

Opening the Straight Spouse's Closet

A Guide for Understanding
Issues Facing Families with
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
or Transgender Spouses





Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is the nation's foremost family-based organization committed to the civil rights of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons. Founded in 1973 by mothers and fathers, PFLAG has 200,000 members and supporters in more than 500 chapters throughout the United States. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced and serviced by the PFLAG national office (located in Washington, D.C.), the national Board of Directors and our Regional Directors. PFLAG is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

For more information, please visit www.pflag.org.

Our Vision

We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Only with respect, dignity and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize this vision.

Our Mission

PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, their families and friends through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

This book was produced in collaboration with the Straight Spouse Network. For more information on the Network, see page 15.

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“His Greatest Gift to Me”

In May 1982, Jane spoke publicly for the first time about a deeply personal issue with which she had struggled for some time. “I feel shaky and vulnerable and alone,” she said. “Just as you felt alone and vulnerable and afraid when you found out your husband, wife, son or daughter was gay; or when you first risked telling someone you were gay and a look of horror flickered in his or her eyes; or when you first spoke publicly for gay rights. In facing the fear to speak openly, I experience a deep strength and power, a great sense of freedom out of doing and being what I must.”

After seven years of marriage, Jane’s husband told her he is gay.

“At that moment, our lives turned upside down,” she told PFLAG members at the organization’s first annual convention. “The unimaginable had happened. Thirty years of dearly held assumptions blew apart. ‘If this is real and all the former rules are untrue,’ I thought, ‘then everything might be false and then again, everything might be true.’”

Jane and her husband tried to open their marriage to include her husband’s male lover, as they isolated themselves from the rest of their world and told no one what was happening. Jane tried therapy, only to feel blameworthy and invisible. Then Jane became pregnant, and sunk further into despair. When Jane was further devastated by a miscarriage, she told her doctor about her family’s situation and her fears. “There is nothing wrong with you,” he said, offering her a first glimmer of hope. Jane then reached out to her sister and estranged mother, who embraced her and helped her seek a divorce.

“Together they let me know that I had their love and support. ‘My family is beside me,’ kept going through my head. ‘I don’t have to face this alone,’” she said.

Jane moved to another town, where she found a therapy group and supportive environment for reflecting. Over several years, Jane coped with her pain and discovered meaning in her life again. She and her ex-husband gradually rebuilt a new friendship. Today, Jane is an ordained minister. She has remarried and become the stepmother of two children. Her deep friendship with her ex-husband, John, continues.

“John’s courage the night he told me he loved Martin was the single most important factor in my discovery of what truth is,” Jane said in 1982. “His courage to speak his truth was his greatest gift to me.”

When Jane addressed the conference, many in the audience were hearing about a straight spouse’s experience for the first time. Since then, particularly in recent years, more married people are coming out of the closet – and their spouses are looking for support.

STRAIGHT SPOUSES: AN INVISIBLE MINORITY

Based on commonly accepted research estimates, up to two million gay, lesbian, or bisexual spouses have entered heterosexual marriages. (Figures for transgender spouses are unknown.) Some have come out to their spouse, others will, and still others may never disclose. When they come out, their straight spouses are devastated. Many feel stigmatized by the straight community and discover most family members, friends, and professionals do not understand their unique issues.

As their partners find support in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) organizations and celebrate their coming out, their spouses' post-disclosure problems are often ignored, and they find little support or understanding. Retreating into their own closets, straight spouses cope in isolation. Those who discover peers are relieved that they are not facing this challenge alone. With the support of peers and others, spouses more easily resolve issues in constructive ways, benefiting everyone affected by the family crisis. Many who find support and validation become advocates for social justice.

Children whose parents come out also go through a coming out process as they cope with news of their parent's disclosed orientation or gender identity. They, too, need support, especially from parents and peers. How their straight mothers or fathers deal with the disclosure becomes a model for them.

Since 1981, **Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)** has recognized that spouses of GLBT partners are part of our family as we work to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity. PFLAG acknowledges the unique concerns of straight spouses and the importance of including their voices in the larger discussion of equality and justice. This booklet describes major issues they face after their partners come out, based largely on self-reports of more than 11,000 straight and GLBT spouses and their children gathered by Amity Pierce Buxton, Ph. D., Executive Director of the **Straight Spouse Network** (originally a PFLAG Task Force), as well as research findings. Understanding concerns of straight spouses serves many purposes: they feel more affirmed as they struggle to cope, their GLBT partners and the larger community better understand their issues, and family members, friends, and professionals can support them more effectively.

