

Straight Spouses Speak Out: Implications for Gay and Lesbian Marriage

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Abstract

This article highlights the experiences of straight spouses who have weathered the “coming out” storm of their partners and their views of same-gender marriage. Experiences of shock, denial, and for some, relief, are chronicled, along with post-disclosure stories of coping and family life outcomes. An overview of mixed-orientation marriage and children from these marriages are discussed.

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Whether reading a local newspaper, a national magazine, watching television or surfing the Internet today, you will very likely find something about same-gender marriages. What you will read, hear or see may be the report of a church wedding by a minister who may soon be sued, or a state legislature's vote to have its electorate amend the constitution to codify marriage as only between a man and a woman, or an op ed piece about morality, social justice and equal rights, the universality of love, or the impact on individuals of not having federal laws that recognize spousal rights and obligations of same-gender partners.

Amid these arguments, we find scant mention of a little known group of spouses in other -gender marriages whose experience adds a new dimension to the public debate about same-gender marriage. These are heterosexual husbands and wives whose other-gender partners are in fact gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The experiences of these spouses shed light on an unintended result of societal pressures that are based on long held beliefs and laws upholding marriages between a man and a woman as the only valid form of religious and civil commitment of two people.

Based on available research on the incidence of homosexuality and bisexuality and percentages

of those who ever were in heterosexual marriages, up to two million gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults in the United States have ever been in “mixed-orientation” marriages. In turn, their 2 million heterosexual husbands and wives and 3,500,000 children were impacted by the denial, discovery or disclosure of their spouse or parent's same- gender attractions and sometimes sexual behavior. These couples can be found in every sector of society across the country, age, educational level, socio-economic class, racial and ethnic group, and faith community.

This article will focus on the experience of straight spouses/partners and their views of the implications of gay marriage. Due to the focus of this article being “marriage,” the authors will only be using the term “straight spouse.” It is important to note that the phenomena of mixed orientation relationships similarly affect those individuals who anticipated their relationship to be a life-long commitment even if s/he did not participate in a “marriage” ceremony. First, an overview of mixed-orientation marriages, a historical perspective on straight spouses/partners and descriptions of their experiences of weathering the coming out storm as a basis for their views of the implications of gay marriage will be presented. Information regarding children from mixed-orientation marriages will also be discussed. Finally, specific

considerations concerning straight spouses and health education will be highlighted.

Heterosexual Spouses/Partners: Their Experiences and Perspectives on Gay Marriage

Before discussing the experience of straight spouses, it is important to understand the background of mixed-orientation marriages. This term is used to denote a marriage between a heterosexual person and person who discloses or discovers s/he is lesbian, gay or bisexual. Why do gay, lesbian or bisexual persons enter heterosexual marriages? Most of the individuals want a committed relationship and a family. Due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of sexual orientation that has abounded for years as well as societal assumptions and prejudices, many gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals felt they had to engage in heterosexual matrimony. In addition, most individuals have been taught to believe the only way to achieve a committed relationship and family is to enter the traditional form of marriage espoused by their family of origin, community, or faith-based congregation.

Many gay, lesbian and bisexual people have had to deny, ignore or leave unquestioned their same-gender attractions. Eventually, these feelings can no longer be suppressed. After a painful struggle between fidelity and truth, love and deception, many come out to their heterosexual wives and husbands. In the majority of cases, the couples divorce, leaving disrupted families and single parents across the country. Thus, the gay, lesbian, or bisexual spouses' attempt to commit to a heterosexual marriage endorsed by society ends up hurting not only themselves but also their wives or husbands and children.

Reported experiences of heterosexual spouses who have weathered the coming out storm, illustrate the extent of pain for all concerned (This information is drawn from self reports gathered from over 8,000 spouses or partners in mixed-orientation marriages or relationships since 1986, and clinical work with spouses in such relationships since 1995.). When they wed, most spouses are unaware that their partners are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Some gay, lesbian, or

bisexual partners may not even be aware themselves. A minority of individuals enters knowingly into such mixed-orientation marriages, but they are often unaware of its implications for their relationship. Over time, something seems to be amiss, or the straight spouses discover evidence that their husbands are frequently surfing the Internet looking at gay-related sites or their wives are inordinately interested in another woman. Sometimes the gay, lesbian, or bisexual spouse discloses that s/he has sexual feelings for someone of the same gender or possibly they have had a sexual relationship with someone of the same outside the marriage.

