

## Married and Coming Out



Coming out to themselves is the first step. Coming out to their spouse is the next big leap — with its own scary consequences.

### What Do You Do When your Spouse Decides 'I'm Gay' and 'I Want a Divorce'

On the morning of his 21st wedding anniversary, Randy Spires woke up expecting kisses and a loving note from his wife, affirming their lives together. Instead he found he'd been blind-copied on an e-mail to her female lover. "It was like taking every emotion you ever had and putting it on the tumble setting in your clothes dryer," says Spires.

Despite the initial shock of finding out that his wife was having an affair — and a same-sex one, at that — Spires hoped to salvage the marriage. "I'd just completed my military career, and she was starting to get traction in her own job. So for a year and a half we went off in different directions, working different shifts. I was giving her an opportunity to grow, just as she had given me, during my career. I loved her, I trusted her. If you've only been married once, you don't know what to expect."

Most importantly, says Spires, they had their children to consider. When he confronted his wife with the e-mail, not only did she admit to the affair, she also informed Spires that she had no desire to work through the issues of their marriage. Her reason, says Spires, was simple. "It was because I am a man."

In hindsight, there were telltale signs. One incident occurred the previous Thanksgiving: when he asked her when she was picking up the turkey, she informed him she'd made out-of-town plans for the holiday. Though their children convinced her to stay for the meal, she left right after dessert. "Her bags were already packed. She'd left them by the door." When the shock wore off, the anger set in. "I was angry at myself, for being played the fool. I thought, 'How could I have been so blind?'"

[Jack Drescher](#), M.D., a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who is the author and editor of several books dealing with psychoanalytic therapy for gay, lesbian bisexual and transgendered patients, has tremendous empathy for the plight of the straight spouse. "Feelings of betrayal are justified. The straight spouse must now adjust the perception of his, or her, life to a new reality."

Drescher also feels that straight spouses shouldn't blame themselves for missing any clues. "Many people don't know if they're gay when they get married. They think the marriage will end the confusion, or that it will make them less interested in people of the same sex. In fact, explains Drescher, some struggle for years with their identity crisis. "Even if they admit to themselves that they are gay, they ask themselves: 'Should I do what is best for myself, or what is right for my family?'"

If they leave the closet, says Drescher, it's because they finally realize that they are not being true to themselves. "They feel they are sacrificing something. Many don't want to hide it anymore."

#### LEARNING THE TRUTH

When the truth finally comes out, says Spires, "The straight spouse is that chalk line on the crime scene. People don't realize that there is actually a person there. The gay community doesn't want to see us, and the straight community certainly doesn't understand our situation. Everyone has had a relationship gone sour, but it was a straight relationship, so they can't really relate. Some guys would say to me 'Boy are you lucky!' or 'How did you turn her gay?'"

Which makes it even harder for straight spouses to find the support they need, to process the emotional trauma that comes with the shock of betrayal. Like many straight spouses, Spires sought information online. That was where he found the [Straight Spouse Network](#), a nonprofit support organization with more than 7,000 members. SSN offers 72 live support groups in the United States and seven other countries. There are another nine online groups.

The organization was founded by [Amity Pierce Buxton](#), Ph.D, whose book, "[The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families](#)," was inspired by her personal experiences: her ex-husband came out after they had separated. "When I'd heard, I was relieved to find out what had been wrong, why he had been unresponsive and got depressed during our marriage."

Her book, which offers straight spouses of both genders insightful and comprehensive advice, is a veritable crash course on the topic. According to

Buxton, there may be as many as two million straight/gay marriages in the country. The recent political scandal involving the former governor from New Jersey, [Jim McGreevey, and his wife, Dina Matos](#), is a powerful example that divorces between gay and straight spouses are more prevalent than society may admit.

However, the number of open marriages — those in which the straight spouse is aware of the other spouse's sexual orientation, and accepts it — is less than one-sixth of such unions. "One third will break up right away, within a year," predicts Buxton. "Another third will stay together for a while, but then eventually separate. The last third will try to work it out, but within three years, only half of these marriages will succeed. If they do, it's because these partners feel it's no else's business."

Surprisingly, when the couple does stay together it's usually not for children's sake or financial reasons, but because they enjoy each other's company, explains Buxton. Whether the straight spouse accepts this new situation or leaves, they must all go through what Buxton has identified as seven stages of emotions.

