

Finding the 'wild woman' within

Local psychologist helps women cope with past hurts to live in the present

By CARRIE JAMES

She grew up in a home where she wasn't allowed to talk about her feelings or really create a healthy bond.

By her late teens, she was already in an unhealthy marriage, married to the first man who asked her, and couldn't see or find her way out. But with the help of a therapist, Duffy Spencer was able to leave that union in her early 20s, work her way through college and now she helps other women through their pain.

"My passion in life is to help women because I think women suffer in so many ways," said Spencer, who now holds a Ph.D. in social psychology. "Certainly, it's not that men don't suffer, but I understand the suffering of women better.

"I had a very difficult childhood," Spencer said. "I am a wounded healer -- from my own wounds I made a life where I help people with their wounds because I understand them and can help them."

Spencer, who has lived in Westbury for the past 25 years, spends most of her time helping women throughout Long Island, including many in East Meadow, to explore their primary relationships and uncover hidden emotions and feelings. She developed Women In Network Giving Support (WINGS), which she uses for her support groups in particular to show women that they can form healthy relationships and feel supported.

By helping these women uncover and face their feelings, Spencer said she is helping them move forward both personally and in their interpersonal relationships.

She not only holds weekly group and private counseling sessions, but also leads three-day retreats throughout the year to help women find themselves again and spend an entire day feeling support from others, without judgment. Her next retreat is on Feb. 8 and is entitled "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues! Finding the Wild Woman Within."

The basis of Spencer's study and current treatment methods rely on a belief that people in general don't get enough nurturing when they are young and don't form healthy bonds with others.

"It's called normative abuse, the abuse is the norm in society, so much so that people don't see it, and as they grow older, they wonder how they got so sad," Spencer explained. She tries to help women explore these issues and the additions to material things that usually resulted from inadequate nurturing. "The most common addiction for females is striving for perfection and people pleasing. But it can be as simple as watching television."

It's a crutch that replaces bonds with people, Spencer explained. When women don't get the nurturing they need, they turn to an inanimate substitute.

"People need to have healthy attachments to a larger other (such as a parent), and when they haven't had that opportunity as an infant, they will move into unhealthy ways to attach," she said.

During her studies in social psychology, Spencer studied under psychotherapist Dr. John Lee and learned to practice PEER (Primary Emotional Energy Recovery), which is a treatment plan that helps patients discover their hidden emotions and finally confront them.

Spencer counsels patients out of her Westbury home, and uses her home as a tool to help her patients feel at ease and safe. Even her living room, where she also counsels her patients, was set up as a warm, inviting place that makes her patients feel more open to expression. She refers to it as her "womb."

Whether it's a private session, a weekly group session or even one of the retreats, she tries to help bring out the emotions that women have suppressed inside.



Courtesy of Dr. Duffy Spencer

DR. DUFFY SPENCER spends most of her time as a social psychologist counseling women about how to explore their core relationship issues and how to become a healthier people emotionally.

"We don't allow people to discharge their hurt feelings in this society," Spencer said, adding that the emotions aren't released in some cases because expressing anger or hurt could hurt other people. "We disallow women to express their hurt, especially in the form of anger. It then implodes, because women aren't allowed to explode, which leads to depression."

Spencer's main goal is to find that emotion, before it implodes, and help women release it. She even has tools hidden throughout her living room to help patients confront the feelings. Pillows represent people who have hurt them, and patients get to express their feelings verbally. A towel turns into a tool for women to release their anger by twisting it. And, if there is significant anger, Spencer will pull out the tennis racket and show the patients how to hit

the pillow; this helps them release their frustration also.

Women of all ages and backgrounds come to Spencer for help. Most often they come because of relationship problems.

"They are involved in some kind of toxic relationship and are in the state of self-loathing because they are blaming themselves for the problems," Spencer said. By helping them discover and deal with past relationship problems early in life, and the feelings that they didn't have nurtured, Spencer said the patients are better able to cope with the present.

Many of her patients leave her sessions or retreats feeling more empowered, more in control of their lives.

"It's priceless to get things off your chest so you can

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really live," said Florence, a patient of Spencer, who only wanted to use her first name. "This is so rich. It's like finding a buried treasure. Ninety-nine percent of people don't experience this, even those who've had therapy."

Many of her patients equate WINGS and Spencer's treatment as a way of finding the true self and cleaning up past hurts.

An example Spencer gave related to a woman who was "triggered" (or angered) by a little incident such as a boss asking her to hire someone she thought was incompetent. Spencer asks the patient, what does this make you think of from your past? In this case, the patient said it reminded her of her feelings toward her step-mother, who belittled and embarrassed her. Spencer helped the woman address these issues from the past, so that in the end the patient could more calmly handle the situation in the present.

Spencer also hosts two radio shows, gives speeches for corporations and large groups, and continues to do private, couple and group counseling in her home. She is starting a new month of weekly group sessions on Feb. 6, and her retreat, Feb. 9 is open to anyone interested. Those who want to know more can call her office at (516) 334-8985.