For heterosexual spouses, finding out that their husbands or wives are gay, lesbian, typically causes shock, denial, and, for some, relief to find an answer as to why they believed they were not sexually appealing or unattractive or why there was little sexual intimacy, unexplained absences, or changes in behavior. After the initial shock, that is often devastating, every post-disclosure story of coping and outcome is different. At the same time, straight spouses gradually discern common issues that are related to sexuality, the marriage, their children, their own identity and integrity and their belief system. They feel rejected sexually as a man or a woman or sexually shortchanged and forever inadequate. They worry about the future of the marriage and the effect on their children of their parents' having same-gender attractions and possibly a partner. Faced with the reality that their partner was closeted, for a short or long time, straight spouses feel duped and unable to trust their own judgment as well as their partners' word. Finally, the disclosure shatters their belief system about marriage, sexuality, and their future. Gradually they begin to feel worthless, helpless, and hopeless.

Emotions that arise from these issues begin as a roller coaster of conflicting feelings: sadness and relief, fear and hope, love and hate, anger and compassion. These feelings follow a typical progression. Many spouses only gradually become aware of their mates' revealed orientation, changes in their lives, and their own pain. This awareness rouses hurt, which, if left

unresolved can turn into debilitating feelings of victim hood. Most find a source for personal support, from a friend or family member. Others find peer, therapeutic, or medical help to work through their pain constructively.

As spouses realize the extent of their pain, most slowly begin to accept the new as something that cannot be changed back to what it had been. Fear and anger can dominate this stage: fear of the unknown for themselves and their children and anger about the deception, harm to sexuality, the need to change their view of themselves, and the end of the marriage as they thought it to be. Some spouses become stuck in their fear, paralyzed to make any moves to make necessary changes in their lives to fit the new reality. Others become embedded in their anger and become vengeful or vindictive. Most work through the anger and fear to gain a wider perspective on their situations.

Once they accept the new situation, most spouses realize that they have lost what they had in the past, unleashing sadness and grief. Some become mired in their grief, becoming depressed and at times, suicidal. Most learn how to distance themselves from the past and turn toward their futures, whether or not they stay married.

Having accepted the present and let go of the past, healing begins. This usually occurs about the second or third year after the disclosure. As they heal, they deal with profound questions mentioned earlier about their own identity, integrity, and belief system that enables them to find meaning in their lives. Resolving these questions often takes a long time. Most spouses resolve them by the end of the third year after about their partners' came out but many take longer.

During these months and years of coping, what happens to the marriage itself? About a third of the couples divorce quite quickly, because the partner wants to pursue a new life or has a lover, the heterosexual spouse does not approve of homosexual behavior or infidelity, or the couple feels their relationship cannot withstand one spouse's having a different orientation. Another

third stay together to sort out issues and decide what to do, usually separating within three years. The last third commit to finding a way to stay married under the new circumstances. Half of these stay together for three years or more and the other half separate, though often with a stronger bond than before from working out their differences with honesty and love.

Having had these painful experiences following a husband's or wife's disclosure or discovery, straight spouses as a group do not condone deception and do support truth telling and personal integrity when it comes to a person's entering marriage, whether heterosexual or same-gender. However, not all spouses support the idea of same-gender marriage, often this is because of their beliefs about marriage and homosexuality.

For those who do support same-gender marriage, the reasons are many and varied. The authors asked straight spouses to respond to the question, "I support gay and lesbian marriage because...." The responses below illustrate the commonalities heard from the participants.