ISSUES FACING STRAIGHT SPOUSES

When married people come out or are "discovered," it becomes a family matter. A spouse's disclosure impacts the couple's relationship and, if they are parents, their children's lives. As more husbands and wives are coming out, more straight spouses are seeking support to cope with profound issues. They represent a diversity of ages, socioeconomic groups, races, ethnicities, educational levels, occupations, and faith communities. Yet they experience common problems and go through typical stages of dealing with them.

Disclosed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity

“I felt I was not an adequate man. It completely destroyed my self image.”

— Dan, husband of a lesbian wife

The mismatch of sexual orientation between the spouses is one of the first issues to arise. Finding out their partners are attracted to the same gender or have had same-gender encounters makes most feel rejected sexually. Many blame themselves as being sexually inadequate and feel they are less of a man or woman. Some fear that they may have become sexually dysfunctional or doubt that they will ever date or have sex again. Others question their own sexual identity.

If husbands were active before coming out, their wives worry about contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. These fears are often less intense for spouses of bisexual partners, because of their mates’ continued sexual attraction to them. Spouses of transgender partners face different sexual problems. Since they may not have to deal with a different sexual orientation, spouses of cross dressers may face few sexual issues, while spouses of transsexual mates worry about consequences on their sexual intimacy from physical, psychological, and emotional changes as they transition to the opposite gender and couple begins to appear as a same-gender relationship.

Future of the Marriage

“We’ve survived seven years of marriage by tolerating the ambivalence of what we are and the uncertainty of what could happen.”

— Barbara, wife of a bisexual husband

Straight spouses, like their GLBT partners, question whether the marriage can continue and, if so, what form it might take and what compromises might need to be made. Conclusive data does not exist, but anecdotal evidence suggests that roughly a third of all GLB-straight couples divorce quickly after disclosure, because of the straight spouses’ anger or desire for monogamy, or the GLB spouses’ desire to live their lives honestly or to enter a same-gender relationship. Pre-existing relationship problems may also cause a breakup. Lesbian wives more often leave their marriages more quickly than do gay men or bisexual spouses. Another third of all couples stay together to sort out issues of sexuality, gender identity, monogamy, fidelity, and alternative marriage forms, eventually deciding that separation is the best resolution. A final third commit to continuing their marriages because of their abiding love, a long history together, the quality of their relationship, or satisfaction in family life with their children. Few stay because of financial reasons.

Couples who stay married encounter many obstacles such as the straight spouses’ difficulty in regaining trust, lack of marital sex, or negativity expressed

by family, friends, and faith communities about homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgenderism or about non-traditional forms of marriage. With time, honest communication, mutual compromise and peer support, half of these couples maintain their marriages three or more years in diverse forms: monogamous, celibate, open, or with a long-term partner for only the GLB spouse. These marriages more often include bisexual-straight couples.

Since transgender partners are no longer required to leave their heterosexual relationships as they transition, whether or not they choose sexual reassignment surgery, transgender-straight couples face the same marriage challenge, with pressure on the straight spouses to maintain the relationship. While little research on transgender-straight couples exists, observation indicates that some choose to separate early on as cross-dressing or transition changes intensify prior marriage problems or introduce a set of changes that the heterosexual spouses cannot tolerate. Other couples try to maintain their marriages and stay together for a number of years. The challenge for straight spouses of transgender partners is whether they can adjust to their partners' gradually different gender expression, physical appearance, and psychology.

Balancing Roles As Parent and Spouse

“Daddy is heterosexual, and Mommy is homosexual, and it just doesn’t work. We’ve been trying, but it just doesn’t work.”

— Jim, whose wife is lesbian, talking to their two young sons

Spouses with children face conflicting challenges. While they feel hurt as spouses, most want to protect their children’s relationship with their GLBT parents and to work together with their GLBT co-parents to tend their children’s needs. They also hope that their children will not be hurt by anti-gay or anti-transgender attitudes they encounter.

