

WHEN ONE SPOUSE IS GAY



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THE GROUP'S GENESIS

Some years ago, I viewed a television news segment that dealt with the topic of couples facing homosexuality of one partner within a marriage. The show talked about ways some couples manage to stay together once a partner discloses being homosexual. Mostly, however, it dealt with the more common scenario: The coming apart of a marriage with the homosexual spouse leaving the marriage and entering the supportive gay community, while the heterosexual partner is left to recover from the break-up with little or no support from the heterosexual community.

The show touched me so much that I decided to form a therapy/support group for people in Columbus who found themselves in this predicament. The group (no longer active), called "Heterosexual Partners of Gays and Lesbians," was always open to individuals in need of help. It was comprised of heterosexual men and women who were married to or in long

term relationships with someone gay or lesbian. The group provided therapy and mutual support. It also provided an atmosphere for personal growth through education and self-examination of attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. Mainly, it provided a safe place where members could vent their anger, grieve their losses and problem-solve together. Although emoting was encouraged, never was gay "bashing," blaming or shaming of anyone encouraged or condoned! We concentrated on feelings and facts. Here is some of each.

HOW OFTEN IS ONE SPOUSE HOMOSEXUAL?

It is estimated that thousands of American couples share this predicament. According to the *New York Times*, it is "an unexpected consequence of the modern era of openly gay life: Gay men and lesbians who once felt pressured into marrying are now emboldened to claim their true identity." Amity Pierce Buxton, the author of "The Other Side of the Closet," a revised book on this subject, estimates "there are 1.7 million gay men and lesbians who were once married or remain so." Her figure is really a "guestimate" because the stigma of homosexuality keeps some gays and lesbians from identifying themselves in the adult population.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HETEROSEXUAL SPOUSE?

While many heterosexual spouses demonstrate empathy with their gay or lesbian partner regarding the personal traumas associated with the "coming-out" process, most heterosexual spouses undergo their own personal crises. Often, they feel abandoned (whether they literally are or not), while their partner seeks out a new life and identity within the supportive gay or lesbian community. Also, the heterosexual spouse may be embarrassed by the stigma of the situation. This embarrassment causes many to isolate themselves (with their secret) which exacerbates their feelings of abandonment and perpetuates their isolation. Some question their own judgment regarding relationships and fear making a similar mistake in future relationships. "How could I have not known?" is commonly asked of themselves.

The heterosexual spouse's weakened self-image might be further damaged if they were sexually rejected during the marriage. It is common for these partners to blame themselves for their spouse's lack of sexual interest. They often feel undesirable and sexually inadequate. They fear intimacy because of these feelings of inadequacy and because, as one person has said, "how do I know this one won't be gay too?"

It is common for the heterosexual partner to feel embittered and victimized...victimized by their homosexual partner and by their situation. Hurt and anger are major issues. One group member who allowed me to quote her for this article put it this way..."He tricked me. He took a chance on my life. He was trying to use me to be "normal" (hetero). I felt like a total idiot. What was good was a lie. I'm angry now for hanging on so long..."

It is especially confusing and painfully shocking when the relationship seems to be (sexually) okay, but then the partner suddenly discloses his or her homosexual orientation. A more typical scenario is described by one of my male group members who was also quoted for this article. "I suspected it because of our decreased sex life and her increasing attention to lesbians. I'm still in the angry stage. I feel very deceived. I thought it was for the rest of my life."

Not all partners are so bitter. Many cry tears of empathy with each other. Some remain close friends. Some stay together (as roommates) until they can work out the issues of separation or divorce and child custody. "The hardest part for me is burying the marriage. I thought we had the perfect marriage. We are best friends," says another group member.

It has been reported that some homosexuals' spouses cling to the hope

of a partner "coming to their senses" and returning to the relationship. Some harbor fantasies of being able to reunite with an ex-partner someday once sex is no longer important. I don't encourage false hopes. Yet some people may need those fantasies while they separate and grieve.

WHY DO HOMOSEXUALS GET MARRIED & HOW DO THEY COPE?

First of all, many homosexuals do not realize that they are gay when they get married. They may be in denial of this aspect of themselves because of their conservative upbringing and/or religious teachings. Strong messages from our society that deprecates homosexuality and homosexual's figure into this situation also. Many gays and lesbians also feel confused or even repulsed by the stereotypes of gay and lesbian people and the accompanying lifestyles. They may not be able to accept these images associated with themselves for a long time until something (or someone) triggers a change. Other homosexuals are aware of their (homosexual) feelings when they marry but want a traditional home life. They believe that marriage (to the right person) will change their sexual orientation. They think (hope and pray) that they can bury their homosexual urges. Some continue to act-out their homosexual urges, in secret, through out the marriage. A minority of couples

elects to stay together and pursue an open marriage. Still others manage to stay monogamous, with the homosexual partner living out his/her homosexuality in fantasy only.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Homosexual partners leaving traditional marriages have gained increasing recognition and have been able to gain support within the gay community through coming-out groups, gay parents groups, etc. Until recently, there have been little (or no) support groups for the heterosexual partner. Groups are available for heterosexual partners:

1) "P-FFLAG of Columbus-phone number-- 614-227-9355. ("Parents, Friends, Families of Lesbians and Gays")

2) For Groups Nationwide--"The Straight Spouse Support Network"

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