The New "Mixed" Marriage
Working with a couple when one partner is gay

When we think of a "mixed marriage," we typically imagine two individuals of different races or religions. But the mixed-orientation marriage—with one straight spouse and one who's gay or lesbian—is just as real, though far more likely to operate underground. This long-shrouded partnership burst into public view in August 2004, when New Jersey Governor James McGreevey went on national TV to come out as a "gay American," while his wife, Dina, stood stock-still by his side, her mouth arranged in a frozen smile. More recently, bestselling author Terry McMillan (How Stella Got Her Groove Back) publicly denounced her husband, Jonathan Plummer, for carrying on clandestine affairs with male lovers. Suddenly, America was buzzing about the "horror" and "tragedy" of straight and gay individuals united by marriage.

Let me be clear at the outset: I'm not against mixed-orientation marriages per se. They can, and do, work well for some couples. What I don't support are mixed-marriages that are steeped in secrecy, which is how these relationships too commonly operate.

Living a Lie
During my first appointment with Eric, he told me that he'd had some homosexual experiences and wasn't sure whether he was gay, bisexual, or a sex addict. The manager of a major export company, 48-year-old Eric had been married to his wife, Ann, for 25 years, and the couple had a teenage son and daughter. But even before he'd gotten married, Eric admitted, he'd had frequent and elaborate sexual fantasies about men.

When he was 21 years old, a college therapist told him what he badly wanted to hear: that his urges were simply sexual perversions that would pass. The therapist further advised him not to act on these "perversions," but to go forth and lead a healthy heterosexual life. Deeply relieved, Eric decided to marry Ann, whom he'd dated during his senior year of college, and to keep his heterosexuality to himself.

At first, Eric felt he pulled it off pretty well. He loved his wife and enjoyed sex with her, though he often used images of men to stay aroused and reach orgasm. For a number of years, he didn't act on his homosexual urges, so he didn't feel bad about them. Occasionally, he'd masturbate to porn, but he was careful to throw the magazines out afterward. Overall, Eric's lack of romantic feelings for other men convinced him that his urges were "simply" sexual, not part of full-fledged gay identity. He told himself he was "heterosexual with a bit of kink."

Then, several years into the marriage, the couple bought a home computer, and Eric's delusions quickly began to unravel. Secretly, he began surfing gay-porn sites and entering chat rooms. Before long, he found himself meeting men for anonymous sexual encounters. "But all this time, I loved Ann and believed in monogamy, so I felt horribly guilty for cheating," he told me.

One night, as he surfed the web, he stumbled upon an internet club expressly for married gay men who wanted monogamy with another man without leaving their wives. He immediately joined the group, and soon afterward met Harris, who lived in a nearby city and was also married. They "clicked" online, met soon afterward, and agreed that they'd found the perfect arrangement. They told their wives they'd met at a business conference and discovered that they both enjoyed fly fishing, which gave them the excuse to spend whole weekends alone together, for enthusiastic sex and—for Eric, at least—deepening intimacy.
But their idyll was short-lived, for Harris soon announced that he wanted to have sex with other men. Eric was devastated. He plunged into a depression so black that Ann couldn't help but notice. Finally, sleepless and distraught, he called me.

After listening to his story, I pulled no punches. "You're not living with integrity," I told him.

He exploded. "This from a gay therapist? For a response like that, I could have called Dr. Laura!"

I assured him that I didn't necessarily disapprove of his having an intimate relationship with a man, even though he was married. "The issue is that you're keeping secrets, deceiving your wife, and aren't being congruent with yourself," I said. "If you both had an open relationship, with informed consent on her side, that would be different."

"You have no idea what my life is like!" Eric shouted. "You've never had a wife and kids you loved, and because of it, faced giving up someone you're mad about." He started crying. "Maybe you're not the right therapist for me," he said between sobs. "I need someone to support me and help me make this work."

"Make what work?" I inquired.

"Having a relationship with both my wife and my boyfriend. I don't want to lose either of them."

I gently told Eric that if he wanted someone to approve his living a lie with his wife and himself, he was correct—I wasn't the right therapist for him. "Until you get honest with yourself and your wife," I said, "I can't support your belief that having sex with someone outside of marriage is okay." Even more important, I told him, "Until you act from a place of integrity, I don't think you'll feel any happier or more whole than you are right now."