Whether and when to tell children about their parent’s newly disclosed sexual orientation or gender identity is a major question. Most tell once they themselves are secure enough about the disclosure to support their children as they cope with the news. If divorce is likely, disclosure might come as the GLBT parents’ new activities impact family life, or as his or her coming out becomes known to others. Parents tell in those cases to prevent their children from hearing misinformation or biased views of others.

When coming out to their children, the parents’ main concern is assuring them that they both love them and that their lives will not change dramatically. How the straight parent handles the discussion sets the tone for how their children react. Initially, the spouses’ pain makes it hard for some to remember their children’s perspective, just as the coming out euphoria keeps some GLBT parents from remembering parental responsibilities for a while. In some

divorce cases, some straight parents curtail the children's contact between their GLBT parent, and either may sometimes speak negatively of the other. In most instances, straight parents make it clear to their children that coming out as a GLBT person does not change a parent's effectiveness, and they work jointly with their GLBT spouse to provide a caring, loving home for their children, whether or not they divorce.

Identity and Self Worth

“Who are you?” my team member asked for the third time. ‘I don’t know.’ I whispered and began to cry.”

— Jane, wife of a gay man

Following these three immediate challenges, more profound concerns arise, causing crises of identity, integrity, and faith. Spouses lose a sense of who they are as they try to adapt to the unexpected revelation about their partners. Many tried to accommodate their partner's needs for so long that they forget their own needs, wants, values, and strengths. Friends and family do not understand their unique concerns, so they retreat into their own closets, where the isolation magnifies their sense of low self worth. Many also fear telling anyone else so their partners will not lose their job or status. Feeling worthless, they do not seek help or cannot believe there is help. As they cope alone, their pain mounts. Most eventually ask themselves, “What about me?” triggering a crisis of identity.

Deception and Betrayal

“I was doubly traumatized by the deceit. I thought, ‘How could I have missed the signals?’”

— Wes, husband of a lesbian

Whether their partners did not know, denied, suppressed, or hid their sexual orientation or gender when they married, most of their spouses feel deceived when it is revealed. If their GLB husbands or wives had same-gender affairs or, in the case of the transgender mates, had engaged in cross-dressing or taken steps toward transition, they feel betrayed. Many feel “stupid” or gullible for not having figured it out. They therefore question their own judgment and distrust everyone else's word. Finding out that their partners were not what they thought, most feel that their moral compass has been broken, leaving them unable to measure what is true or real. Most spouses also have to keep their partners' sexuality or gender identity secret after disclosure out of fear that their families, communities, places of worship or employers might reject them or their partners. This process makes them feel guilty and powerless. Among spouses of transsexuals, hiding becomes more stressful as their part-

ners' changes become more observable by others. For all spouses, these stresses converge into a crisis of integrity

Belief System

“If I can find the meaning in all this, I’ll be all right.”

— Emma, wife of a gay man, shortly after he came out.

The disclosure shatters spouses' long-held assumptions about their partners and also about gender, relationships, marriage, and their future lives. Spouses of transsexual partners experience an actual disconnect between the male and female they married and the current male-to-female or female-to-male partner. Being with a partner with a new face, body, and name and who talks about his or her prior persona in the third person is disorienting. With their value system in shreds, negative attitudes expressed by friends and families confuse them further. Most feel that their lives are bereft of meaning and purpose. Many ask, “In what can I believe? Is there hope?”

COPING & RESOLUTION

“Whatever uncertainties of life lie ahead for me in the new year, I feel confident that I can meet and overcome any obstacle in my path,” wrote Kristin, former wife of a gay man, in her journal one Christmas night. She remembers that journal entry as a turning point, noting, “In my fifty-seventh year, I had come of age.”

As with other straight spouses, her journey toward restoring her identity, integrity, and belief system was long and arduous. The time needed for most to resolve their issues varies, but typically ranges from about two to six years. The stages through which they struggle to achieve transformation are common.

While the stages may overlap or vary in order, they generally proceed in the following sequence:

Shock and Relief

“It was like a fist to the gut. Everything seemed to drain to my feet.”

— Siri, wife of a bisexual man

Most straight spouses are shocked when their partners come out. It is difficult for them to believe that the loved one with whom they lived intimately has this unexpected component to their identity. Most feel disoriented by the complex mix of emotions the disclosure, while some feel relieved to find an explanation for marital problems or changes in their spouses' behavior, appearance or moods prior to the disclosure. For wives, having to be tested for sexually

transmitted diseases because of their husband's same-sex activities adds confusion, fear, and anger to the hurt that pervades this stage.

