

Partners in life and Wellesley nutrition/wellness business

By **Anne-Marie Smolski**, asmolski@wickedlocal.com

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Posted May 02, 2013 @ 01:56 PM

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Wellesley —

Although Joanne Levy Soolman and Jonah Soolman married in August 2012, they became partners of another sort before that.

The owners of **Soolman Nutrition and Wellness LLC**, located on the second floor at 555 Washington St. in Wellesley Square since January, they had worked together for about a year in the same business out of a Wellesley Hills location.

The couple met online, and they say it's just coincidental that they were both in the nutrition field. They met when they were in various stages of their training, and decided during their engagement to start the practice together, since they both wanted to do outpatient counseling.

Joanne, who grew up in Wellesley, where her mother still lives, went to Wellesley Middle School and graduated from Buckingham, Browne, and Nichols (BB&N). She earned her undergraduate degree in psychology from Brown University and a master's of nutrition and health promotion at Simmons College. Jonah has a degree in mathematics and English, while his second bachelor's degree is in human nutrition from UMass-Amherst.

The Soolmans have separate offices and share a waiting room. Jonah's photography is on view, but you won't find any food-related pictures. "I try to not trigger them [patients] in any sort of way with food images," Joanne said.

The décor offers a little insight into their treatment philosophies. While Jonah went with a round table instead of a desk in his office because "we feel strongly that we're equal with our patients," Joanne chose the more traditional placement of a desk and two comfortable chairs in front of it. And although they both have scales in their offices, the one in Joanne's is a little more "discreet," she said. (Joanne's niche is eating disorders.) When a patient steps on the scale it communicates wirelessly to her computer for a blind weigh-in, so the patient doesn't have to see the number if he or she doesn't wish to.

"I wanted to have a Zen environment, a calm, welcoming, peaceful environment," Joanne said. Using a little bit of color psychology, the Soolmans chose blue for their waiting room because it's a peaceful shade, while the green paint on the walls in their offices is a little more invigorating, Joanne said.

The duo does not rely on pre-packaged meals or supplements, but does offer nutritional advice tailored to the individual. They take several insurance plans now and will accept others in the near future. They also accept out-of-pocket payments (i.e. cash, credit card, checks) for those patients whose insurance does not cover their care at Soolman Nutrition and Wellness.

The Soolmans are both registered dietitians. Jonah previously worked as a counselor at a multidisciplinary medical clinic and as a consultant for the Tufts University Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

He was also a personal trainer. While he no longer does that, Jonah said there are oftentimes discussions with clients about physical activity. In that case, he has a network of trainers he can refer people to.

He has had patients ranging in age from pre-teens to nonagenarians. They've come to him for nutrition-related issues such as weight concerns, food allergies, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, hypoglycemia and athletic performance.

The Soolmans do medical nutritional therapy, working with people who have Crohn's disease, COPD, kidney issues, liver issues, food issues and celiac disease. Jonah said that the main way patients are going to take care of an issue is through lifestyle change.

He gave an example of one patient who is taking medication for high cholesterol, which he'd rather not have to do. It's a pretty common issue, Jonah said.

"We take a look at what they're doing right now; what are their goals; what they like to do; what they don't like to do; what kind of time they have. We have to work with the constraints that he has, as opposed to making wholesale changes at once. "We make small steps over time," Jonah said.

Joanne offers nutrition and wellness counseling and specializes in helping those with eating disorders, weight management and nutrition for the prevention/management of illness. She draws on her background in both psychology and nutrition. "I believe nutrition and psychology go hand in hand," she said. She gets referrals from doctors and psychiatrists.

Previously, she worked as a community residence counselor at McLean Hospital's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Institute, where she first encountered people with eating disorders. After she earned her master's in nutrition and health promotion, she worked as a registered dietitian at Cambridge Eating Disorder Center's residential and partial hospitalization treatment programs, helping clients

with anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorders, as well as people with a variety of disordered eating habits, to establish a healthier relationship with food.

Joanne sees patients with eating disorders "just until they feel like they can do this on their own," she said. Most come once a week, and as they progress, "we scale back the appointments, and I always keep in touch with their outpatient teams," she said, calling it "collaborative work."

She spoke about a patient who started seeing her last October. "Things are going well," she said. "She's off to college in the fall. Our summer project is preparing her for all the food challenges she'll be facing."

They will check out school menus online. If there's a taco bar, for example, Joanne and the client will come up with a game plan so the student can go to the taco bar and enjoy it.

Jonah said that although 97.5 percent of dietitians are female, it can prove helpful to have a male on staff. He cited the case of a young boy with an eating disorder who is more comfortable seeing a male. In that case, Joanne, who specializes in eating disorders, shared a little bit of her expertise regarding what questions Jonah might ask of his young patient.

Even though they work together, the fact is they don't see each other during the day that much. "We don't have tons and tons of face time," Joanne said.

They do find time to collaborate, however. "We might think of an idea for one of our patients when we're out for dinner on a Saturday night," Jonah said.

They also try to be as accommodating to their patients as possible, offering office hours one Saturday and one Sunday a month as well as some evening hours.

Although food is the focus of the work the Soolmans do, they recognize that everybody is different. "We're not the food police," Joanne said. "This is a judgment-free zone, a safe zone."

"I think we're both in the Health at Every Size movement," Joanne said. "It's not just about the number on the scale, it's the whole person. We both believe in that."

Jonah, added, "You can't look at somebody on the outside and know what's going on inside."

Soolman Nutrition and Wellness LLC will have an open house on Wednesday, May 29, from 5-9 p.m. at 555 Washington St., second floor (above Miele). There will be light food and refreshments. To RSVP, email Joanne at Joanne@soolmannutrition.com, or call 781-237-0470 by Friday, May 24. For more information about Soolman Nutrition and Wellness LLC visit www.soolmannutrition.com.

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