## THE SEVEN STAGES

### **Stage 1: Disorientation, disbelief, denial — and often relief.**

Says Buxton: "Straight spouses ask themselves, 'Was it me? Was I not woman, or man, enough for him or her? What about my own sexuality?' Not only do you feel betrayed but you start to doubt your own judgment. 'What is right or wrong, true or false? Was there anything good about this marriage?' And perhaps: 'I've always felt something was wrong, and this proves it.'"

### **Stage 2: Facing the reality of the partner's sexual orientation (or gender identity), the spouses' own pain and changes in their life because of it.**

"The news is devastating. Your feelings of pain can last for weeks," says Buxton. "The straight spouse thinks: 'He's doing this to me. I've been shortchanged, sexually, and I had nothing to do with it.' One wife told me she just curled up into the fetal position and didn't move for three days."

### **Stage 3: Accepting present reality and realizing the irreversibility of the new aspects of the partner, even if the marriage might continue.**

"Coming out to themselves is the first step. Coming out to their spouse is the next big leap — with its own scary consequences. They risk rejection with the person who loves them, with whom they've built their lives around," explains Buxton. "Now, having confessed their true feelings, gay spouses feel liberated. They feel free to live the life they truly want. They are like teens let loose in a candy shop. Some can't even understand why their spouses are upset."

### **Stage 4: Letting go of past assumptions about themselves, their marriage and their partner.**

"Because straight spouses feel they are living a nightmare, it takes them a while to look and accept the fact that this is happening," explains Buxton. "They think: 'Who do I talk to?' They are angry that they've been put in this situation."

### **Stage 5: Healing their own identity and integrity including self worth and value system.**

"Straight spouses feel as if their values — their assumptions about gender, marriage, their own futures — have been smashed to pieces. They question their own moral integrity," explains Buxton. "And while a number of gay spouses are supportive and look for a way to help their straight spouses process this news, others may be cruel because, emotionally, they've moved on." When the gay spouse wants to keep the revelation private, the straight spouse may feel guilty and ashamed for playing along, says Buxton. "Maybe the gay spouse wants to keep it quiet because of his job, or perhaps because of his status in community. If that's the case, then he's asking someone to go into the closet with him. The straight spouse is living someone else's lie. She is complicit in it, and doesn't like it."

### **Stage 6: Reconfiguring and refocusing themselves to view their situation in perspective and formulate a belief system with meaning and purpose.**

"By this time, the straight spouse wants to tell someone, receive empathy or advice. But many friends, and family don't understand. Frustratingly, their only reaction might well be, 'Why didn't you know?' or 'Why don't you leave him?'"

### **Stage 7: Transforming their lives based on their reconfigured worldview.**

Buxton counsels straight spouses to take their time before making any decisions. "Clarify what you want, need, and value. Be clear about yourself, and ask your spouse to do the same. Believe it or not, it may take a year or two to think through your options. In the long run, you have to do what is right for you."

## MOVING ON WITH LIFE

Randy Spires agrees. "When I married, my number one goal was to make her as happy as she could be. I realized if I was the cause for her unhappiness, there was nothing more that I could do but support her and let her move on. For me, the turning point, came when I could look myself in the mirror and announce: 'I did everything I could to hold this marriage together.'"

Today Spires is still single, but he is in a committed relationship — with a woman whose ex-husband also came out of the closet. In fact, he met her at one of the many Straight Spouse Network gatherings that take place around the country. Says Spires: "Because we have both gone through this experience, there was already a strong basis of empathy, understanding, and trust."

Will there come a time in which Spires feels comfortable enough to make the relationship permanent? "It is difficult, because I still suffer from trust issues," explains Spires. "It's unfair for both parties to commit when either of us is still facing those dragons."

The healing doesn't happen over night, says Buxton. But the goal is to move beyond the hurt. If the straight spouse can't accomplish this, either emotionally or physically, he or she becomes bitter and vengeful. While the gay spouse is now out of the closet, the straight spouse has elected to take his place within it. "To live the life he wants, he must now lie. Is that the kind of relationship you want? A life with accusations, and distrust

controlling you?"

Explains Spires, "If you continue to ask what if, or why, you cannot move forward yourself. This can only happen when you can actually say, 'I forgive you.' Through that forgiveness, you yourself are set free."

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