Opening the Straight Spouse’s Closet

A guide for understanding issues facing families with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered spouses
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Inc. is a support, education and advocacy organization. Founded in 1981 by 25 parents, PFLAG now represents more than 80,000 members, donors and supporters. PFLAG affiliates are located in more than 450 communities in the United States and abroad. PFLAG is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

Our Vision
We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered 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
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered 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. PFLAG provides an opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

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

Opening the Straight Spouse’s Closet
In May 1982, Jane spoke publicly for the first time about a deeply personal issue she had struggled with 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 had 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 where she could reflect. As time passed, 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, and she has remarried and become the mother of two stepchildren. Her deep friendship with her ex-husband, John, continues.

“John’s courage the night he told me he loved Martin was the single

In the United States . . .

2 million husbands or wives have or will come out to their spouses as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

3.5 million children are born to mixed-orientation couples.
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 PFLAG’s membership in 1982, many members heard about straight spouses’ experiences 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, about 2 million spouses in heterosexual marriages have or will self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (figures for transgendered spouses are not known). If and when they come out to their spouses, their straight partners can be devastated. Many spouses may feel stigmatized by the straight community, and may discover that family members, friends, and professionals do not understand their unique issues.

Spouses’ problems are often ignored, and they may find little support as their partners find support in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered organizations and celebrate their own coming out. Retreating into closets of their own, straight spouses cope in isolation. Those who discover peers are relieved they are not the only ones facing this challenge. Whenever outsiders, too, validate spouses’ concerns and offer appropriate help, the spouse’s closet is opened.

With support, spouses resolve their issues in more constructive ways, and everyone affected by the family crisis benefits. Many spouses who are supported become vocal advocates for social justice.

Children whose parents come out also go through a learning process and a coming out process as they cope with news of their parent’s disclosed orientation or gender identity. Their reactions are often modeled on those of their straight parent. They, too, need support, especially from parents and peers.

Since 1981, PFLAG has recognized that wives and husbands whose spouses come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered are part of our work in creating a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity. In these efforts, PFLAG acknowledges the unique needs of straight spouses.

This booklet describes major issues straight spouses face and is based largely on self-reports of more than 4,500 straight and gay spouses and their children to Amity Pierce Buxton, Ph. D., Director of the Straight Spouse Network (originally a PFLAG Task Force), as well as from research literature.

Understanding concerns of straight spouses serves many purposes: straight spouses find validation and realize their feelings are not unusual; their loved ones are better able
to support straight spouses; and gay and transgendered spouses are more equipped to see their straight spouses’ perspectives.

ISSUES FACING STRAIGHT SPOUSES

When married persons come out, it becomes a family matter. A spouse’s coming out changes a couple’s marital relationship. As more husbands and wives are coming out, more straight spouses are seeking support. These spouses represent a diverse array of ages, socio-economic groups, races, ethnicities, educational levels, occupations, and faith communities. Yet, they experience common problems and typical stages of dealing with them.

Sexuality and Gender Issues

“I felt I was not an adequate man. It completely destroyed my self image.”
- Dan, whose wife is a lesbian

The mismatch of sexual orientation within couples is one of the first issues that impacts spouses. Finding out their partners are attracted to the same gender makes many spouses feel rejected sexually. They may blame themselves as being sexually inadequate and feel like less of a man or woman. Some fear that they may become sexually dysfunctional or doubt that they will ever date or have sex again. These fears may be lesser for spouses with bisexual partners. Others question their own sexual identity. If gay spouses were active before coming out, sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS) may be concerns.

Spouses of transgendered partners face different sexual problems. While they may not have to deal with a different sexual orientation, they may worry and wonder about the consequences of the physical and emotional changes of their partners’ transition on their sex lives. Outward changes of the transgendered partner make the couple appear as a same-sex couple, causing many spouses to feel stigmatized or to question their own sexual identity.

Challenges to the Marriage

“We’ve survived seven years of marriage by tolerating the ambivalence of what we
are the uncertainty of what could happen.”
- Barbara, whose husband is bisexual

Straight spouses, like their gay or transgendered partners, question whether the marriage can continue, and, if that is possible, what compromises will have to be made. Some gay-straight couples divorce quickly, because of straight spouses’ anger or desire for monogamy, or the gay spouse’s desire to live their lives honestly or start same-sex relationships. Pre-existing relationship problems may also cause a breakup.

