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Periwinkle Health: Therapist focuses on positives, ‘feeling better tomorrow’

By [Steve Coulter](#)

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Allison Spitzer outside of her Periwinkle-colored home on Lake Avenue. — Steve Coulter photo

Depression, ADHD, anxiety — Allison Spitzer sees these conditions as a tangled ball of yarn that needs to be slowly unraveled.

That's what the Trumbull resident and therapist has been working towards through her business Periwinkle Health, which provides solutions to individuals and families from Fairfield and New Haven, over the last four decades.

Spitzer, who has master's and bachelor's degrees from Northwestern, takes a holistic approach to the emotional well-being and authentic communication within families using an integrated approach some in the field label as cognitive behavioral therapy. With a background in human communications and expressive art therapy, Spitzer believes her work is more rooted in life skills coaching than anything else.

"I see a ton of kids who have no time to meander in conversation with their parents — it only happens in the car on the way to soccer practice, and that's not enough," she said. "What they need more of is unstructured downtime within the family — a period that's relaxing, where there's a transfer of value, hobbies, and interests from parents to kids."

Of course, the starting point to this whole process is slowing life down. And Spitzer understands that's the greatest challenge every family faces in the 21st Century.

"One thing I tell all my clients is to have a set time for a weekly family meeting where each member can have time to talk about what's going in their life — I call it a weekly update," said Spitzer, who served as a consultant to 33 Connecticut school districts beginning in 1978 teaching life skills and problem solving through creative activity.

"Most family conversations these days tend to deal with logistics — who's driving where, what time is pickup — and that's not very good," she added. "The conversation needs to be, 'How are you doing? Why are you feeling that way?' Families need to enjoy time together, and enjoy talking to one another — not stress over logistical details."

In order to resolve problems with kids, Spitzer firmly believes parents need to be proactive in their approach.

"A parent's job is not to be a scheduler," she said. "Families need to eat together — that's more important than any after-school activity."

If parents want to give their kids structure and discipline, Spitzer suggests scheduling time for a child to do a chore — with either their mom or dad.

"It's of no use if they aren't talking while doing it," she said. "So a daughter cooking dinner with her mother or a son helping his dad in the yard or in the tool shed — they're watching you, but there's a conversation that's going on that makes the experience truly interactive."

Keeping things in motion

Spitzer was trained in analytical psychology, expressive arts, and somatic therapy with Dr. Leland H. Roloff, and interned at Park Forest Hospital in Illinois in dance therapy, so she's a big believer in getting her clients to express themselves through a variety of artistic outlets.

"It's a fantastic tool," she said. "Arts can be used as a vehicle to get someone towards self-understanding and transformation."

Spitzer began work in creative arts therapy in 1974, and later taught at Milton Academy, in Milton, Mass., and served as president of Bright Solutions Inc.

Whether it's dancing, coloring or singing, she's adamant that this approach can yield more successful results than traditional psychiatric practices.

And that's because she leaves her clients completely in charge of the counseling they receive, while focusing on the positives that put them on a healthy trajectory.

"People want to solve a specific issues, but generally that's not what happens," she said. "What I like to ask them is, 'Do you want to feel better tomorrow?' and if the answer is yes, then here are some tools that can help you with that process..."

"My clients are always walking away with homework — things to practice in between sessions," she added.

Spitzer said sometimes her clients only need two to three sessions before results are seen, and they feel more comfortable within themselves to face whatever the future may hold.

"I don't want to focus on the negative, because the goal is working toward something that's positive," she explained. "It's remarkable to see people change their lives, and how quickly they can do it here."

"In traditional therapy, you're on a once a week schedule where they review every part of your history," she added. "When a client comes to my house, they're totally in charge of frequency — how many times they come in, and when — and method."

For example, with clients who suffer from ADD, Spitzer said traditional therapy focuses too much on the negative.

"They're not able to see all the wonderful attributes," she said.

"ADD is not a behavioral issue, it's a management issue," she explained. "You just have to educate the people who work with that person to understand the strengths and challenges of someone with that type of brain — they're seeing things from all angles, constantly."

Two types of clients

Periwinkle Health sees two types of people, Spitzer said.

"It's either people who have been through a dozen traditional therapists and nothing has worked for them, or it's someone who's never been to therapy before because they don't want the stigma on it," she said. "But because I don't dwell on the negatives, people are always saying 'I can't believe how different this is; this is such a gentler approach' and that's because it is."

Her home office, at 15 Lake Avenue, is decorated in colorful couches with plenty of bright lighting.

"It's not your typical office," she said. "I'm not sitting behind some desk and putting you on the clock, trying to shuffle clients in and out all day — this is a partnership and we're having a conversation as equals."

"The whole point of this is to de-stress, and that's why there's no clock," she added. "I don't schedule any sessions too tightly because I want to give people the time they need and deserve."

She said the biggest challenge her business faces is the "alternative therapy" label that's placed on it by physicians and social workers.

“They don’t understand that this has been around for years, and so doctors tend to shy away from it,” she said. “But I’ve been working with kids and families, and other clients, since 1975 and a lot of these people have been around the block with traditional therapists and haven’t gotten the help they need.”

Full spectrum

Spitzer doesn’t just serve kids. Periwinkle has several other niches, including adults in their early to mid 20s, moms in their 40s and 50s, and workers coming back from the city, who range in age from 30 to 65.

“I love having the whole spectrum, and seeing the whole picture,” she said.

That’s why she keeps her doors open from 7:15 a.m. to 7 p.m.

“I see a lot of people who work in the city so I try to accommodate them,” she said.

And then there’s the kids who have now grown up into adults.

“It’s a very stressful time — financial, social, family, marriage, first real job,” she said. “It’s a complicated time and I see a lot of twenty-somethings who just need to get it off their chests and talk about everything they’re facing.”

She gives her clients her home number so they have access to her at any time.

“It’s a safety net,” she said. “People use it all the time.”

Of course, the safety net is nice to have, but Spitzer knows it’s valuable to put a plan in place for her clients so they can achieve sustainable change over time.

“This isn’t some flash in the pan solution,” she said. “Life is going to keep throwing lessons at you so you need to be able to be prepared for and ready to understand.”

The therapist is acutely aware of the fact that history repeats itself, and she tries to urge clients to break away from repetitive patterns of the past.

“If you’re getting better, it shouldn’t be painful,” she said. “I want my clients to break patterns and begin to live more consciously through creating solutions for themselves when I’m not there — set boundaries, care deeply for their personal well-being, do things that make them feel better and positive about who they are...”

“My first to whoever comes in is to have fun by asking, ‘What small thing can you do today?’” she added. “It could be as simple as taking a bubble bath or walking on the beach at dusk or calling a friend in California — as long as it puts them on a healthy trajectory towards simplifying their life.”