Empathy and Denial

“When I saw the anguish in David’s face, I tried to console him. We tried to console each other.”

— Carol, wife of a gay man

Many spouses experience a period of increased sexual intimacy now that they share their partners’ secret, and many empathize with their identity struggle. This increased closeness encourages hope for an improved and lasting relationship. Positive feelings often overshadow the hurt and cause them to deny implications of the disclosure. Some blame themselves for not being sexually attractive to their partners or minimize their own feelings as they try to adjust to their partners’ sexuality or gender change. This stage is marked by a roller coaster of contradictory emotions, such as empathy/anger or hope/fear, as spouses try to understand and relate to the new aspect of their partner while carrying on with family, work and social obligations.

Facing and Acknowledging Reality

“My dreams of a happy family were shattered, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.”

— Grant, husband of a lesbian

As the initial shock wears off during the first year, most straight spouses gradually become aware of the impact of the disclosure on themselves, the marriage and family life. Some become aware of the extent of its effects only as they experience depression, illness or physical breakdown.

Once aware, they can look candidly at the reality of their partner’s sexual orientation or gender identity, their own pain, and changes in the marriage. Those who do not face the reality of their post-disclosure lives stay in a state of limbo, often marked with continued bouts of anger, depression or illness. Acknowledging the effects on themselves prompts most to take responsibility for taking care of their own physical, mental and spiritual health, often with therapeutic help. Learning about homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgenderism helps them to realize that their partners will not revert to being heterosexual or their previous gender.

Spouses of bisexuals have a more complex situation to comprehend since their mates are still attracted to them as well as to persons of the same gender, and bisexuality does not fit into the prevalent either/or way of thinking. Spouses of cross dressing partners face periodic changes of their partners’ behavior and appearance, and those of transsexuals realize they face long-term physical, psychological, and emotional changes.

Facing day-to-day changes in their lives is perhaps the most difficult task. They must cope with changes in their lives as they thought they were, their roles as a spouses, and, since the majority divorce, the end of their marriages. Seeing so many sources of security gone, most spouses become angry and fearful about their future, especially those who will become single parents.

Anger

“My deep rage persists to this day, five years later. Anger is my only connection to Tim’s gayness.”

— Moira, wife of a gay man

Anger occurs at any point in the coming out process for straight spouses, but most often emerges strongly as spouses assess the total impact of the disclosure on their lives. Some feel bitter about their partners’ deception, and spouses of gay or lesbian mates may feel angered at being sexually shortchanged. The fear of HIV/AIDS and other STDs also adds to the spouse’s rage. Others are angry that their lives have been disrupted and that their families may break up. Still others resent that their partners are beginning new lives as they are picking up the pieces of their old ones. Untreated or not managed constructively, lingering rage often fuels resentment or vindictive behavior. Working through their anger typically leads to spouses’ acceptance of their new situation.

Acceptance

“I’d wanted my fantasy to come true so much that I’d compromised who I was and what I believed to make it real.”

— Caitlin, wife of a gay husband

It takes a long time for spouses to accept their partners’ disclosure and its effects as irreversible. Acceptance is a day-to-day process that may take a short or long time, depending on the extent of changes in their lives and their ability to break through former ways of viewing the world.

Some never wholly accept the reality of their situation and remain stuck in denial or helplessness. Others who experienced an extremely hurtful disclosure cannot release their feelings of injury and, without outside help, continue to feel victimized and angry. Still others never accept their partners’ orientation or gender change and live with false hope and frustration.

Most spouses gradually accept the post-disclosure changes and stop trying to make things go back to the way they were. They understand that how they handle the changes is what matters. They accept their pain as an unintended consequence of the disclosure and something that they alone can heal. Slowly, they accept their losses, too, of partners and marriages as they thought they were, their day-to-day lives, and their own self-worth, integrity, and belief sys-

tem. They realize it is up to them how to take charge of their future, regardless of the outcome to their marriage.

Grief

“I withdrew into myself, barely able to take care of myself.”