Conclusive data does not exist, but anecdotal evidence and trends indicate that lesbian wives tend to leave their marriages more quickly after disclosure than do gay men and bisexual men and women.

Some couples may try to sort out issues of sexuality, gender identity, monogamy, fidelity, and alternative marriage forms, before deciding what to do about the marriage.

Some couples try to redefine their marriages because of enduring love, a long history, the quality of their relationship or their children’s needs. Less often, others stay together for emotional, religious or financial reasons. These couples encounter many obstacles in their newly formed nontraditional marriages, because their sexual and emotional needs aren't met, or as a result of familial, religious or societal pressures. With time, communication, compromise and support, some mixed-orientation marriages, either monogamous or non-traditional, endure. These more often include bisexual-straight couples.

While there is little research on transgendered-straight couples, evidence indicates that some couples choose to separate early on as prior marriage problems are aggravated by the changing appearance of the transgendered partner. However, some couples may try to maintain the marriage. Transgendered partners are not required to leave their heterosexual relationships as they transition, whether or not they choose sexual reassignment surgery. Therefore, most hope their spouses can accept their transition from one gender to the other, putting pressure on them to make the relationship work. The spouse’s challenge is to adjust to their partners' gradually different gender role and physical appearance.
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 a lesbian, talking to the couple’s two young sons

Mixed-orientation couples with children face complex issues. Whether and when to tell children poses major concerns. Most parents tell their children that one parent is gay or transgendered, especially if divorce is likely or if the parents’ activities have changed enough to impact family life. Many parents wait to disclose until they are secure enough themselves to provide support for children’s coping. Parents’ main concerns are that children know they are loved by both parents. They hope that their children will not be harmed by anti-gay or anti-transgendered attitudes they encounter. How the straight parent handles the coming out sets the tone for children’s reactions to the disclosure. Sometimes, a spouse’s pain from the disclosure makes it hard at first to support gay or transgendered parents and their bond with their children. In some cases of divorce, some straight spouses may speak negatively of gay or transgendered parents, or curtail contact between them and the children. Yet many try to protect their children’s relationship with gay parents and work together to take care of their children’s needs. They make it clear that being gay or transgendered does not change the parenting role of their gay or transgendered spouses and work together with their spouse to show joint love for their children - whether or not a divorce occurs.

Betrayal and Deception

“I was doubly traumatized by the deceit. I thought, ‘How could I have missed the signals?’”
- Wes, whose wife is a lesbian

Straight spouses may feel betrayed when their partners reveal their homosexuality or bisexuality. Spouses of transgendered partners can feel deceived if their spouse engaged in secret cross-dressing or their transsexual partner took steps toward changing their gender before disclosing their identity. Whether their partners’ sexuality or gender identity was unknown, denied or hidden, spouses may feel deceived or ignorant for not having figured it out. Straight spouses may question their own judgment and distrust everyone and everything. Their discomfort can be magnified if straight spouses keep their partners’ sexuality or gender identity secret out of fear that they or their partners might be rejected by their families, communities, places of worship or employers. Hiding the truth from friends and family may cause many
to feel guilty or powerless. Keeping a transgendered partner’s changing gender identity a secret can be especially distressing and difficult for straight spouses because of visible changes or differences during their partner’s transition.

Crisis of identity and belief

“My best friend didn’t want to talk about it. The girls at work were no help. I couldn’t find any books on being married to a gay person.”
- Tracey, whose husband is bisexual

Issues facing straight spouses gradually accumulate to pose profound questions about their own identities and belief systems.

Spouses may begin to question long held values regarding marriage and beliefs about homosexuality or gender identity. Spouses of transgender partners experience an actual disconnect between the male or female they married and the current male-to-female or female-to-male partner. To be with a partner who now has a new face, body, and name and who talks about his or her prior persona in the third person is often disorienting.

