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'Valentine Journey'

Montecito estate will be setting for couples' weekend retreat

BY MARILYN MCMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Do you feel the energy between you and your partner is flat and boring?

Do you want to recapture the joy and happiness you once had?

Are you having the same arguments over and over again?

Do you want to overcome destructive patterns that are making you unhappy?

Mary Kay Cocharo, who calls herself The Couples Therapist, thinks she might have the answer to these problems during a perfectly timed weekend retreat for five couples.

"A Valentine Journey to the Relationship of your Dreams" takes place from Feb. 8 to Feb. 10 at a "beautiful estate nestled in the hills" overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Montecito. It has eight bedrooms and eight bathrooms. The cost is \$4,200, which includes two full days of expert coaching, two nights in private, luxury accommodations, meals and beverages, and a guided hike through unique terrain.

"Participants can expect to learn effective communication skills that will take them deeper into their love and commitment as a couple, resolve conflict that has been getting in their way with one another, remember why they got together in the first place, get positive energy and support from other couples in the group and relax and have fun together in a beautiful and calm setting away from home," said Ms. Cocharo, who has been in practice in Santa Monica and on the West Side of Los Angeles for 28 years.

She is a licensed marriage and family therapist, certified Imago Relationship Therapist and Encounter-Centered couples therapist.

"Imago relationship therapy is a form of marriage therapy that takes a relationship approach rather than an individual approach to problem solving in a marriage," she said. "It was co-developed by Dr. Harville Hendrix and Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt, and documented in Hendrix's 1988 book, 'Getting the Love You Want, A Guide for Couples.' Dr. Hendrix has been on Oprah Winfrey's TV show a number of times. She calls him The Marriage Whisperer."

Ms. Cocharo, 63, said she finds "tremendous joy witnessing the magic that unfolds when couples truly connect. After all, we come into the world connected. It's our natural state. As we go through life, our connection to others is often disrupted,

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Mary Kay Cocharo, a licensed marriage and family therapist, will lead "A Valentine Journey to the Relationship of Your Dreams" from Feb. 8 to Feb. 10 in Montecito. COURTESY PHOTO

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causing us to suffer isolation. I believe it is only through re-connection that we restore to our natural wholeness. That is why I love to facilitate the transformation that takes place when people finally meet each other in their essence."

Born in Colorado Springs, Colo., Ms. Cocharo grew up in Pueblo, Colo., and graduated from Pueblo High School and earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Denver in 1977 after which she came to California to study for her master's degree in marriage and family therapy at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks.

A post-grad fellowship in family therapy took her to the Houston Galveston Institute and later she was on the staff at the Houston Child Guidance Clinic.

In 1990, Ms. Cocharo moved back to the Los Angeles area and began working with couples and families.

"I cannot imagine doing anything else! I am deeply passionate about helping couples and parents rediscover the joy of being together, deepening communication and resolving conflict," said Ms. Cocharo, who is married to Steven Cerasal and the mother of twin daughters, Claire and Vanessa, 37, and a son, Lorenzo, 25. She also has a granddaughter.

She stressed that the Valentine weekend is not just for couples who are having problems in their marriage or on the brink of divorce.

"I have couples who are engaged and want to make sure they are getting off on the right foot. Other couples have good marriages and want to spice them up. They're fine but want them to be great. I've had couples who had been divorced, were now dating other people and wanted to be sure to get off on the right foot," she said.

Ages range from couples from 28 to 30, who come for pre-marital counseling, to couples in their mid-70s, who were married after college.

Is this weekend anything like "Marriage Boot Camp," the reality TV show that chronicles the lives of five couples who move into one house for approximately 10 days to save their marriages?

"I've never seen it and know nothing about it. My more general feeling is that these reality TV shows rarely have anything to do with real therapy!" Ms. Cocharo said.

Her Valentine weekend begins Friday evening with a dinner prepared by a private chef after which participants create collages representing their "wildest dream" in their relationship.

"It's a lot of fun and a real ice breaker," said Ms. Cocharo.

Saturday begins with couples yoga followed by counseling sessions, where one couple works with Ms. Cocharo while the others observe and later work with her and four licensed marriage therapists who assist her during the weekend.

The afternoon is spent practicing the tools learned in the morning.

"Saturday evening is party time with dancing, pizza and soaking in the jacuzzi," Ms. Cocharo said.

The Sunday schedule includes a guided hike in the morning, continuing to practice the tools learned and before dispersing at 4:30 p.m., sitting in a circle and sharing what each couple learned during the weekend.

"What's really beautiful is that frequently the couples stay in touch afterward. One couple took a trip to the Philippines to see another couple they met during a weekend," said Ms. Cocharo. "Going away for a weekend like this is worth four to six months of therapy."

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FYI

"A Valentine Journey to the Relationship of Your Dreams" will take place from 5 p.m. Feb. 8 to 4:30 p.m. Feb. 10 at a location in Montecito, which will be given upon registration. The cost is \$4,200, which includes two full days of expert coaching, accommodations in a private home with eight bedrooms and eight bathrooms, meals and beverages and a guided hike. Five couples is the maximum number of participants. For more information, call Mary Kay Cocharo at 310-828-2624.