If Eric wasn't prepared to tell his wife, I said, there was another viable option—to stay married and make a commitment to never again act on his homosexual urges. I made very clear that my perspective on this was different from practitioners of Reparative Therapy (RT), who tell gay people that sexual reorientation is possible and, indeed, highly advisable. I believe that's nonsense. However, I do believe that people who self-identify as homosexual, but don't wish to come out as gay, can choose to create a heterosexual lifestyle.

But Eric wasn't open to this option, either. At the end of the session he left quickly, mumbling over his shoulder that he'd call if he wanted to reschedule. I figured there was a good chance I'd never hear from him again. But a month later, he called, sounding desperate. His depression and anxiety had worsened. "I gotta tell her," he said.

**Coming Out**

When a gay person comes out to his or her straight spouse, the couple is likely to embark on a roller-coaster ride of emotional stages that often encompass humiliation, revenge, renewed hope, rage, and, finally, resolution. While each couple is unique, these stages can serve as a rough road map for therapists trying to help mixed-orientation couples make sense of their feelings, communicate honestly, and, ultimately, make informed, healthy decisions about their future.

When Eric told Ann that he was homosexual, she was stunned and horrified. "Did you marry me just to have kids?" she railed. "Were you just using me all along?" When he then admitted that he'd been having an affair with Harris, her hurt and horror turned to cold fury. Blaming him for ruining her life, she ordered him out of the house and threatened to tell their two teenage children and their families of origin. She also planned to see a divorce lawyer to get full custody of the kids. "You do realize," she hissed, "that no judge would let a homosexual even have visitation rights!"

Beneath Ann's rage was a deep sense of humiliation. "What kind of a person was she to choose a homosexual husband?" she wondered. Eric, in turn, felt humiliated by Ann's accusatory response, which only reinforced a lifetime of shame about his essential "wrongness." I explained to Eric
that Ann was trying to shame him because of the humiliation she felt, but that he needed to take her threats of reprisal seriously. At my suggestion, he asked her to join him for a therapy session, and she reluctantly agreed.

Before they came in, Ann sent me a long e-mail detailing everything she knew about Eric's dysfunctional childhood, neurotic personality traits, inadequate fathering, problematic work and sleep habits, and more. This wasn't unusual. Typically, when spouses learn that their partner is gay; their first response is to focus on their partner's failings.

As the joint session got underway, Ann was quick to let me know that she didn't trust me. "Why would a gay therapist be interested in helping us decide whether to stay together?" she demanded. She wasn't sure she wanted to stay with Eric, she said, but she wanted to keep the possibility open. Her concerns made sense to me, and I explained my perspective on mixed-orientation marriages. "If you both want it to work, then so do I," I assured her.

For most of that first session, I listened to, and validated, Ann's flood of thoughts and feelings. Both Ann and Eric wept, insisting that they wanted to stay together but weren't sure it was possible.

I then appealed to Ann's sense of integrity. If she wanted to remain married, it needed be a conscious choice free of shame and darkness. But Ann was unwilling to look at her contribution to the issues in the marriage. Spouses in all marriages—gay or straight—choose partners, in part, to meet certain unconscious needs. I tried to explain to Ann that straight individuals rarely marry gay people accidentally. Either they have sexual issues themselves or they need emotional distance from their partners. Ann didn't want to hear any of this. Instead, she projected all of their problems as a couple onto Eric.

I spent our next several meetings trying to facilitate clear, open communication between them. What did each of them want? Ann made it clear that she couldn't tolerate Eric's having a relationship with both her and Harris. "You'll have to choose," she told him. But soon afterward, Harris made the choice for Eric by breaking off with him. Eric was crushed, although his boyfriend's decision also clarified for Eric what he wanted—or at least what he thought he wanted. Now that he'd lost Harris, he couldn't face the possibility of losing Ann, too. He apologized for hurting her, and told her he wanted to stay married. "I love you, and I promise to stay faithful," he said. Ann was moved and deeply relieved.

The Honeymoon

This new pledge of fidelity initiated the next stage of the coming-out process for Eric and Ann as a couple: a kind of honeymoon period of renewed hope and mutual appreciation. Because Eric truly loved Ann, and because he'd empathized with her pain, she began to feel she'd been reunited with the man she married. Eric, for his part, was profoundly grateful that Ann was willing to take him back. "She's a saint!" he told me, his voice edged with awe.