— Dan, husband of a lesbian

As each loss is accepted, spouses grieve profoundly. When grief is not processed fully, it often turns into despair and sometimes to suicidal thoughts or actions. Spouses of transsexual partners also grieve over the change of their partner’s physical appearance, gender expression, and even name. The vast majority of spouses let go of all their losses, one by one, and in doing so find the inner strength they did not know they had to accept reality and restore identity and purpose in their lives.

Healing, Reconfiguring, and Transforming

“I never thought the pain would go. Now I’m glad I went through it. I am sure of myself and I love myself.”

— Lynn, wife of a gay man

Letting go of their losses and accepting the reality of the present lives enables spouses to focus on their own needs: physical, emotional and spiritual. Many, totally exhausted, begin self-nurturing through nutritious diets, exercise, time spent in nature or with the arts, or reading and meditation. Most spouses in this stage gradually look beyond their plight to seek others and something of meaning beyond themselves.

Spouses begin the last two stages of resolution as they put their past into perspective, balancing good memories of their marriage with painful aspects of their partners’ coming out. Slowly, they reconfigure a healthy view of their sexuality, a confident self-identity, trust in others, a moral compass to guide their lives, and a new belief system grounded in reality.

Transformation, the last stage, takes place as they begin living their future based on their new blueprint, whether within the marriage or as a single person. Through forgiveness – of everyone involved with their pain of disclosure – many find peace of mind. Some utilize residual anger to become productive and creative. Others find fulfillment in helping peers in the Straight Spouse Network or becoming advocates for social justice. Whatever route taken, most spouses end up stronger and wiser human beings.

CHILDREN’S ISSUES

Just as spouses’ experiences vary, so do children’s, but their reactions shift as

they age and they never lose their role as a child nor lose their parent as a parent. Children deal with finding out about their parents' sexual orientation or gender identity according to their age and stage of development. Their reactions and understanding continues to change as they grow older, as does what it means to be the child of a GLBT parent. In addition, their coping with their parents' coming out is simultaneous with them dealing with their own development issues as they grow into adulthood. Therefore, children need time, space and support to come to terms with the fact that a parent is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

The most common issues with which they struggle include:

Disclosure

“The night before we told them, we rehearsed what Peter would say to allay any fears they might have.”

— Allison, wife of a gay man, recalling how they told their two children

Rather than hearing it from outsiders, children want to be told by their parents that a parent is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. In retrospect, some young adults say children feel trusted if they are told sooner rather than later about a parent's coming out, and the reverse if they are not told for a period of time. They feel more reassured when their parents tell them together, demonstrating that both parents are there for them, to provide security, support and to answer any questions.

Children's reactions differ widely, yet they may hide their actual feelings. Common reactions include surprise, disbelief, upset if divorce is eminent, fear of HIV/AIDS, resentment over negative effects on them, their straight parent or family life, or silence. They do not want this development to affect their lives.

Parents help children process and express their feelings by exercising patience, expressing love and encouraging communication. They want parents to “be there for us,” listening to their cares and setting a climate for sharing worries. Children feel more secure when their straight parent expresses support for the GLBT parent and reaffirms their bond with the children.

Understanding Sexuality and Gender Identity

“It wasn't bad when Dad came out – just unusual. He's the same old Dad.”

— Mark, 11, whose dad is gay

Depending on their age, children grasp different meanings in the initial news about their GLBT parent. Disclosure is but the beginning of a long process of revisiting and rethinking the information. They need time to experience what a parent's coming out means to their own lives.

Young children can accept a simple statement, such as “Mommy and Daddy still love each other and you, but Mommy (or Daddy) also loves someone else.” Children of transgender parents can understand, “Dad or Mom will be looking different but he/she will still be the same Dad or Mom.” School-aged children can grasp more details, like their parent’s love for someone of the same gender, yet they do not completely understand sexuality or gender identity.

As adolescents begin to experience their own emerging sexuality and gender identity, they welcome factual information about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism. Young people of any age who have already adopted prejudices against people who are different, especially against gay people, have a particularly difficult time. However, they can unlearn prejudice with information and examples of acceptance from their parents.

Regardless of when their parents come out, adolescents have the hardest time sorting through their feelings, issues about sexual orientation and gender identity, and being the child of a GLBT parent. They welcome an open environment in which to discuss sexuality and gender identity. Parents help by encouraging questions and open communication about HIV/AIDS and the need for safe sex. Many urge their teenage and adult children to be clear about their own sexual orientation before marrying.

