

WHEN YOUR SPOUSE COMES OUT: *A Straight Mate's Recovery Manual*

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PREFACE

"I'm gay!"

When a heterosexual's mate utters these words, life changes in an instant and will never, ever be the same for either partner. My husband of 30 years disclosed his homosexuality and we suddenly found ourselves in a completely different realm. With his one sentence, "I have homosexual tendencies," we both plunged into a crisis of identity. In those first few days, my mind was pummeled by disbelief, disorientation, fear, confusion, deep sadness, and anger. Trust was gone. Our plans evaporated. I was in shock.

The ensuing months were chaotic, as my husband and I worked together and separately to understand how our lives would go on. Could we remain married? Would the family be destroyed? Were we trapped in secrecy? Would we die with AIDS?

Could I meet my deepest needs, married to a gay man? Would I grow old in lonely isolation? Hundreds of unfamiliar questions battered my heart and mind.

That initial crisis was the beginning of a more complicated journey. Awash with doubts, we took many months with many false starts to work our way through waves of confusion. Even with counseling and our best efforts it took a long time to begin healing, gain clarity, and finally to regain an optimistic sense of self. After four years in the closet of secrecy, we finally did separate and divorce amicably, but the emotional toll was heavy.

Afterward, I engaged these hard-won personal lessons to encourage others who found themselves in mixed orientation marriages. I wrote *My Husband Is Gay: A Woman's Guide to Surviving the Crisis*, revealing my experience and that of twenty-five other heterosexual women whose husbands came out. Focusing on that event and its immediate aftermath, it was a crisis survival handbook for straight wives. Courageous, determined women demonstrated on its pages that a mixed orientation marriage need not be entirely destructive to either spouse, despite initial shock and inevitable suffering.

The hopeful thesis of that book touched thousands of women in many countries of the world. Though all the straight spouses who shared their stories in *My Husband Is Gay* are Americans, women in other cultures identified with our experiences and understood. The book was first distributed in English-speaking countries and I heard from women in the U.S., England, Australia, South Africa, and Canada. Later, when it was translated into Thai and Spanish, other women who grew up in vastly different cultures in Asia and South America also responded. In matters of the heart, we are all the same. People everywhere need love and security, deep trust within the family, and

a safe environment for their children. Though our language and geographic location differ, our shared hurt is familiar and we comfort each other via the Internet. Worldwide exploration of this subject proves that homosexuality is a fact of life in all cultures, and when gay people marry heterosexuals, the entire family experiences radical challenges and upheaval.

My Husband is Gay explored the *initial crisis* faced by straight wives. But early survival is only the beginning of a longer process. Key questions begged answers. Are there differences in the way men and women perceive the straight spouse situation and deal with it? What pitfalls do people encounter and how do they bridge them? What are typical long-term challenges? What are some secrets of successful rebuilding and renewal? I continued interviewing straight spouses to find answers, finding more than 40 role models who have walked this path, some for thirty years or more. Their stories provide answers that can help overcome other deep personal losses as well, whether related to mixed orientation relationships or not.

This new book, *When Your Spouse Comes Out*, explores long-term healing for both male and female straight spouses. Co-author Dr. Deborah Bowman, a clinical psychologist and professor in the Transpersonal Psychology Department at Naropa University, brings both counseling experience and academic training to the project. She identifies patterns in the case studies and provides a psychotherapist's insight into straight spouses' unique challenges. She also offers solid therapeutic techniques for self-help. This book attempts to identify practical steps that successful individuals have taken to keep this one traumatic event from ruining their future. True stories prove that,

for most, the damage is not irreparable. When they are fully healed, straight spouses can craft a new reality and thrive again.

The book is divided into three sections. In Part One, “Understanding the Challenge: Contrasting Patterns,” characteristic but diverse reactions to the coming-out event reveal typical stages of coping by straight spouses. Case studies form a mosaic of personal experience, creating the ground for Part Two, “Self-Healing Guide for Straight Spouses.” This middle section defines and interprets immediate personal challenges, family and social concerns, and long-term obstacles. Here, Dr. Bowman's expertise sheds light on core issues. Finally, Part Three, “Growing and Thriving,” examines the fruition of lessons learned on the straight spouse path and suggests some secrets of transformation.

True stories of straight mates, both male and female, illustrate chapters in each section. Spouses' experiences are told in their own words, taken from the interviews. Only their names have been changed to protect their identity. Their direct quotations are integrated into the text and are *designated by italics*, rather than by endless quotation marks. The intent is to have these real people speak directly to the reader. Questions and activities at the end of each chapter reinforce the ideas presented and help readers apply others' wisdom to their own situation. The result is a self-directed path to recovery, which can be used individually or in the context of a support group. Two appendices contain a compilation of exercises and activities plus additional resources.

Whether facing the straight spouse challenge isolated and alone, or working with a support group as a participant or facilitator, you are invited to join us on this journey to

renewal. We invite you into this poignant world of real people whose former lives were shattered. Watch and learn how some picked up their broken pieces and transformed them into wholeness. Practice their techniques for healing. Their triumphs and disasters and shared wisdom can point the way toward greater awareness and the possibility of thriving after crisis.

--Carol Grever
