and it was just too stimulating. Now he has his own quiet office facing San Francisco Bay and he does most of his work by actually email and he's just by himself in the office and he's very relaxed. So self-employment is an excellent option for highly sensitive people because you can control the external factors in your work situation.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that makes sense to me as I'm sitting here in my home office doing this work (laughs)...

Dr. Zeff: Isn't it great? (laughs)

Dr. Dave: ...and it works for me.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, it's very hard for highly sensitive people to be in a work environment that's very noisy, over stimulating, with rigid bosses who don't understand what it's like to be a highly sensitive person.

Dr. Dave: You know that's probably one of the reasons why I ended up in academia. I think I'm one of those people who don't like a boss staring over my shoulder all the time. The academic environment, there's quite a bit of personal freedom in terms of how you structure your time when you're in the classroom. Unless you're being evaluated, you know, nobody is looking over your shoulder.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, it's very hard for sensitive people who have a tough boss who's always judging them. They'll react so much deeper than a lot of other people who just kind of say "whatever" and it doesn't bother them.

Dr. Dave: Of course that makes it hard, too, being a teacher or being a therapist, and again I'm talking about myself, of the students judging me, the client judging me, am I doing a good enough job? That's been an issue for me.

Dr. Zeff: It's kind of a mixed bag. A highly sensitive person makes usually the good student because they're so conscientious and responsible and creative, but yet then they'll agonize over their homework, for example. "Are all the answers correct?" and checking themselves. It's a mixed bag. There's no doubt about it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well speaking of mixed bags, in some ways it's an affliction but in other ways there's a positive side, isn't there?

Dr. Zeff: I don't like to use the word affliction. It's more in terms of, again, go back to the cultural differences. If you're living in a culture that's close to the earth where they glorified the shaman or the herbalist, it's considered a great attribute. Or even in a lot of these Asian countries, the sensitivity is much more respected. Or in Northern Europe. A lot of it just depends on the society you're living in.

But I wouldn't say it's an affliction. I would just say that it's a neutral trait that's affected by how society perceives us. So it's so important that highly sensitive children get the support they need for their special talents, for the special trait so they can develop it. And for adults, to surround yourself with people who support your sensitivity: Be friends with other sensitive people; don't try to compete with people who are non-highly sensitive and very aggressive and unemotional, because the sensitive person tends to be more emotional, sensitive to their environment and other people. So it's so important that highly sensitive people get the support they need and really not interact in a situation that's going to make them feel like there's something wrong with them, that they're flawed just because they're not like the majority—aggressive, over stimulated—in society.

Dr. Dave: What you're saying reminds me of some of the stuff that's coming out of positive psychology in which they're saying – the advice really coming out of positive psychology is to learn to recognize your strengths and focus on your strengths and develop your strengths.

Dr. Zeff: Exactly. The problem of course is of course growing up, most people who are sensitive want to fit in, and so they'll repress their innate abilities to fit in with the culture. So it's a question of fitting in but also recognizing and appreciating all the positive qualities of being a highly sensitive person. Actually I'd like to even mention – I mentioned how sensitive people tend to be very conscientious and loyal, and when highly sensitive people aren't under stress they can deeply appreciate beauty, art, and music more than most people. Sensitive people are intuitive and tend to have spiritual experiences. They notice danger. I actually make a joke sometimes saying, "Why don't highly sensitive people ever get lime disease? Because they'll notice the tick crawling on

their skin before a non-HSP.” They know about safety issues; they’re making the positive changes in the environment. All the things about the noise control and stopping smoking and pollution are usually at the forefront of the highly sensitive people who don’t like that. Very compassionate, kind, understanding, and I think the highly sensitive person – I just finished writing this little chapter mentioning how when you look at all the spiritual giants, from the Buddha, Christ, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, they all had those wonderful, same qualities in common as a highly sensitive person about being compassionate, about really caring about the environment, about having deep, spiritual experiences. So it’s a question of really putting the highly sensitive person within the right context.

Dr. Dave: Ok. You’ve mentioned cross-cultural differences. What about gender differences?

Dr. Zeff: You know, it’s interesting. When Elaine Aron did her research, she interviewed men and women and she found that across the board it was 20% highly sensitive for males and females. However, despite all the pressure for men not to cry, for example, was the one area where she found highly sensitive women said they cried more than highly sensitive men. So you always have to take into effect the cultural bias about men. Basically men have to repress their emotions except for anger. One research study I recently read showed that infant boys are actually more emotionally reactive than infant girls, but by the time boys reach four or five they’ve learned to repress every emotion except for anger. “Big boys don’t cry. What are you, a sissy, showing your feelings?” A lot of it is the societal influence that makes even the difference between highly sensitive males and females a little different.

