

# Kort's Korner

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*Joe's practice specializes in sexual addiction, childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse, depression and anxiety.*

*He offers workshops for couples and singles. He runs a gay men's group therapy and a men's sexuality group therapy for straight, bi and gay men who are struggling with specific sexual issues.*

*His therapy services are for gays and lesbians as well as heterosexuals.*

## Gay Spouse, Straight Spouse

Written by Cynthia Hubert and published in the Sacramento Bee

When a partner comes out of the closet, it can be just as traumatic for the one who gets the news

Anna Marie Will was prepared for a bombshell. Her husband of 11 years, Jim, had been troubled and told her he needed to speak with her about something serious.

But the words that came from his mouth that day were ones she never imagined she would hear.

Jim was physically attracted to men, he told her.

Jim was gay.

It is a disclosure more common than most people imagine, said Amity Pierce Buxton, director of the Straight Spouse Network, a Bay Area support group with members across the country and abroad.

Buxton, author of the book "Other Side of the Closet: The Coming Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families," has estimated that, in at least 2 million marriages, a spouse has revealed being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

As difficult as "coming out" can be for disclosing spouses, it can be just as painful for husbands and wives on the receiving end of the news, said Buxton and others. Often they are angry, confused, depressed and isolated, too embarrassed to tell friends and family members but with few other outlets for their feelings.

Many retreat inward.

"We're the closet within the closet," said Buxton, who started the Straight Spouse group after her husband of 25 years declared he was gay in 1986. "It's pretty rough."

Anna Marie Will "went into shock" after her husband told her, more than a year ago, that he had been living a lie.

"You've said that I don't make you feel attractive as a woman," he said. "There's a reason. It's not you. You're wonderful. It's because I'm not attracted to any women at all.

Jim Will had been preparing himself for months for the conversation in his Citrus Heights home.

"I just did not have the energy to keep hiding who I was as a person," he said. "I was upset that I wasn't being everything I could be for her. That was monumental for me."

Anna Marie Will immediately thought of the couple's daughter, who was 9 at the time. She thought about how their lives would change. She asked herself whether their marriage had been a sham.

"I felt totally confused," she said. "I never had any idea that he had any interest in men. I never even thought it was a possibility.

"Everything I thought I understood was wrong. My memories of our marriage and our life together lost their meaning. It was like I had fallen off a cliff and there was no bottom."

Anna Marie plunged into depression. Then she got help.

Three months after her husband's disclosure, she contacted Buxton's

organization, which referred the couple to the Sacramento chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Early last year, Will helped launch a local Straight Spouse group.

"It has given me the courage to say that my husband is gay, and I'm not alone in this world," Will said.

Will is one of a growing number of spouses dealing with such issues, said Joe Kort, a psychotherapist who practices in the Detroit area and works with gay men and lesbians.

"My practice started out with gay men who had come out and had never married," as well as homosexual married men who remained deep in the closet, Kort said.

"Suddenly, it began filling with people who were struggling with how to tell their wives and husbands that they were gay. Society gives people more permission these days to be honest about it, so it's happening more and more."

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Most of these clients got married because they succumbed to societal pressure or because "they really believed their homosexual feelings would go away," Kort said.

"These people go into their marriages with good intentions. They think it's all going to work out, and they genuinely love the spouse. So they're not really deceiving the spouse, they're deceiving themselves."

The Straight Spouse Network, which has hotlines in every state, 65 support groups and a Web site that draws 200 visitors a day, provides informal counseling to spouses, their partners, friends and family members. It is an outlet for spouses to vent their feelings and to be with others who understand their pain, Buxton said.

"It allows people to pick up a phone and talk to someone, to tell their story, to talk about and validate their feelings," she said. "It gives people permission to get angry, to feel hurt, to cry."

Hope Wine, a Miami psychologist and sex therapist who works with straight spouses whose husbands or wives have revealed they are gay, said reactions to such disclosures "run the full range of human emotions."

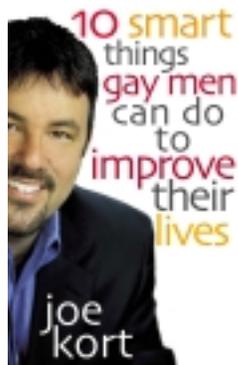
"The primary issue is a feeling of being betrayed," Wine said. "Generally, the straight spouse feels used. There is a lot of anger and grief, a deep sense of loss."

"It's painful for everyone involved. The person coming out. The person's spouse. The children. It's a shock, a trauma no matter how you look at it."

Buxton remembers feeling a profound sense of isolation.

"Suddenly you're married to a gay person," she said. "How do you tell your friends? You wonder, was my marriage ever real? Will I ever be sexual again? Have I lost myself in this?"

About a third of spouses confronting the issue separate immediately, Buxton estimated. Others stay together temporarily, then split. As many as 15 percent choose to remain married.



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Because Buxton's husband was involved with another man at the time of his disclosure, the couple soon separated and divorced. Buxton, who had two children with her first husband, later remarried.

Anna Marie and Jim Will, who are both 34 and have been a couple for more than half of their lives, have decided to try to maintain their marriage.

"At first, we had no idea what we were going to do," said Anna Marie, who works as a technical director for a private firm. "We talked about divorce, but that seemed worse than any situation we could imagine. For me, the thought of losing him as a friend was too much."

So the couple have established a rather unconventional lifestyle. Jim Will, who works for the state, is involved "with certain guidelines" in the gay community, he and his wife said. The couple still live together and in some ways are closer than ever, Anna Marie Will said.

"We have discovered that love and friendship are very different things. That you can be in love with someone even if you're not physically attracted to them."

At some point it might all fall apart, she conceded.

"We have drawn some lines and set up some definite guidelines, and if those lines were crossed, I would have to make a decision," she said. "But we are proceeding under the assumption that we want to keep our marriage and our relationship together."

Such arrangements can be successful, Wine said, particularly in the first months or years after disclosure.

"It can help both people ease into the transition," she said. "They both still have the safety of their home and their friendship and their children. Their base has not been suddenly destroyed."

Despite the initial turmoil she experienced, Anna Marie Will said, her husband has earned her respect.

"He has been through a lot. He's still very uncomfortable being gay, and he had to come out in the middle of a marriage," she said. "Since then, he has been very open, and we have made decisions together about how we will deal with this."

"Yes, it's been hard. But through it all he's supported me as his best friend and his partner and his wife. A lot of spouses don't have those things. As odd as it sounds, I feel like one of the lucky ones."

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