Shortly after they reunited, Ann stopped coming to see me. She also refused to see another therapist or attend a support group for straight partners married to gay partners. But Eric continued on in therapy. Before long, he acknowledged that he'd begun to feel restless and dissatisfied. He loved Ann and his kids; there was no question about that. But with no homosexual outlet, his life felt flat and empty.

Eric's growing dissatisfaction initiated the next stage of the couple's process, when they become aware of the limits of the possible. While still hurt, Ann was genuinely happy to have Eric back. But, the absence of a man's emotional and sexual companionship weighed increasingly heavily on him. Increasingly depressed, he found himself surfing internet porn sites once again, and drifting into chat rooms. Before long, he was telephoning men and meeting them for sex—and, he hoped, for love.

Late one night, Ann caught Eric making arrangements on line to >
hook up with a new man. After an explosive fight, they returned to my office together. "I love you," he told her in that session, "but I have to be who I am. I want to stay married to you and have affairs with men." I still remember my sense of foreboding when Ann, looking strained and pale, agreed to his terms. This type of arrangement can sometimes work out, but only when the straight spouse is willing to take a long, close look at herself. So far, I hadn’t seen any willingness on Ann’s part to do that. I strongly recommended she get some individual therapy, but she assured me, "I can handle this on my own."

Eric continued to meet men, but now told Ann the truth about his plans. Between dates, he’d often sit in their driveway for hours talking on his cell phone with guys he’d met online. From Eric’s vantage point, Ann seemed to be adjusting pretty well to their “new marriage.” Then one night Eric returned home from a date to discover that Ann had told their son and daughter that their father was gay. He was stunned and furious. "How dare you tell them without my permission," he raged, "and without letting me be part of the process!"

“What was I supposed to do?” Ann countered bitterly. “You’re out all hours meeting guys, and I’m left here worrying sick you’ll be killed!”

Back into therapy they came.

Ann stubbornly held to her position that she’d told the kids only because she was worried out of her mind, not because she was furious at Eric. Firmly, I told them that I believed that neither one of them was behaving either with respect to themselves or their relationship. As far as I could tell, I said, Ann wanted a full-time, monogamous husband—sexually and emotionally. Eric wanted a boyfriend as well as a wife who was reasonably happy with the arrangement. Their aims were incompatible.

For the next few sessions, I worked on encouraging both of them to examine and identify their authentic
relationship needs. Within a few weeks, Eric decided to come out as a gay man—in his words, to live “as the person I’ve been all along.” Ann, for her part, realized that it was impossible to make the marriage work. They decided to divorce.

Getting Real
When I work with people in mixed-orientation marriages like Eric and Ann’s, my goal is neither to help them to stay married or to get divorced. Instead, it’s to help partners come back into integrity with themselves and each other. It’s truly up to the couple, not to me, to discover what’s right for them.

That said, I tend to start from a place of hope for the relationship. Unless one partner definitely wants out of the marriage, I start by asking a couple how their marriage can continue. I work with each partner on what he or she really wants. I realize that many therapists disapprove of a gay husband and straight wife staying together under any circumstances. Many believe that such an “arrangement” is a clear sign of an intimacy disorder. Some might urge the couple to consider divorce to allow both parties to move on with their lives. Other clinicians might advise the gay husband to remain the sexually faithful partner he promised to be on his wedding day. I once held this belief myself—that anything less than monogamy betrayed the relationship. Now I’m open to the various arrangements that couples adopt.

The principal reason I’ve changed my mind is that I’ve now sat with many couples who’ve struggled long and hard over a divorce or separation when, in the end, that wasn’t at all what they wanted. So I’ve come to accept that there are a number of instances in which responsible non-monogamy between partners is a viable option. One such instance is when the couple is older, has invested emotionally, financially, and psychologically in each other, and want to be together in their later years. Another is when the couple has become best friends, and the marriage is sacred to them. A third is when the man is emotionally heterosexual and physically homosexual.

The idea here isn’t to change the orientation of the gay spouse. That’s impossible. Rather, it’s to accept the couple as they are and honor what they want.