Dr. Dave: Yes. I think it was Jed Diamond who I interviewed about men. You probably know his work. I’m forgetting what the term is. It’s irritable male syndrome.

Dr. Zeff: (laughs) That’s very good.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, it really is. He’s written a very compelling book. He’s kind of oriented his work around that syndrome, just as you’ve oriented your work around “highly sensitive person.” And so he marshals a lot of evidence really that, as men, we’re quite sensitive (laughs) and what we really need from women to a large extent is soothing. That our nervous systems in fact are highly reactive, and that’s why we tend to clam up when our woman gets on our case and so on. And often we way over react with anger or go into this sort of clam shell silence.

Dr. Zeff: Well that’s what is accepted. But even little boys who are wild, if a kindergarten teacher hugs them when they come in, the boys enjoy it just as much as the little girls.

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Dr. Zeff: But males are just taught from a young age to never ever to show your emotion, although they have the same needs as females in terms of love and feeling connected.

Dr. Dave: Well in fact I believe you've recently been doing some research with males and I think you did a survey of thirty sensitive men from five countries? What did you find?

Dr. Zeff: As I previously mentioned, the men from Denmark, Thailand, and India, had a much better time growing up as a sensitive male than those from North America. I found that, interestingly, the men who said they played sports in school had a higher self-esteem than the men who didn't play sports, and I think the reason for that is they felt like they fit in with the other boys...

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Dr. Zeff: ... growing up and they didn't feel like they were flawed and they weren't sitting alone at home. The boys who had the most supportive parents also had the higher self-esteem in North America. But even the boys who grew up, even the males who said they grew up in Asia or Europe who didn't have such peer pressure or negativity even by the parents, still felt there was something wrong with them and they were flawed in some way because they were different. So this is why it's important to really extol the special qualities of sensitive people when they are growing up.

Dr. Dave: Yes. So I gather there are misunderstandings about sensitive men, and you kind of alluded to that. Do you have any tips for parents or teachers in regard to dealing with sensitive boys in particular?

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. It's so important that the parents treat the highly sensitive children, especially the boys, differently in terms of let's say discipline. A lot of parents will scream at their kids and really get upset. The sensitive child takes that in so deeply and they want to please and they're very conscientious and responsible. So the parent doesn't have to over-react. Yeah, with some boys who are non highly sensitive, they might really have to come on strong for the kids to get it, but the sensitive people, sensitive children, usually don't have to come on so strong.

It's really important that the teachers in school know if a child is highly sensitive because a lot of times the teacher will say, "Oh, the child is not learning." Well, they might be learning in a different way. They're checking out the environment; they have a little more difficulty dealing with being in a large classroom with all the stimulation, so teachers have to be aware of the sensitive child in terms of not expecting necessarily the same things of the non highly sensitive children do. They react slower, they pause to reflect more rather than jumping to the answer immediately. So if a child thinks about an answer and the teacher wants an answer right away, instead of condemning the child, understanding that certain children need more time because they tend to pause and reflect on the questions.

I think it's important – parents have to really let the child know that society, especially in North America, doesn't extol the virtues of sensitivity, but let the child know that they're special in a lot of ways, and really encourage them to develop their talents, maybe in art or reading or whatever it is, their gentleness. A lot of kids even from an early age find that they're good at counseling people. So the parents have to just really really not – so

many of these men told me, “Oh my god, my parents humiliated me. They said, ‘What are you, a baby? What are you, spoiled?’” and really shamed the children who were highly sensitive. That leaves a scar for life sometimes. It can create post-traumatic stress disorder on children growing up, highly sensitive children who have had parents, peers, and teachers who have humiliated them. It could be really traumatic.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now on the positive side of the ledger, you say that highly sensitive people make better lovers. You want to say something about that?

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. What’s interesting is because the highly sensitive – let’s say in this case, there were men I interviewed, they found first of all that they were better mates and a better catch than non highly sensitive men because they were more emotional, they liked to work out issues with their spouse, they were more in tune with the needs of their spouse. So a lot of the men said yeah, they felt they were – they actually made better lovers because they weren’t just focused on themselves, but were focused on what would pleasure their lover. So in effect, the fact that they are so more attuned to subtleties in the environment and concerned about other people, makes them overall better – it could make them, I don’t want to say it definitely make them – but it could make a highly sensitive person a better marriage partner and a better lover.