Adult children, no longer in the family home and their values formed, have less of a personal stake in their parent’s disclosure. Their reactions vary, too, including respect for or a moral/religious judgment against the parent’s new orientation or gender change, empathy for the straight spouse, anger at the couple’s break up, or happiness to see both or at least one parent happy. With information and support, most continue to love their gay or transgender parent.

Some young adults may use their experiences to help other children of GLBT in support organizations such as Children of Lesbians & Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) or Families Like Mine, and some become advocates in their local schools and communities. (See p. 15 for a list of just a few of these resources.)

Parents’ Stereotypical Appearance and Same- Gender Relationships

“Dad and Buzz walked in acting feminine. To me it was ‘Yuck.’”

— Lynn, 15, whose dad is gay

Many children, particularly teenagers, initially feel embarrassed if they see their GLB parents using “stereotypical” mannerisms or clothes, or they become uncomfortable seeing their parents interact romantically with people of the same gender. Gradually, affectionate interactions set an example of a caring, loving relationship so that most children become comfortable with caring gestures,

and enjoy being with their gay parent and their friends or partners. If the parents divorce, children see that daily routines in their gay or transgender parent's home are not much different from those in their straight parent's home.

While children of transgender parents may or may not face changes in sexual orientation of their parent, they encounter more dramatic changes in appearance and behavior as the transgender parent transitions to the other gender. Nevertheless, they, too, gradually accept and relate to their parents as they always knew them under the different external appearance.

Some children of divorced GLBT parents grow up in what Stefan Lynch, co-founder of COLAGE, calls a "bi-cultural" environment because of experiences in both the straight and gay or transgender communities.

Anti-GLBT Attitudes

"When I was 10, I knew 'fag' was not a good thing to say about people, but I did not know what it meant and never thought about meeting one."

— Jo, 11, whose dad is gay

Children's discomfort, especially among teenagers, increases when they hear anti-gay or anti-trans remarks, either in general or directed at their parent. When teased for having a GLBT parent, they feel angry, embarrassed, and rejected. Some children are presumed by schoolmates to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and teased for that.

Children rely on their parents to correct the misinformation and ignorance of homophobic taunts. Parents help build their confidence by giving them tools to handle teasing, such as ignoring it or making counter remarks.

Some children lose friends when they find out about their GLBT parent. Fear of such rejection causes many, especially teenagers, to tell no one about their parents.

Teenagers, who particularly do not want to appear different from their peers and fear rejection, appreciate their parents not being overly "gay-appearing" or having GLBT books magazine or photos visible in their home when their friends visit. Not talking with peers about their parents or concerns can magnify these negative feelings, and the isolation may interfere with the development of social intimacy skills. Some adolescents and teens therefore find it helpful to share concerns with peers through online and face-to-face groups like COLAGE.

Family Breakups

“Who is going to take care of us?”

— Sue, 5, and Ginnie, 9, whose mom is a lesbian

It is estimated that the majority of couples divorce within three years after a spouse comes out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. (There are no figures available for straight-transgender couples). For most children of divorcing couples, the separation is worse than the parent’s disclosure. Typical of most children of divorce, they experience a sense of abandonment, conflict of loyalties and separation anxiety. That one parent is GLBT intensifies these reactions. For this reason alone, they need explicit assurance of love, open communication, and support from both parents and quality time with each of them, and observation of positive interaction between them.

Resolution

“I love you. You are always in my prayers.”

— Jeff, 18, in a note to his gay dad

With parental support and their own resilience, most children come to terms with their parents’ sexual orientation or gender identity when they reach adulthood. Those who find peers with whom to share have an easier time. While some may not accept the fact that they have a GLBT parent, most respect their parents’ honesty and courage in coming out. Although not all are supportive, most still love their parents and value their relationship with them.

HOW OTHERS CAN HELP

Partners, family members, friends and professionals may want to help straight spouses, but they often do not understand the unique problems they face or the depth of their trauma. Spouses therefore tend to isolate themselves, fearing rejection or assuming no one understands their unique problems.

Coping alone, many become stuck in negative feelings, and some do not fully recover from the disclosure. However, most do. While healing and growth come from within, outside support can reinforce the process. Family members, partners and friends are in a position to provide day-to-day support that can help them accept their situation and to encourage them to take steps to heal, resolve their issues, and reconfigure their lives in a forward direction. Peer support is especially beneficial, providing first hand experience with the overwhelming emotions and complex challenges spouses face.