Few support systems exist for straight spouses to resolve such challenges. While their partners, family members, friends and professionals may want to help them, they often do not understand the unique problems straight spouses face. Feeling stigmatized and alone, spouses may retreat into a closet of guilt, embarrassment and confusion. Feeling worthless, they do not know where to find help, or they may fear finding none if they look. This isolation often magnifies their anger, fear and doubts, leading to a crisis of identity and faith. Feeling hopeless, many ask, “Who am I, anyway? In what can I believe?”

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, whose husband is gay, in her journal on Christmas night. She remembers that journal entry as a turning point. “In my fifty-seventh year, I had come of age,” she says.

As with other straight spouses, Kristin’s journey toward acceptance and reintegration was long and arduous. The time it takes straight spouses to resolve their issues varies, but it typically ranges from about two to six years. The stages through which they struggle toward confidence to meet any challenge are common, and while they 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, whose husband is gay

Most straight spouses are shocked when they find out their partners are gay or transgendered. It is difficult for straight spouses to believe that the people with whom they lived intimately have this unexpected component to their identity. Some spouses feel relieved to find an explanation for marital problems or changes in their spouses’ behavior, appearance or moods. It is not uncommon for spouses to feel disoriented by the complex mix of emotions the disclosure brings.

Empathy and Denial

“When I saw the anguish in David’s face, I tried to console him. We tried to console each other.”
- Carol, whose husband is gay

Many couples experience increased intimacy from sharing the secret, and straight spouses may empathize with their partners’ struggle. With this increased openness, some couples hope for an improved relationship. Positive feelings often offset the straight spouses’ pain and cause them to deny implications of their partners’ sexuality or gender changes. 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. Most spouses report a roller coaster of contradictory emotions as they try to understand and relate to the new aspect of their partner while carrying on with family, work and social obligations.

Facing Reality

“My dreams of a happy family were shattered, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.”
- Grant, whose wife is a lesbian

During the first year after disclosure, most straight spouses gradually become aware of the impact of their partner’s coming out on themselves, the marriage and family life. As the shock wears off, they look candidly at the reality of their partner’s sexual orientation or gender identity, their own pain, and changes in the marriage.

Spouses may experience depression, illness or physical breakdown as they become aware of the painful impact of their spouse’s disclosure. Recognizing the pain prompts most spouses to take responsibility for taking care of their own physical, mental and spiritual health, often with therapeutic help. Spouses who do not face the reality of their post-disclosure lives remain in a state of limbo, often marked with continued bouts of anger, depression or illness.

Learning about homosexuality, bisexuality, or what it means to be
transgendered helps spouses to realize that their partners will not revert to being heterosexual or their previous gender. Spouses of bisexuals face a more complex situation since their mates may still be attracted to them as well as persons of the same sex. Spouses of transgendered partners face periodic changes of their partners’ behavior and appearance, including potential long-term physical, psychological, and emotional changes.

Facing day-to-day changes in their lives is perhaps the most difficult task for straight spouses. Spouses’ encounter many changes in their assumptions about their partners; their life as it was; their role as a spouse; and in a majority of cases, their marriage. Seeing so many sources of security lost, most spouses become angry and fearful about their future, especially those who become single parents.

**Anger**

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

Anger may occur 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 partners may feel angered at being sexually shortchanged. The fear of AIDS and other STDs can also add to a spouse’s confusion, fear and anger. 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 lives. Untreated or not managed constructively, lingering anger often fuels resentment or vindictive behavior. Working through their anger typically leads to spouses’ acceptance of their new situation.

**Acceptance**

“It’s always a struggle, but I can’t pictures what life would be like if it wasn’t.”
- Caitlin, whose husband is gay

It takes a long time for straight spouses to accept their partner’s disclosure and its effects as unchangeable. Acceptance is a day-to-day process that may take a short or long time, depending on the extent of changes in a spouse’s life and his or her ability to break through former ways of viewing the world.

Some spouses never wholly accept the reality of their situation and remain stuck in denial or helplessness. Some spouses who experienced an extremely hurtful disclosure cannot release their feelings of injury and, without outside help,
remain feeling victimized and angry. Others do not accept their partner’s orientation or gender change and live with false hope and frustration. Most spouses eventually accept the post-disclosure changes in their lives and stop trying to make things go back to the way they were. They accept their hurt as an unintended consequence of the disclosure and as something they alone can heal. All told, most spouses slowly accept their changed lives and realize it is up to them to take charge of their future, whether or not they stay married.