Dr. Dave: Ok, now you not only write books but you’re also a psychotherapist, and I assume because of your high profile that you are probably treating a number of highly sensitive people in your practice. If so, how would you describe your overall treatment approach?

Dr. Zeff: It’s very individualized. Because remember one of the important things is each highly sensitive person is different, and it just popped into my mind how I was shocked in my survey of highly sensitive men that 2 out of the 30 men said when they were growing up, and even now, they loved hunting. I said, “Huh?! Hunting?” And then one said, “Yeah, I loved using a BB gun and hunting with a bore rifle.” I didn’t even know what a bore rifle is, but he said he liked that. I was just sort of surprised, but these two men were raised more in a rural area and even though most highly sensitive men are gentle and don’t like violence and are concerned about the humane treatment of animals, it just goes to show you that each person is different.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Zeff: So the fact that – I have this little subheading going “A Paradox: the Highly Sensitive Male Hunter.” You know? (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah. (laughs)

Dr. Zeff: So it goes to show you. So when anyone comes to me, I do actually phone consultation all over the country. Actually I’ve got people from other countries calling in for counseling, phone counseling. Each person is unique and different. One thing that’s so important is, because so many sensitive people growing up were told they were bad and wrong, it’s easy to get a victim consciousness. I mean I’ll never forget this lady who called me and she was so upset. She was living in New York City and the people upstairs from her were making so much noise it was giving her a nervous breakdown. She quit her

job. And I said, “Why don’t you move?” And she said, “Oh, I just can’t move. It’s a rent-control building and I like this neighborhood.” So I see that sometimes, that tendency to be a victim because they were told they were bad and flawed. It’s so important for me, in my role as a counselor, to really empower the highly sensitive person and try to get the – you know, the neurons keep firing the same way and it’s like, “Oh, I’m not fitting in. I’m not good,” and opening up new pathways so they can see some of these beautiful characteristics of being a sensitive person and start getting a new way of being in the world. Because a lot of people do who are highly sensitive and who have been abused as children get very stuck in a victim mentality, which doesn’t work.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now what about diet and exercise, Do they play a role in the work that you do with these people?

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, it’s so important for highly sensitive people to do regular exercise. I’d almost say it’s more important for highly sensitive people than non highly sensitive people because highly sensitive people are going around all day absorbing energy. Some people say – one guy said, “I feel like a sponge just absorbing everybody’s negative energy.” So if they’re exercising, it helps release any negative energy they’ve taken in from other people during the day. You know if you do regular exercises, the endorphins get released, you feel more joy, less stress, you’ll feel healthier and stronger. That counteracts being a victim when you have a strong, healthy body. So it’s so important for the highly sensitive person to do at least 20 minutes of aerobic exercise every day. I’m a firm believer. Actually many studies have shown that people who did aerobic exercise got out of their depression just as much as people who were taken anti-depressants.

Dr. Dave: Right. What about diet? Do you have any recommendations in that regard?

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. Because sensitive people might be more sensitive to the effects of, I mentioned earlier, caffeine, preservatives like MSG in the food, it’s really good to try to eat food that isn’t treated with pesticides, organic fruits and vegetables, wholegrain, and protein, and really stay away from a lot of the processed foods because there’s a tendency for some sensitive people to react deeper and they tend to get physically ill sometimes just from eating a lot of the processed foods with a lot the junk in it. These are not so much scientific terms (laughs)...

Dr. Dave: Right. (laughs)

Dr. Zeff: ...but basically, you know, red dye #34 and all these preservatives and additives that sensitive people react to in processed foods.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Zeff: So eating organic fruits and vegetables, wholegrain, especially in the winter it’s good for people with a sensitive nervous system to eat heavy, warm, moist foods—that’s very grounding. If sensitive people eat very light foods like sprouts and lettuce, like a big lettuce or sprout salad for lunch, they’re not going to feel as grounded as if you had a casserole or a lasagna or some heavy soups. That’s also important.

Dr. Dave: Interesting. Now I noticed on your website and also you mentioned this in your intro to this interview that you also offer services to people suffering from insomnia. Does that tend to go along with being HSP or is this a separate specialty?