A major reason that runs through the comments (don't need "below", I think) is to prevent anyone else – the heterosexual spouse or his/her gay/lesbian/bisexual partner — from having to suffer the pain and grief, depression and sometimes illness that both spouses endured because of the legal and societal sanctions against a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person's forming a relationship with a partner of the same gender. Other reasons relate to the importance of truth, integrity, love, and societal acceptance.

Last autumn, when the Massachusetts Supreme Court was considering the case of same-gender marriages, a former wife of a gay man in Boston in early 50's, married 15 years and divorced for seven, wrote a statement to be read on the steps of the Boston Public Library in favor of the same-gender court decision. In it she wrote,

"Sometimes, a marriage between 'one man and one woman' is a recipe for disaster, tragedy, and heartbreak: when one of them is straight, and one--openly or secretly (perhaps unknown even

to the person him or herself) is homosexual or bisexual. Let ours be the last generation -- the last generation in which a straight spouse finds himself or herself trapped in a mixed orientation marriage. The last generation in which gay teenagers are driven to commit suicide because of their sexual orientation.”

More recently, Collette, a forty-year-old in Nebraska, wrote her Attorney General about her experience and what she learned to make her urge him not to have the state pass a constitutional amendment that would limit marriages to couples comprised of a man and a woman.

"I want to share my own story with you so that it might help Nebraska citizens-at-large to decide to stop discriminating against the homosexual community. I was married for 13 years when my husband told me he had been cheating with men. I have had almost six years since then to think about what happened and why. I blamed myself for being stupid enough to love him, trust him and care for him, just to get a slap in the face in return. I felt I lost everything we had worked for. Now, I have come to the conclusion that that is not true, and I'm not to blame. Society is really to blame because they don't understand homosexuality and are pushing the homosexual community into "The Closet." Society doesn't want to open up their minds and understand anything about people who are different. Society just wants people who are different to go away. Well, that's not going to happen. Homosexual people have been around thousands of years and they are our family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and so on.

“My experience taught me that:

1. Homosexual people long for a committed, open, loving, and lasting relationship just like heterosexual people. But because the law says, “A marriage is between a man and a woman” they can't have it.
2. Because homosexual people are discriminated against and cannot have a committed, open, loving, and lasting relationship with a person of the same

gender, most run into ‘The Closet,’ which causes lots of pain and suffering for them, their family and friends. (Most of the time, the family and friends don't even know what is wrong or why someone is unhappy, and the homosexual person goes to his or her grave with their secret. What a miserable existence).

3. Some homosexual people want that committed, open, loving, and lasting relationship so bad they force themselves into a relationship with the opposite gender, get married and have kids. As you can see from the information I sent, this causes a lot of pain and suffering for everyone involved, most importantly, the children.
4. It would be so much better for everyone if laws limiting marriage to a man and a woman do not exist.”

Other arguments often expressed by straight spouses or partners in favor of same-gender marriage emphasize the importance of supporting same gender couples who want make a loving commitment to each other. Molly, former wife of a gay man and mother of a gay son, recently writes,

“That is why I support gay marriage and willingly was interviewed as the supportive parent of a newly legally married gay son last month. How badly I wanted to carry a huge sign and tell the world that gay marriages might prevent a number of gay/straight marriages and share with them the agony of gay/straight marriages for both me and ‘the gay one’.”

Another woman, in her mid 50's, married for 24 years and now separated, wrote: “I am very pro gay marriages. I just wish it was accepted years ago when I got married. Everyone deserves to be happy. Everyone deserves to be legally bound with the one they love. When I heard on the TV that one lesbian woman could not see her partner who was dying in the ER because she was not a ‘family member’ was sad. She was more than a family member. If they are living together anyway why not get married to each other?”

The former wife of a man, married for nearly 30 years, emphasizes personal integrity. “I really

can only think of one issue and that is to be who you are. If you feel you are gay or a lesbian than go for it. Do not act what is considered to be the normal world and what your parents accept. For your sake, be yourself you will be a much happier person. Your parents and friends will come around t. For straight spouses who meet someone who is gay and think you can change them, forget it. You cannot change who a person is. They may appear to have changed for five, ten years, but down the road the true person comes out and their true happiness or sadness comes out. Would you want to be changed to be someone you aren't? Why would you want to do that to someone?"