In doing this kind of work, taking a thorough history on both partners is essential. While Ann refused to participate, I was able to do some effective family-of-origin work with Eric. He grew up in a family that demanded obedience, and therefore Eric learned early on to get his needs met underground. I helped him see that his depression stemmed, in part, from his inability to openly make decisions for himself and allow himself to experience the consequences of those decisions. Gradually, I helped him feel safe enough to do this.

Ann still hasn’t gotten help. She remains angry at Eric for “ruining her life.” This outcome isn’t the norm: many gay and straight spouses who divorce ultimately become friends. While Eric wants friendship, particularly for his children’s sake, Ann has made it clear she’s not interested. Meanwhile, Eric has done his best to talk with his teenage kids about who he is, why he’s made the decisions he has, and how much he loves them. At this point, they’re more aligned with their mother.

In the meantime, Eric has met a man with whom he wants to spend the rest of his life. He continues to regularly visit his children, but doesn’t talk about his gay life or bring his partner around, at their request. I hope that, eventually, the children will develop a separate relationship with Eric and accept his life as a gay man with a new partner, just as they would if their parents had divorced and Eric had married another woman.

It’s often hard for me to sit with mixed-orientation couples, since I get in touch with my anger at living in a society that shames gays and lesbians into role-playing heterosexuality. If gays were treated with respect and empathy to begin with, much personal suffering and chaos could be spared. As comedian Jason Stuart says, “If you wish you straight people would let us gay people get married. If you did, we’d stop marrying you!”

CASE COMMENTARY

BY MICHELE WEINER-DAVIS

Couples decide their marriages are doomed for a litany of reasons. Some say that, though they love their spouses, they’re no longer in love. Others find the spark has gone out of their sexual relationships. Still others feel that the endless arguments about children, in-laws, and money are so divisive that the marriage has been drained of mutual respect and caring. To me, a psychotic optimist about the possibility of personal and relationship change, these are nothing more than garden-variety problems that, with a heavy dose of problem-solving, can easily be resolved.

But because sex is such a fundamentally important part of marriage, what happens when one spouse finds him- or herself yearning to be with a same-sex partner, despite many years of marriage? No amount of “I-messages,” active listening, or willingness to compromise alters sexual orientation.

This is the problem Joe Kort faces on a regular basis, and I have great respect for his interest in helping these couples find their way. Nonetheless, there were times in reading about Eric and Ann that I found myself wondering, “How might I have handled this case differently?” As I reflected on this, several major issues emerged.

One of the most important lessons I’ve learned in my work with 11th-hour couples is that, regardless of my personal opinions, unless I join equally with both spouses, change becomes unlikely and resistance almost inevitable. I’ve become convinced that the art of doing good marital work lies in our ability to have both spouses leave our offices feeling that we’re on his or her side. After all, we often ask people to stretch outside their comfort zones. But, unless they see us as genuine allies, why should they?

With that in mind, I wondered whether Kort really connected with Ann. Let’s face it, she was inap-
Propriate and irritating. Her anger and blaming would easily push the buttons of even the most accepting of therapists. But I put myself in her shoes for a moment and tried to imagine what it would be like to discover in an instant that the man I married and thought I knew more intimately than anyone in the world wasn't who I thought he was. Talk about having the rug pulled out from under you!

So, while I'd draw a line in the sand about Ann's anger and threats, I'd try to help both Ann and Eric see how her cruel behavior was really a symptom of the shock, grief, and fear she was undoubtedly feeling. Normalizing in this way might have softened the blow of her actions for Eric, while, at the same time, painting a more humane picture of Ann. This might have allowed them to join in their shared pain, rather than become opponents.

Also, I suspect that marital work may have been doomed from the start because of a theoretical belief held by Kort—that mixed marriages can only work if straight spouses are willing to examine the underlying dysfunctional reasons they marry gays. I know many, many people who simply don't have "gaydar"; they don't pick up on their spouses' homosexual tendencies. And I don't think this means they have an unconscious need for emotional/sexual distance in their relationships.

