

Helping Hand

Local counsellor makes a difference in women's lives...

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Enthusiasm and passion seems to pour out of the compact dark-haired young woman sitting in the big easy chair. Easy, however, does not describe her job, but Esther Kane is determined to make a difference in the lives of women.

Kane, who moved to the Comox Valley three years ago and opened a private counselling practise, views herself as a social activist. Just as some people dedicate their actions to saving the environment and act as advocates on its behalf, Kane, 35, sees herself as a crusader for women.

"I hope that the crusade I'm on will benefit future generations," she says, smiling. "We are impoverished emotionally and we need a lot of help. Just being a woman and experiencing all I've gone through and survived, I can use that experience and knowledge to try to help others. I've had to do a lot of soul-searching myself, and it still goes on because of the work I'm involved in. Whenever I realise that I'm stuck with a client, I have to examine what's going on in myself. I'm continually having to delve inwards and work through my own issues if I'm to be of any use to my clients."

As a young woman, Kane suffered from a serious eating disorder. She realized then that education was the key to empowerment and healing. 'Why did I get this problem at this time in my life' is a pivotal question, and she feels we need to look at the larger systems outside of ourselves for answers. Kane began to question how Jewish women were given messages about food and eating. What had they been taught about food, eating and who they were that led so many into dangerous eating disorders? This questioning later led to the topic for her Masters' Degree- *Jewish women and body image*.

Kane's counselling practise embraces many of the ideas put forth by Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist who worked with patients suffering from schizophrenia and noticed that when their families visited, the patients became worse and their symptoms were alleviated when the families left. This was in the 1940's when psychiatry was still a fairly new science. Bowen's approach was to admit the whole family to the hospital and work with them all; not just the 'identified patient'.

Esther Kane, MSW, RCC
250.338.1800

w: www.estherkane.com e: esther@estherkane.com

"We don't exist in isolation to everything and everyone else," says Kane. "I know for myself I had to look at my own family when I was trying to unravel my problems. I was born into a Jewish family; my grandparents survived the Holocaust; we have known persecution. I can delve inside myself within the context of where I have come from, my history, what we went through. I realised that all these things were handed down to me in a multi-generational way, through my family and my culture.

"As a social worker, I've been trained to think in cycles-everything and everyone is connected," she adds. "There's a difference between being an individual and a part of a community. It's like the approach to the environment- if you are an individual, you can just plunder the world for what you want. You don't have to see connections to the whole."

Kane likewise not only works with an individual client, she invites in her client's community as they define it- family, friends, colleagues- and works with their help. Kane specializes in working with women who struggle with disordered eating, depression and anxiety, and relationship problems. She also offers workshops through the Courtenay Recreation Association that focus on healing from disordered eating and women's empowerment.

"My main reason for working with women is that I'm a woman and I'm also on my own journey," she says. "I can't pretend to know how men see the world. I have a passion for women and I see my process is to help us be all we can be. It just makes me angry that so many women beat themselves up over the problems in their lives. I think feminism has only come so far- we still have a long way to go."

She pauses. "It gives me so much hope and encouragement to see fathers today joyously being part of their children's lives, in all aspects," Kane adds. "Research shows that happy unions are those where both people feel equal and valued; where needs are shared. Co-parenting allows a couple to each have some work outside the home without being completely overwhelmed by the monumental job of parenting, cleaning, and cooking. In my mother's time, she was expected to do it all- as were most women."

On the same topic, Kane professes to despise the polarization of men and women. She has an aversion to the theories of 'men are from Mars, women are from Venus.' "We have far more in common than we are different as far as I'm concerned," she says, grinning. "What makes us different is the socialization process."

While studying for her Masters in Social Work at UBC, Kane steeped herself in that very process of socialization through her research on *Jewish Women*

Esther Kane, MSW, RCC
250.338.1800

w: www.estherkane.com e: esther@estherkane.com

and Body Image, which was subsequently published in the *Journal of Collaborative Therapies*.

"My mother and I did lots of therapy together," Kane says. "And we are always working at our relationship. My mother is very expressive-doesn't take any guff from anyone. She's 60 years old now and was 24 when she had me. Then you had to be the perfect mother, wife, have a career and you could never do it all right. For example, I have chosen to not have children. Every woman I interviewed for my book, *What Your Mama Can't or Won't Teach You*, assumed that they got married and had children. Now women my age are seeing the costs and benefits of striving to do it all. I think men are enslaved too, although I think the new generation of men is putting more thought into raising boys and girls. It's not enough to just say 'men are the problem'. I am married to a wonderful man. I think the main problem we all suffer from is bad training."

Kane reflects for a moment before continuing. "I do think that things are easier, working with young women, I see a change. Many of us have clearer visions of womanhood from our mothers and grandmothers. I have to think that with each generation there's new wisdom. What our parents didn't get right, we might get right.