A former husband, married for 22 years writes, "I believe the media has created a moral panic. One side is played against the other. If same sex marriages are allowed it will be a major step toward acceptance. This will take time but the issues will be more in the open and not hidden in a closet. I do not feel that allowing them to marry will eliminate or reduce the number of gays that marry heterosexuals. It is my opinion they marry in an attempt to fulfill the needs creating a family and be accepted as "Normal" Society has created this image that unless you marry, and have children you are not accepted. People have to accept change. It cannot be forced."

Spouses stress the importance of equal access to the protection and obligations of civil marriage, and some mention parenting. "I don't have anything against gay marriage either," one spouse writes. "I think we all should be treated equally. Isn't that what so many people strive for in a "perfect world?"

Another spouse comments, "I believe everyone deserves the same rights, regardless of their sexual orientation. My boss is a lesbian, living with her significant other for some time. They would very much like to get married. Legally married spouses have over a thousand rights that unmarried couples don't have. My boss has mentioned the fact that if one of them were seriously ill or injured, the other one would not have the right to direct their medical treatment. They could be denied the right to care of each

other if one of them were dying of an illness. Why on earth should these two wonderful women be denied the right to marry?"

"Would I allow my child to be part of such a union? That is, if her father was in a gay relationship, would I 'allow' her to be with him? Absolutely, I would insist on it. A child needs to interact with both parents if that is at all possible. Besides that, I'd like to think my child grew up knowing that there are all different kinds of people in this world and they are (for the most part) all worthwhile human beings. My ex took our daughter to a lesbian wedding when she was about six. Afterwards, I asked her what she thought of the wedding. Her answer was that they had really good cake."

Another spouse responds, "I always have been in support of same-gender marriage. I simply do not see why ANY couple committed to each other should not be able to get married. Frankly, I think heterosexuals have made a mockery of the institution of marriage all on their own, and see little gay couples could do to make it any worse, as so many claim would happen if they were allowed to marry. I can't imagine actually sitting face to face with a gay couple-my ex and his partner included-and telling them they don't deserve to be married."

Finally, in order for the above qualities and attitudes to be realized, many spouses point out the need for social acceptance of homosexual and bisexual persons as a core reason for their support of gay marriage. In response to the question: "If I could teach someone three things about gay and lesbian issues, I would want them to learn..." one respondent, a former wife, married eleven years, with four children, and now in her early forties, writes:

"...that there are people beyond the gay and lesbian population. First, there are straight spouses. Second, there are children of straight/gay marriages. There are children that are a part of the gay and lesbian population, not out of choice, but rather out of deceit and societal conformation. Third, we must acknowledge that homosexuality exists in our society." She continues, "We have asked a

group of people to conform to one societal expectation: men marry women. It cannot be done. If we ignore this issue we create expectations that cannot be met. Innocent straight people are paying for societies oppression of the person they married. My knowing many gay men and my mothers influence made me accept everyone. It never entered my mind, that a man would marry a woman if he was a homosexual....”

“I do know that until we accept that there are people with lifestyles that are not necessarily alternative, but rather ‘right for them,’ we will never be able to move forward with integrity and compassion.”

Still other comments: “As a straight spouse, I believe in supporting gay marriage because it's simply the right thing to do. Any couple willing to enter a committed relationship deserves the chance to marry. Even in 2004, homophobia is still interwoven in every aspect of our society, thus making it very difficult for gays and lesbians to be honest about who they are. Gays and lesbians are all around us, we work with them, live next door to them, go to school with them, etc., they're just like the rest of us, but with a sexual orientation that is in the minority. Gays and lesbians are NOT looking for special rights; they are just looking to be treated with the same respect and access to rights as heterosexuals have.”