The Straight Spouse Network provides ongoing peer support, online or in person. With this double support, straight spouses and their children can become strong advocates for social change.

Ways to Support Straight Spouses

- Listen to their concerns non-judgmentally
- Try to see their point of view
- Validate their feelings
- Encourage them to take care of their own needs
- Help them look candidly at the situation
- Practice your own and encourage their patience with the slow process of resolution
- Identify something he or she has done that can be honestly praised as showing his/her strength or insight
- Help them rebuild trust in themselves and others by trusting their word and keeping commitments made to them
- Encourage them to engage in outside activities, perhaps offering to take a spouse out for a cup of coffee or to dinner and a movie
- Call periodically to check on a spouse's welfare, since their feelings may change dramatically from day to day
- Assure spouses they are not alone and that the Straight Spouse Network is waiting with support from others who have walked their path

Resources

Sharing concerns with other spouses or children is among the best sources of support. The Straight Spouse Network can help put spouses in touch with one another, and often with support groups (both local and online). In addition to a newsletter, the Network has publications on a father's coming out to children, custody issues, straight spouse coming out issues and stages of resolution, maintaining a marriage after disclosure, and guidelines for therapists.

Professional counseling is often helpful for working through profound emotions and their identity crisis. While many therapists do not have experience with spouses in mixed orientation marriages or transgender-straight couples, the Straight Spouse Network support groups can provide information about local therapists with such experiences.

The Network can be reached at:

Straight Spouse Network

33 Linda Avenue, #2607
Oakland, CA 94611

Phone: (510) 595-1005

E-mail: dir@straightspouse.org

Web: www.straightspouse.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

One of the best ways for parents, family members, friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people themselves to get support, receive educational materials and learn about PFLAG's advocacy efforts is to visit a chapter. PFLAG has over 500 chapters located in all 50 states.

We suggest you call the local chapter whose name is stamped on the back of this booklet. If there is no chapter listed, you can visit PFLAG on the web, call PFLAG's national office for a referral, or you can use directory assistance to find PFLAG in your local area.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

Voice: (202) 467-8180

Web: www.pflag.org

Additional information or referrals to support for children of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons (and their parents) are available from:

COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere)

www.colage.org
(415) 861-5437

Family Pride Coalition

www.familypride.org
(202) 331-5015

Families Like Mine

www.familieslikemine.com
(866) 245-4281

Recommended Reading about Straight Spouses, Children and their Families

- **“The Best Interest of Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents,”** *The Scientific Basis for Custody Decisions*, Robert Galatzer-Levy and Louis Kraus, eds. Wiley, 1999.
- **Beyond Acceptance**, Carolyn Griffin and Marian and Arthur Wirth. Prentice-Hall, 1986.
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- **From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation**, Deborah Abbott & Ellen Farmer, Crossing Press, 1995.
- **Goodbye, I Love You**, Carol Lynn Pearson. Jove, 1989.
- **Just Tell the Truth**, Terry Norman. Prehension 1998
- **Married Women Who Love Women**, Carren Strock. Doubleday, 1998.
- **My Husband is Gay**, Carol Gray. Crossing Press. 2001.
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- **The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-Out Crisis for Straight Spouses**, Amity Pierce Buxton. Wiley, 1994 (rev.).
- **The Truth Shall Set You Free: A Memoir**, Sally Lowe Whitehead. Harper San Francisco, 1997.

- **Uncommon Lives: Gay Men & Straight Women**, Catherine Whitney. New American, 1990.
- **When Husbands Come Out of the Closet**, Jean Schaar Gochros. Harrington Park, 1989.
- **“Works in Progress”** Amity Pierce Buxton, in *Current Research in Bisexuality*, Ronald C. Fox, eds. Harrington Park, 2004.
- **“Writing Our Own Script,”** Amity Pierce Buxton, in *Bisexuality in the Lives of Men: Facts and Fictions*, Brett Beemyn and Erich Steinman, eds. Harrington Park, 2001.