"I am very conscious that although I don't want children myself, I am really aware of why," she adds. "I think raising children is a gargantuan job and the most difficult thing anyone can do. I think all women want to nurture, it's a female thing and I think of my work as being nurturing- it's on a global level."

For Kane, breaking out of stereotypical roles for both boys and girls is what brings healthy change. "Boys are brought up to be tough, not cry, hide their feelings, and then their wives want them to share their feelings!"

She laughs and shakes her head. "Even as I'm saying these things, I hear a voice that says 'Oh, don't say that- it's too harsh.' I think we need to care less what other people think of us. Men seem to be raised to not care about that so much- we could learn from them. As women, we are taught to be more compassionate, not to fight for the prize- men could learn from that. My husband Nathaniel is my best friend- we both have interesting careers and enjoy coming together to share that. Nathaniel was raised to cook for himself because his mom went back to school. My experience of working with people is that rigid sex roles get people into trouble- the more flexibility there is the better."

Kane recently won an award under the Health category in the Vancouver Island Top 40 Under 40 competition sponsored by the *Times Colonist*. "It was wonderful to have my work acknowledged," she says with a smile. "My

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250.338.1800

w: www.estherkane.com e: esther@estherkane.com

working life hasn't been easy and I thought lots of times of quitting as a therapist, so it's great to be acknowledged. There are so many young people doing neat things, it was fun to be part of it all."

Much of Kane's work deals with mothers and daughters. "There's so much mother-bashing in this culture," says Kane, who helps them learn to relate to each other as two women, not just as mother and daughter. "It's so difficult to be a mother. I think women are so courageous and brave. I feel privileged to work with so many women and I learn so much from them. I think it's an incredible position to be in, to be a therapist. It's like getting pearls of wisdom every day."

The key for her is taking care of oneself- emotionally and physically. "It's been my hardest struggle," she says frankly. "Self-care is so vital. The hardest thing for me as a therapist is when a client is really ill and dies of an eating disorder. That's really hard to watch.

Although she has a deep understanding of emotional problems and issues, she does not see that sticking a label on someone is especially helpful. "I just don't buy into it that so many women have all of these problems. Why does she have these problems in the first place? Why does she not want to eat, or binge and purge? I look at patriarchy and see the society we have created, what messages we get as women and men. It tells us what is valuable, how we should act, and as far as I'm concerned, serves neither gender very well."

Kane is also very honest about her own path. "I have had one trauma after another in my own life- healing is like peeling an onion," she says. What I have learned is that we all suffer, we are all too hard on ourselves, we all beat ourselves up too much. I try to be a role model. I feel like I am always parachuting out of a plane- I am always throwing myself into my fears. I think if I don't see that I am great- and say so- how can I expect other women to do the same? I take chances and speak out. Being true to yourself and not wearing a mask and being someone less so that others will like you is key. You know what? You can't control what other people think and say about you. It's quite liberating actually. I think women get trapped by trying to be what we think others want us to be."

This includes helping to alleviate guilt. "I believe you can die from guilt, it's so pernicious," she says. "Guilt and shame- they are the real enemies; they are so pointless and unnecessary. I see therapy as preventative medicine and think it should be paid for by the government as part of our tax money. I think everyone can benefit from getting the help and healing they need. Therapy saved my life, and I think it's an incredible thing to have an objective person there to accept you as you are and just listen without judgment."

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w: www.estherkane.com e: esther@estherkane.com

"Therapy is also losing the stigma that it used to have attached to it. How is it not helpful to go to someone and get rid of the shame about so many things in our lives? It takes the weight off. It is about choice, not being a victim, owning whatever is yours and then deciding to do it differently. I help women to deal with their feelings- if there is anger, let it manifest in ways that don't hurt themselves or others, but let it out. I think so many eating disorders and addictions are the result of inner anger- we turn it in on ourselves and there are better ways of dealing with anger."

A believer in solutions, Kane maintains that there is not a relationship that cannot be healed if the parties are willing. "I've seen miracles" she says matter-of-factly. "Family members who had been estranged for years, relationships where there was so much pain and conflict. If the parties are willing to work through it, they can."

In 2004 to 2005 Kane interviewed over 20 women between the ages of 20 and 80 about their experience in teenhood and what they have learned since then. Her book, *What Your Mama Can't or Won't Teach You* is the result. On a plane back to her hometown of Toronto in 2006 Kane started writing *Dump That Chump*, a self-help workbook for women to rid themselves of unsatisfactory relationships and attract their ideal mate. Esther's books are available at: www.guidebooktowomanhood.com and www.dumpthatchump.com

At only 35, Kane's work with women is receiving national attention. She was recently interviewed by *Glow Magazine* about women's intuition and a future publication will feature Kane on why women choose toxic relationships.

"I feel completely blessed in my life," says Kane. "I have a fantastic marriage, marvelous friends and a loving and supportive family. And I get to help others through my work- not a bad package at all."

To book a session or to set up a free 15-minute phone consultation, phone Esther at 338-1800.

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