

A sanctuary of stress relief

Psychologist Sunny Massad offers UnTherapy to her clients

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Located at the back of Kalihi Valley, surrounded by a stream, birds and trees, the two-acre Hawai'i Wellness Institute is a sanctuary of stress relief for "ordinary people with ordinary problems." Motivated in part by the ineffectiveness of mental illness treatment that her own family received, psychologist Sunny Massad created the HWI in 1999, offering classes and workshops, which employ her own trademark model UnTherapy. In the comfortable, quiet living room of the Hawai'i Wellness Retreat House, she talked to the *Weekly* about her approach.

Why would someone with a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in psychology not become a clinical psychologist?

While I was studying psychology, I realized I wasn't interested in working with people who had emotional or mental diseases. That's really what they're teaching: How to handle people after they've already been diagnosed with something. I thought, what about the rest of us that just have ordinary problems and need a boost in the right direction? What kind of counseling is there for that?

So you developed your own UnTherapy model?

I had gone to hypnosis school before I went to a school of psychology, and in hypnosis school the first question of counseling is "what do you want?" We don't need to know why we have these problems. We know why. If you start with "what do you want" and what needs to change in your attitudes and your beliefs and your behavior in order to get what you want, all of a sudden there's hope. And your life changes right away.

It's a style of counseling specifically designed for healthy, well functioning people.

Tell us a little about the institute.

I always say you drive through the Philippines, Fiji and Samoa to get here. And then you come to the very end of the road, and there's a Shangri La. You can't even remember what you drove through. Because Kalihi is known for trash on the side of the road. It's not a place you would think of for wellness. There's a wife battering in this neighborhood and renegade roosters. People will actually say to me "It's too far to drive all the way to Kalihi Valley." You know, it's like 12 minutes. But values change when they're surrounded by nature. We can have a class out on the lanai in the summer when it's a beautiful day, and if you're learning how to meditate and you're not listening to traffic but you're listening to birds, you're much more peaceful.

Is there any other place on the island like it?

You can go to a hotel or a day spa, but what I



A place of peace: Sunny Massad (right) offers UnTherapy at the Hawai'i Wellness Institute.

find in those environments is that, particularly with women, they go to these places to come out looking changed. Now they have very pretty fingernails and toenails and better skin and nicer hair, but they haven't dealt with their issues. People go running out, and they know they need something. What they need is sleep. What they need is quality relationships and friends that last. They need art day and time to get their to-do list done. Women often go to self-help books. They underline it, put stars in the margin. They highlight. They understand the book exactly, but reading a self-help book won't change your behavior because the very act of reading is a left-brain activity. It's the logical, analytical part of your brain, so you can understand it. But the part of your mind that's in charge of your behavior is your right hemisphere, the creative, artistic, imaginative side. Unless it's an experience, you won't change, you'll only understand, which is why traditional therapy for self-actualized people is ineffective.

What are some of the problems of ordinary people?

I feel people are suffering from what I call techno stress. It's a specific stress related to technology. Since we got computers and call waiting

and voice mail, everything has sped up. What we believe that we can get done in the course of one day is unrealistic. What happens is we carry our old story with us, and we expect that that's the way it should be. But everything is changed. The conclusion is we're feeling inadequate. Our self-esteem goes down. So I am attempting to show people that they're not inadequate and the very thing they're attempting to do to keep up with their lives is sabotaging the quality of their life.

And to know that there are other people going through the same thing?

Yeah. The entire island (laughs). We're all in it. The whole country. Starbucks has made millions of dollars because the idea is "I need to speed up, I can't keep up, I have to read all this stuff on my desk, I have to produce more, and I have to do my laundry and pay the bills and put the kids through school and it better be private school..." It goes on and on. Knowing how you would prefer to be and how you're going to handle your feelings in order to be able to get to where you want to be is going to be your emancipation.

For a list of upcoming courses available at the Hawai'i Wellness Institute, visit www.hawaii-wellnessinstitute.org. 848-5544