Anti-GLBT Organizations

There are a number of groups that have formed to oppose basic civil rights and equality for GLBT individuals. Many are difficult to immediately identify since they claim that they are committed to “traditional values,” when in reality they advocate for harmful “reparative therapy” and anti-GLBT legislation.

Knowing who they are and the harms that they pose to your gay, lesbian, and bisexual loved ones is critical. Below are the names of just a few of these groups. You can learn more about such groups online – People for the American Way (www.pfaw.org) has a resource center that lists these groups, descriptions of their work, and archives of what they’ve advocated in their own words. You can also get news on these organizations from PFLAG.

American Center for Law and Justice

American College of Pediatricians

American Family Association

Christian Communication Network

Christian Families with Faith for Lesbians and Gays (CFLAG)

Concerned Women for America

Courage/Encourage

Eagle Forum

Family Research Institute

Focus on the Family

Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality (JONAH)

Liberty Counsel

National Association for Research and Therapy for Homosexuality (NARTH)

Parents & Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays, (PFOX)

Positive Alternatives to Homosexuality (PATH)

Traditional Values Coalition

Support PFLAG

The Benefits of PFLAG membership:

- A subscription to our newsletter, the PFLAGpole
- The PFLAG Weekly Alert and Action Alerts via e-mail
- Discounts on PFLAG publications
- Invitations to local, regional and national events and conferences
- Voting privileges for national board members and regional directors
- Satisfaction that you are part of the nationwide network of PFLAG families and friends advocating for GLBT equality

To join as an at-large member, visit www.pflag.org or fill in the application below and mail the application to:

PFLAG

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

Member Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Phone: _____ e-mail: _____

Payment Information:

Check enclosed made payable to PFLAG.

Visa Mastercard Discover American Express

Please charge my card:

\$50 \$75 \$100 \$250 \$500 \$1,000

Card Number: _____

Card Expiration: _____

Important:

The member name and address must match what appears on your credit card billing statement to be processed.

Other PFLAG Publications

Our Daughters and Sons: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People

One of our most popular publications, this is a “must read” for parents who are forming new and honest relationships with a loved one who has come out to them. This booklet answers several commonly-asked questions about having a gay child and includes a list of related resources.

Nuestras Hijas y Nuestros Hijos: Preguntas y respuestas para padres de gays, lesbianas y bisexuales

A culturally appropriate Spanish translation of *Our Daughters and Sons*, this booklet is a valuable resource for Spanish-speaking families coming to terms with homosexuality and bisexuality. It answers commonly asked questions about having a gay or lesbian loved one, and includes Spanish language resources.

Be Yourself: Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth.

Today’s youth face more social pressures than ever, especially since young people are coming out at increasingly younger ages. This publication offers a supportive approach to common questions asked by teens who may be questioning their sexual orientation. It also provides hotline numbers for teens and a list of resources.

Faith in Our Families: Parents, Families and Friends Talk About Religion and Homosexuality

Discovering that a loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can pose new questions about your faith and may prompt you to re-evaluate beliefs that you previously took for granted. By using personal experiences, this publication provides examples for reconciling your faith with the knowledge that a loved one is gay. Includes an updated list of gay and lesbian religious and spiritual groups to watch out for.

Bisexuality Resource Packet

Bisexuality is a commonly misunderstood and misrepresented concept. This packet provides facts about bisexuality, commonly-asked questions, resource lists and a set of articles.

(continued)

From Our House to the Schoolhouse: A Safe Schools Publication

Making schools safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth is an important part of PFLAG's work. Facts about anti-gay harassment in schools and important legal landmarks are detailed in this booklet for educators. Resources and a "safe schools checklist" are also included.

Our Trans Children

PFLAG'S Transgender Network (TNET) published this booklet as an introduction to transgender (TG) issues especially for parents of "children" of all ages. The booklet covers transgender-related terms, TG youth, transition processes, family journeys, commonly asked questions, commonalities and differences between sexual orientation and gender identity, legal concerns, a brief bibliography, a list of resources, and trans family websites. This is an excellent educational tool for families, friends, employers, and the larger community. (This publication is also available in Spanish.)

Coming Out Trans to Your Parents and Family

This single-page handout outlines things you need to consider when you plan to come out to your parents and family as transgender. It is a guide to making the coming out process as comfortable as possible.

All publications are available as a free download on www.pflag.org and also for purchase. Visit our website or call (202) 467-8180 for more information.

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