Children from mixed-orientation marriages comprise another very important group whose needs often go unrecognized. Despite a growing awareness that many children do not reside in a household with two parents of both genders, there has been little, if any, acknowledgement that some of these children may have parents who are of the other gender but also of mixed-orientation. It is important to acknowledge that children from mixed orientation families often have gone through a different process than their friends who may have always known their parent(s) are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

As they shift their perception of the disclosing parent, they have to process their parent's change in self identity (though he or she is still

the same parent), and often social life as well as their own coming out as a child or adult-child of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual parent and mixed orientation parents. The majority of children in these situations have to contend with issues of divorce as well, including separation anxiety, fear of abandonment, and divided loyalties. If the young person is an adolescent when their parents come out, it may be confusing to have their parent dealing with the same issues of sexuality, identity, and integrity with which they are dealing. Having to keep the family's secret, feelings out of shame and embarrassment or not wanting to appear different may inhibit them from developing healthy relationships.

A common theme throughout this article is the impact homophobia and heterosexism has upon all of us. The authors would like to suggest that, in promoting physical and psychological well-being, it is imperative to be aware of the consequences to individuals, couples, communities and society that result from the non-acceptance of different sexual orientations. Many resources exist for exploring the topic of sexual orientation in the classroom and the public sector. If your campus, school or community does not have teaching guides, a good source of information is the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS, 2004).

Many of the physical and psychological concerns of straight spouses are the same as other individuals who are going through changes and/or an ending in her/his relationship. As already mentioned, what complicates an already stressful process is the uniqueness for the straight spouse in having to also contend with homophobia, heterosexism and the coming out process. Here ‘coming out’ refers to the process as it impacts the straight spouse, the gay, lesbian or, bisexual, partner and /or the child(ren). For more on this subject please see the book, “The Other Side of the Closet.” In addition, concerns about STD's and HIV/AIDS add another stressor to an already complex situation.

In conclusion, if “marriage between a man or a woman” were codified as the only legal form of marriage in the federal constitution and same-

gender marriage is outlawed at a federal level, then there will probably be an increase of the number of gay men and lesbians who, wanting to form lasting couple relationships and raise children, will chose to do so through marriage to someone of the other gender. That means that, these painful stories of closeted marriages and family breakups would probably multiply. There would be more gay men and lesbians would repeat the cycle of denial or deception, disclosure, and, in most cases, divorce, that we have witnessed over the past twenty plus years. More straight spouses will be in pain and more children will suffer from divorce and have to work through issues of having a GLT parent; Not only would this consequence add to the current instability of our communities and further erode marriage as a core social value, but it would result in more mental and physical health problems that have to be addressed by health care workers and educators.

In contrast, if same-gender couples are able to have their committed relationship legitimized and raise families, supported by the law and public opinion, we as a society will have fewer broken families and relationships that are more lasting that will increase community stability and public health levels as well as nurture the institution of marriage itself.

Resources for straight spouses and children of mixed-orientation parents

Straight Spouse Network (SSN)

Straight Spouse Network's (SSN's) (Straight Spouse Network, 2004) philosophy is to support all spouses or significant others wherever they

are in their journeys and to encourage constructive resolution of issues that arise when their gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) partners come out, regardless of the outcome to the marriage or relationship. SSN supports and provides free services for spouses or partners and mixed-orientation couples who stay together after disclosure as well as those who separate or divorce. SSN members include spouses whose GLBT spouses were open about their sexual orientation in the beginning as well as those whose GLBT spouses were closeted or continue to hide and deny. Inclusion and diversity, honesty, understanding, acceptance, support for personal growth, and constructive problem-solving -- that's what SSN's mission of reaching out, healing, and building bridges is all about.

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)

The Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE, 2004) organization is by and for children of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans parents or couples or mixed-orientation couples. Resources are primarily for children teen age on up. Reading references are available, two annual conferences for families are held, and local chapters offer support and sometimes activities.

Families Like Mine

Families Like Mine (2004) was founded by Abigail Garner, the daughter of a mixed-orientation couple who was raised by her straight mother and two fathers. The organization offers information, advice and resources for families like hers.

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