Dr. Zeff: It is very very related. I myself had insomnia for many years until I created this program that really works. Many sensitive people – because what we’re looking at is people with a sensitive nervous system. If you have a sensitive nervous system, there’s a tendency that you’re going to have sleep problems. Not all of them. I asked this question in my first book and this last one, but a large number, I would say maybe half the people, have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. If you get someone who can tune things out, who don’t feel emotions deeply, who aren’t over stimulated, they aren’t going to have sleep problems. I remember Deepak Chopra one saying, I don’t know if you’re familiar with *Ayurveda*?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, the healing science that comes from India. And Deepak Chopra, the famous holistic doctor from India, said he’s a *Kapha* type, which is someone who can tune things out. He could have three cups of coffee before bed and fall right to sleep. If you’re a *Vata*, which is basically what a highly sensitive person is, someone with a very more nervous nature. If they have a cup of coffee in the morning, it could be enough to keep them awake at night.

Dr. Dave: Yes, my wife is an interesting paradoxical person who can drink coffee throughout the day and at night and then go to sleep. But that’s very unusual.

Dr. Zeff: It is, but I wouldn’t say in *Ayurveda* that she’s the *Vata* type, the nervous spin type, or she wouldn’t be most likely a highly sensitive person because most highly sensitive people couldn’t do that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. So what’s your approach to dealing with insomnia? You seem to mention that you’ve developed a special approach that works.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah. In a nutshell, it’s good to go to bed earlier. About an hour before you go to sleep, you turn off all the media. Actually in the evening it’s best not to be on the Internet...

Dr. Dave: Oh yes...

Dr. Zeff: ...watching stimulating TV shows or DVDs. It’s good to do calming things like reading quiet, spiritually uplifting books. One thing that sounds very not that important, but when I teach the classes one of the main things that helps get rid of insomnia: Never ever look at a clock after 8 or 9 p.m because you need a hook, and what happens is people who look at the clock – “Oh, it’s almost midnight! I got to hurry up and get to bed because I have to get up early.” And it’s just, you’re setting yourself up – “Oh, it’s 2 a.m and I still haven’t got to sleep yet. Oh, I woke up at 3 a.m. Oh my God.” So if you’re thinking of the time, then you’re using your mind to hook yourself in to getting more nervous and more anxious and you’re not going to fall asleep as long as the muscles are tense. I have actually a wonderful CD on my website. It’s called, “The

Highly Sensitive Person Healing CD,” where I have a deep relaxation where I guide people into relaxing all the muscles in their body and doing deep abdominal breathing.

Dr. Dave: Sure. I’ll put a link to your website in the show notes so that people will be able to go there. And actually, why don’t you just mention it right now.

Dr. Zeff: Yeah, its HSP, which stands for “highly sensitive person,” – hspsurvival.com.

Dr. Dave: Ok, that’s wonderful. Well, as we wrap up is there anything else that you’d like to say?

Dr. Zeff: I guess I’d like to say that if 20% of the population has a finely tuned nervous system, that’s millions and millions and millions of people all over the world. So it’s so important to realize that the highly sensitive person is not alone, but they have millions and millions of brothers and sisters everywhere. There are chat lines for people; there are books to read; there’s actually meet-up groups now in a lot of cities. So I really encourage the highly sensitive person to get support. We have an HSP gathering twice a year in the United States. There was one in October in Colorado. There was one in the Bay area in June. And in Europe they have these gatherings also. So there are other people out there to help you. There are counselors who specialize in working with highly sensitive people. Please feel free to email me if you have any questions about being a highly sensitive person.

Dr. Dave: Ok, well that’s wonderful news for 20% of the people that are listening right now. Dr. Ted Zeff, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Zeff: Oh, it’s my pleasure, Dave.

Dr. Dave: I hope you enjoyed this interview with Dr. Ted Zeff. Well of course this gets me to wondering whether I fall into the category of the highly sensitive person. I’m certainly willing to accept all the positive descriptors related to intelligence and creativity and so on. There are a couple of other things that make me think I might be a member of the club. My mother used to tell the story that I was such a sensitive baby that she had to put me in a closet to get me to sleep because I was so reactive to the outside stimuli of passing cars and perhaps light as well. Unfortunately, my mother is no longer around for me to probe her more closely on what might sound like border line abusive behavior. I do know that I’m still very sensitive to both noise and light. I sleep at night with my head sandwiched between two pillows. Not only does this help to block out any outside stimulation, but I suspect it also provides a bit of a sense of protection and isolation, like a bear hibernating in his cave. I also find that I tire quickly in social gatherings these days and need to retreat to my own space. So even though I’ve never thought of myself before as a highly sensitive person, I think the moniker might fit. How about for you?