**Grief**

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

- Dan, whose wife is a lesbian

As they acknowledge their own pain and their partners' sexuality or gender identity, straight spouses gradually assess the losses and changes in their lives. Loss - of partners, marriages, families, self-worth, integrity or belief systems - causes profound grief. Spouses of transgendered partners also grieve over the change of their partner’s physical appearance. Some spouses do not fully work through their sorrow, and it turns to despair or suicidal thoughts or actions. The vast majority of spouses let go of 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 and rebuilding**

“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, whose husband is gay

Letting go of their losses enables spouses to focus on their own needs: physical, emotional and spiritual. Many are totally exhausted. Self-nurturing can be reinforced in many ways: nutritious diet, exercise, time spent in nature or with the arts, or reading and meditation. While a lack of outside support may prolong the healing, most spouses start to interact with others and seek something of meaning beyond themselves. Slowly, they restore a healthy view of their sexuality, a confident self identity, trust in others and a moral compass to guide their lives. Spouses begin the last stage of the resolution process by letting go of the past and balancing good memories of their marriages with painful aspects of their spouses' coming out. They put the past into perspective and construct a new future, whether they remain married or separate. Through forgiveness - of everyone and everything involved with their spouses' coming out - many find peace of mind. They reassess their worth and forge new belief sys-
tems on which to rebuild their lives. Some utilize residual anger to become productive again. Others find fulfillment in helping peers 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. Children deal with the new information about their parent according to their age and stage of development. They cope simultaneously with news of their parents’ sexuality or gender identity at the same time they are dealing with their own development into adulthood. The meaning of their parents’ disclosure will continue to change for them as they age. Children need time, space and support to come to terms with the fact that a parent is gay or transgendered. The most common issues children may face include:

Disclosure

“The night before we told them, we rehearsed what Peter would say to allay any fears they might have.”
- Allison, whose husband is gay, recalling how the couple told their three children

Rather than hearing it from outsiders, children want to be told by their parents that a parent is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. In retrospect, some young adults say children feel trusted (and able to trust) if they are told sooner rather than later about a parent's coming out. Children feel reassured when their parents tell them together, demonstrating that both parents are there for them and that being gay does not affect parenting.

Children’s reactions differ widely, and how they actually feel may be hidden. Common feelings may include shock, upset if divorce is eminent and resentment over negative effects on them, their straight parent or family life.

Parents can help children process and express their feelings by exercising patience, expressing love and encouraging communication. Children feel more secure when their straight parent expresses support for the gay or transgendered parent and 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 that a parent is gay or transgendered. Disclosure is only the beginning of a long process. Children 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 transgendered 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 sex, yet they do not completely understand sexuality or gender identity. As adolescents begin to comprehend the complex aspects of sexuality and gender, they need information - beyond just reassurance - about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgendered issues.

Young people of any age who have already adopted prejudices against people who are different, especially against gay people, have a particularly difficult time. They can unlearn prejudice with information and examples of acceptance from their parents.

Regardless of when their parents come out, adolescents may question their own emerging sexuality, identity and life goals as they develop their own sexual identity and explore gender roles. Children welcome an open environment in which to discuss the complexities and nature of sexuality and gender identity. Parents can also encourage questions and communicate openly with their children 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, may have less of a personal stake in their parent's disclosure. Their reactions vary also, including respect for or moral/religious judgment about 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 children continue to love their gay or transgendered parent.

Some young adults may use their experiences to help other children of gay and transgendered parents in support organizations such as Children of Lesbians & Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), and some become advocates in their local communities.
Parents’ stereotypical appearance and behavior

“Dad and Buzz walked in acting feminine. To me it was ‘Yuck.’”
- Lynn, 15, whose dad is gay

Children, particularly teenagers, may feel embarrassed if they see their gay or lesbian parents using “stereotypical” behavior or dress. At first, they may also feel uncomfortable seeing parents interact romantically with people of the same sex. Gradually, affectionate interactions can set an example of a caring, loving relationship. In time, 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 transgendered parent’s home are little different from those in their straight parent’s home.

While children of transgendered parents may or may not face changes in sexual orientation of their parent, they encounter more dramatic changes in appearance and behavior as the transgendered parent transitions to the other gender.