If owning up to her own reasons for marrying a gay man was the sort of personal growth Kort was expecting of Ann, I can completely understand why she resisted it, along with his other suggestions for individual therapy and support groups. From my perspective, since both Ann and Eric were interested in saving their marriage if at all possible, what they needed was help in defining the parameters of their newly emerging relationship, which was headed toward uncharted territory. I couldn't help but wonder whether Ann's meltdown resulted, not from her inability to cope with her anger about having to develop a mixed marriage, but from poor communication regarding their mutual expectations around his dating behavior.

Kort's work shines a light on one other issue that's become increasingly clear to me over the years—a marriage is about more than the person to whom you're wedded. I recently worked with a man who loved his wife, but was not in love with her, and was wildly passionate about the woman with whom he'd been having an affair. He admitted he didn't understand why he felt so confused and stuck, because he knew he'd rather be with his affair partner. I explained that, in life, our choices are never simply about one issue versus another: every choice in life is about package deals. I asked him to weigh the attributes not of the women in his life, but of the packages they encompassed. When he did so, his marital package won hands down, despite the sizzle of his affair.

How does this relate to Kort's work with Ann and Eric? Marriage isn't always about achieving personal satisfaction. While I'd certainly encourage Eric to honor and explore his need for same-sex relationships, I'd work overtime to help preserve the family unit, and not simply for the reasons Kort proposes—a shared history, friendship, companionship in old age, etc.—all personally driven goals. What about the kids? Conspicuously missing from Kort's list of acceptable reasons to stay in the marriage is a relationship with your children.

Am I suggesting Eric stay for the sake of the kids? That would be okay with me, but that's not what I'm proposing here. Nevertheless I can't help but wonder how Eric feels now, months or even years later, having satisfied his homosexual yearnings and become a "regular visitor" of his not-yet-accepting children? Is that the package he wanted?

**AUTHOR'S RESPONSE**

Weiner-Davis's commentary is comparing apples to oranges: she juxtaposes her heterosexual male client's affair with a woman to the affair of a gay husband with another man. But for the gay spouse, cheating isn't just an indication of a relationship issue; it's his attempt to resolve a personal identity crisis about his fundamental sexual and romantic orientation. Eric had to decide not just whether he could make some changes in his marriage, but whether his marital partner was the wrong gender.

My work with couples assumes that each partner has an equal investment in creating and maintaining the type of closeness or distance—including emotional and sexual—that exists between them. Straight spouses often look back at themselves and admit they unconsciously needed a partner who couldn't be fully available to them. In mixed marriages, these spouses happen to be gay. Nevertheless Ann was unwilling to examine anything other than Eric's "bad" behaviors. Try as I did to join with her, she was unwilling to accept any insights about herself from support groups or individual therapy with myself or another therapist. Had she been willing to do so, she could have come to understand her own personal and relational dynamics.

With all couples, my work is about shared responsibility. When one partner in a relationship has an addiction, they're an addicted couple. When the woman is pregnant, they're pregnant. When one has an affair, they both share the burden of how it evolved and how to resolve it.

I would never advise anyone, gay or straight, to stay in a marriage only for the sake of the kids. This burdens the children and would have denied Eric's fundamental identity as a gay man, keeping him invisible.

Weiner-Davis supports my concern about a therapist's countertransference with these couples when she writes, "I put myself in [Ann's] shoes ... and tried to imagine what it would be like to discover in an instant that the man I married and thought I knew more intimately than anyone in the world wasn't who I thought he was." As therapists, our job is to put on our clients' shoes and take off our own. Doing this is no easy task, but...
it's mandatory if we're to do good work. Weiner-Davis winds up by doing what too many do to gay spouses: giving them all the blame for their situation, rather than having empathy for both partners within the context of the culture as a whole.

Joe Kort, M.S.W., is an openly gay psychotherapist in Royal Oak, Michigan. His forthcoming book, 10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Find Real Love, includes a chapter on heterosexually married gay men. For more information, go to www.gayaffirmativepsychotherapy.com. Contact: jokort@jokort.com.

Michele Weiner-Davis, M.S.W., is a marriage and family therapist in Woodstock, Illinois, and author of The Sex-Starved Marriage; The Divorce Remedy; and the bestsellers Divorce Busting; Change Your Life and Everyone In It; and Getting Through to the Man You Love. Contact: dbusting@aol.com.

Letters to the Editor about this department may be e-mailed to letters@psychnetworker.org.