

Out of the closet: Support for the straight spouse

When your spouse shares that he's gay, it can be devastating. Here's where to seek support.

By: Deborah Moskovitch



"I feel very alone and I'm so confused. I'm sure you have never heard this before." a client in my private divorce consulting practice confessed. However, this was not the first time I had a client tell me that her marriage was ending because her husband declared that he was gay.

While Canadian figures are not available, conservative estimates indicate that roughly two million lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in the United States have married someone of the opposite sex. When these partners come out of the closet one third of these relationships break up right away, a third stay together for a year and then separate, and another third commit to making it work - although three years later, only half of this last group of relationships are still intact.

When a spouse comes out, it impacts the entire family

Amity Pierce Buxton, Ph.D. the founder of the [Straight Spouse Network \(SSN\)](http://www.straightspouse.org/) (<http://www.straightspouse.org/>) and author of *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families*, says that "a spouse's coming out within a marriage is not an individual event. It impacts everyone in the family circle. The straight husband or wife and their children go through their own struggle to understand and accept the revealed information from their perspective. They, too, are affected by the social stigmatization and heterosexist expectations that helped influence their partners to marry."

Buxton founded SSN in 1991 after her husband disclosed that he was gay. She has since become the foremost authority on the post-disclosure experience on straight spouses and lectures internationally about the grieving and coping process people need to develop in order to heal and move on.

Didn't you know he was gay?

"How could you not know?" people often ask the straight partner. But there aren't always obvious signs that a partner is struggling with his or her sexual orientation.

Annie Lewis, a psychotherapist in Toronto, didn't learn that her husband was gay until he shared this revelation with her 24 years into their marriage. Lewis noticed that her husband seemed stressed and urged him to talk, and finally he disclosed that he felt he "could only be 100 per cent happy if he was with a man." She was devastated.

Lewis thought she had the perfect marriage. "I felt I had it all - lots of demonstrative affection, love, romance and sex. People admired our marriage, other people got divorced; that was totally not going to happen to my life."

June Galbraith, a registered nurse and landscape designer in Toronto, was married 27 years. Despite the fact that Galbraith had a warm, happy and loving relationship with her husband, intimacy was missing from her marriage. After Galbraith repeatedly discussed this lack with her husband, he admitted to being gay. The couple separated within six months of post-disclosure.

As Galbraith worked through her grieving process, she often wondered "did my husband marry me for who I was, or was I just a cover up for his gay lifestyle?"

Lewis' and Galbraith's marriages ended around the same time, and they were introduced by a mutual acquaintance. Lewis and Galbraith decided that once they had both healed emotionally, they would start a peer support group, since many of their issues are different from heterosexual couples separating. In 2004 they founded the [Straight Forward Peer Support Group](http://www.straight-forward.ca) (<http://www.straight-forward.ca>) in Toronto and have helped over 300 straight spouses.

Disclosure brings waves of emotions

Buxton has researched the impact of a spouse coming out on the family; her research is extensive and spans 24 years. She found that "disclosure and its aftermath within a family occurs in waves, starting with the act of coming out (or being discovered) after an internal struggle to acknowledge his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Once an individual is "out", the second wave begins, as the straight wife or husband deals with what it means. As the two spouses deal with the revelation, each from a different viewpoint, a third wave of coming-out begins when they tell their children or they find out."

Responses to each stage vary. Some straight spouses feel that this is a nightmare. They become very confused, and can come to question the reality of the entire relationship. Some experience a sense of relief, if they had wondered what was wrong with the relationship.

Buxton suggests that there are three issues that arise that need to be dealt with right away when a spouse discloses his or her sexual orientation: sexuality, the marriage, and the children. Alongside these immediate concerns, three deep crises emerge in:

- Identity: The coming- out destroys their sense of who they are
- Integrity: Their partner kept their orientation or gender identity secret
- Belief system: The disclosure shatters spouses' assumptions about gender, sexual relationships, marriage and their future

It's a family affair

The whole family also has to go through a process of coming out: Sensitivity is a must when coming out to children, especially at different stages in their life. Middle-school-aged children may have the hardest time dealing with the revelation because they are developing their own sexual identity. And young adults sometimes become judgmental as their value systems have most likely been formed.

In order to get through this and move on to regain your sense of identity, self esteem, faith, and lose the anger, Buxton says that spouses go through six stages of coping.

Stage One: Disorientation, disbelief, denial and relief.

A straight partner's denial that their partner is not straight prevents them from dealing with reality. Once you are able to come to terms with this, you may be relieved to find an answer as to why things did not feel right and can accept why something was missing.

Stage Two: Facing, acknowledging, and accepting the reality.

Slowly, the reality seeps into consciousness. Eventually you must acknowledge these realities as true and irreversible. Once acknowledged, you are ready to finally accept the present reality as the new "given".

Stage Three: Letting go of the past.

Once there is acceptance of the new reality, you let go of what you thought the marriage was, and start to grieve the dreams you've harboured.

Stage Four: Healing.

Only when you let go of what was can you begin to heal. Healing begins when you start taking care of your own health and well being. It's time to focus inward, clarifying wants, needs and values. Expect a breakthrough in terms of thinking and/or perspective.

Stage Five: Reconfiguring identity, integrity and belief system.

Once a realistic picture of yourself is created, you are able to reconfigure who you are and regain your sense of self-worth. Resetting your moral compass based on your truth and reality, you learn to trust yourself and others. Lastly, accommodating the new information into your world view will give you meaning and purpose to your life.

Stage Six: Transforming your life.

With your identity, integrity and belief system reconfigured, you achieve balance emotionally, psychologically, and sometimes spiritually. You can live your life as a new person in a new way.

You can expect your journey to take 3-6 years. And, once this process takes place, for many, there is a realization that their partner really did marry them out of love, and not to hide in a closet -- they fully intended to make it work. So, while these couples cannot be lovers, perhaps they can still be good friends.

Where to go for help if your spouse has come out of the closet:

Straight Spouse Network - www.straightspouse.org (<http://www.straightspouse.org>)

Straight Forward - www.straight-forward.ca (<http://www.straight-forward.ca/>)

Families Like Mine - www.familieslikemine.com (<http://www.familieslikemine.com/>)

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) - www.colage.org (<http://www.colage.org/>)

Family Equality Council - www.familyequality.org (<http://www.familyequality.org/>)

Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) - www.pflag.org (<http://www.pflag.org/>)

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation Family Project - www.hrc.org (<http://www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/10475.htm>)

TransFamily - www.transfamily.org (<http://www.transfamily.org/>)

Deborah Moskovitch is a divorce consultant and educator, and author of The Smart Divorce: Proven Strategies and Valuable Advice from 100 Top Divorce Lawyers, Financial Advisers, Counselors and Other Experts. Deborah has become an opinion leader in the media and has shared her insights and research on television and radio to explain that divorce can be managed in smarter ways. To learn more visit thesmartdivorce.com