Some children with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered parents grow up in what Stefan Lynch, co-founder of COLAGE, calls a “bicultural” environment because of their exposure and experiences in both straight and gay or transgendered communities.

Anti-gay 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 teenagers’, increases when they hear anti-gay or derogatory remarks from others. Besides reflecting on their parents, some remarks are directed at the children themselves. Because of their parent, some children may be perceived as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered themselves, and subject to harassment at school. When teased for having a gay or transgendered parent, they feel angry, ashamed, and rejected.

Children welcome their parents’ help in correcting misinformation and understanding the ignorance that gives rise to such remarks. Parents can also help build children’s confidence by giving them tools to handle teasing, such as ignoring remarks or countering them.

Some children may lose friends when they find out about the gay or transgendered parent. Fear of such rejection causes many children, especially teenagers, to tell no one about their gay or transgendered parents. Not talking with peers about their parents or concerns can magnify children’s negative feelings.
For teenagers who do not want to appear different from their peers or who fear reaction, this isolation may interfere with development of social intimacy skills. Some adolescents and teens find it helpful to share concerns with peers through online and face-to-face groups.

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-transgendered couples). For most children of the divorcing couples, the separation is worse than the parent’s disclosure. Children whose families break up because a parent is gay or transgendered may experience profound worries that are typical of any child of divorce, such as a sense of abandonment, conflict of loyalties and insecurity. These typical reactions are intensified by the fact that one of the parents is gay or transgendered. During and after divorce, these children need more than ever explicit assurance of love, open communication and support from both parents.

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 can come to terms with their parents’ coming out by the time they reach adulthood. Those who find peers with whom to share seem to have an easier time putting their experience into perspective. While some children may not accept the fact that they have a gay or transgendered parent, many can respect their parents’ honesty and courage in coming out. While not all children are supportive, many can continue to love their parents and value their relationship with them.

HOW OTHERS CAN HELP

Straight spouses often isolate themselves, fearing rejection or finding no one who understands their unique problems. Coping alone, many become stuck in negative feelings.

Without support, some spouses never fully recover from their spouse’s disclosure. However, most do. While most of their healing and growth comes from within, outside support can reinforce the process. Family members, partners and friends are in a position to help spouses break out of their isolation.
They can provide day-to-day support that can help spouses accept their situation and encourage them to take steps to heal, resolve their issues, and reconstruct their lives.

The Straight Spouse Network provides ongoing peer support for spouses to work through their problems, pain, anger and grief in a positive direction.

Below are suggestions of ways to support straight spouses. With this kind of support, spouses and their children can become strong advocates for social change.

**Ways to Support Straight Spouses**

- Listen to the spouse’s concerns non-judgmentally;
- Try to see the spouse’s point of view;
- Validate the spouse’s feelings;
- Encourage spouses to take care of his or her needs;
- Help spouses look candidly at the situation;
- Practice and encourage spouse’s 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 spouses rebuild trust in themselves and others, by trusting their word and keeping commitments made to them;
- Encourage spouses to engage in outside activities, perhaps offering to take a spouse out for a cup of coffee or to dinner or 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 needed support from other spouses.
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 on-line). In addition to a newsletter, the Network also has publications on a father’s coming out to children, custody issues, and maintaining a marriage after disclosure. Professional counseling is often helpful as straight spouses work through a complex set of issues. While many therapists do not have experience with spouses in mixed orientation marriages or transgendered-straight couples, the Straight Spouse Network can provide information about therapists with such experiences in helping couples and spouses. The Network can be reached at:

**Straight Spouse Network**
8215 Terrace Dr.
El Cerrito, CA 94530-3058;
Phone: (510) 525-0200; or
Email: info@ssnetwork.org
Web: www.ssnetwk.org

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

**Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)**
3543-18th St., #17
San Francisco, CA 94110
Phone: (415) 861-5437
Email: colage@colage.org
Web: www.colage.org

**Family Pride Coalition (FPC)**
PO Box 34338
San Diego, CA 92163
Phone: (619) 296-0199
Email: pride@familypride.org
Web: www.familypride.org
Recommended Reading about Straight Spouses, Children and their Families


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