



**kort's korner**

# Extreme Makeovers: What Reparative Therapy is All About

A RECENT SURVEY ASKED San Francisco gay men whether they were born gay. Eleven percent of the men felt they were born gay, while the remaining 89 percent claimed they were “sucked” into it!

That joke is funny only because it's absurd! Absurd as the idea that anyone can change from a gay to a straight orientation, or vice versa, for that matter. But there exists a body of literature on so-called Reparative Therapy and clinical workers who call themselves Reparative Therapists. I'd call them Extreme Makeover Artists. If you believe their accounts, you could imagine that when their work is done, clients look in the mirror and see themselves as suddenly heterosexual!

The theory behind Reparative Therapy is that homosexuality is a result of a person's suffering a broken gender identity and a stunted, “stuck” sexual development that's gone “bad.” Their “repair” work, to help clients regain their heterosexuality, is almost always directed more at males than females. The person—again, usually male—is labeled with “low gender esteem;” the cure-all is to make him “more of a man” and her “more of a woman.”

The problem is not that there are people with a homosexual orientation who want to live heterosexually. That is an individual decision for individuals

to make. The problem is, these extreme makeover artists state repeatedly that being gay is wrong and that everyone should be heterosexual and live that way. Who can make that decision for anyone else?

Reparative Therapy never uses the word gay, only the term “homosexual.” As Richard Cohen says in his book, *Coming Out Straight*, “There is nothing ‘gay’ about the homosexual lifestyle.” True, for some individuals with a homosexual orientation, there is nothing pleasant or appealing about coming out and living affirmatively as a gay or lesbian. These individuals cannot reconcile being gay, which is about being affirmative toward one's self, living in integrity, honoring one's sexual and romantic inner life, and living congruently—as heterosexuals do with their sexual and romantic orientation. Some decide they cannot live as a gay or lesbian, so they create and support a life of heterosexuality. They do not change their sexual and romantic orientation, simply their behavior!

In my writings and presentations, I talk a great deal about the covert cultural sexual abuse that gays and lesbi-

ans undergo these days, with so much homophobia and heterosexism in the media surrounding marriage for gays and lesbians. Reparative Therapy is perhaps one of the biggest assaults out there. Reparative Therapy, in fact, is a most overt form of sexual assault on individuals and is usually inflicted on children.

Sexual abuse can take the form of degrading one's gender. Reparative Therapy's inherent abuse is telling those with homosexual desires that they are not “man enough” or “woman enough,” and that they should feel ashamed for being the “kind of” male or female they are. That is gender abuse which is a form of covert sexual abuse.

Probably the worst, most abusive book toward gays and lesbians is *Preventing Homosexuality* by Joseph Nicolosi. In its veiled way, this book gets around the American Psychological Association's warning that if you try to help homosexuals to suppress their sexual and romantic desires, they might lead lives of depression. So Nicolosi and his wife wrote a book on preventing “homosexual” orientation in the first place.

Nicolosi and others in his extreme-makeover camp have gotten wise to the criticism of their approach and so have disguised it. They've softened their terminology, as in telling parents to correct children but not shame them for playing with opposite-gender toys. If your son plays with a doll, they advise

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# Extreme Makeovers, continued

to take it away and say you are giving it to a little girl who needs it. To me, this is abominable. They want men to be good fathers, but then stop them from playing with dolls—which is one way to learn how to parent. Nor will playing with dolls make a boy homosexual or lead to orientation problems. Taking toys away, whether you do it nicely or in a shaming way, will only wound the child's self-esteem.

*Preventing Homosexuality* tells mothers to “back off” and turn away from their sons, giving the example in the book of a mother who was “disgusted” by her son's asking to use her makeup. The only good thing they advise is for fathers to get more involved. I couldn't agree more: Fathers have abandoned their sons, gay and straight alike, causing much of the anxiety and depression in men today. More involved fathers can help their sons become more mature men, but not make them straight or gay.

Quite selectively, reparative therapy promotes antiquated beliefs and theories about homosexuality and uses outdated psychological views. Religious groups continue to turn out “ex-gays” and supporting their “extreme makeovers.” After their “sexual conversion,” I can just imagine these men and woman looking in a mirror and screaming, “I never dreamed I could look so . . . straight!!!”

The groups promoting and supporting “ex-gays” include Exodus, Courage, Homosexuals Anonymous (a 12-step group to help those “powerless” over their homosexuality). PFOX, Parents of Ex Gays and Lesbians, is the evil twin of PFLAG, an affirmative support group for families of gays and lesbians. These various groups claim to have helped hundreds of men and women “heal their homosexuality.” The most visible proponents are Joseph Nico-

losi, Charles Socarides, and Richard Cohen.

As a disturbing side note, Socarides himself—who has written extensively on how absent, distant fathers contribute to creating homosexuality in their boys—has an openly gay son who is active in politics. And Dr. Laura Schlessinger wrote the foreword to Richard Cohen's *Coming Out Straight*, published in 2000—during which time she denied that she was speaking out against gays and lesbians. How can she make that claim after contributing the foreword to a book that's completely anti-gay from page one?

Those who review and critique reparative therapy have done extensive work of their own, uncovering the bigotry and lies that these extreme makeover artists spew. These authors include Martin Duberman, who wrote *Cures*; Wayne R. Besen, author of *Anything But Straight*; and Jack Drescher, editor of *Sexual Conversion Therapy* and the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*.

I'd like to expose several myths that these reparative therapy perpetuate, along with the misconceptions, sexism, and cultural sexual abuse inherent in each one.

## 10 Smart Things to know about Homosexuality

### Myth #1: Being gay or lesbian results from stunted, immature sexuality and gender.

**Truth:** Gay and lesbian children (and we adults) are shamed for being the type of men and women we are. What is wrong with a boy being effeminate or a girl being tomboyish? It's sexist to insist that certain actions or appearance define being male or female. Also, this concept doesn't explain those heterosexual males or females who are sexually immature or stunted and in their gender development.

I attended The New Warrior, a men's workshop sponsored by the Man-kind Project ([www.mkp.org](http://www.mkp.org)), because I wanted to heal the wounds left by those who, over my lifetime, tried “to make a man out of me.” Most of them were straight men, so my wounds were around what straight advocates like Joseph Nicolosi and Richard Cohen had done to me. The workshop did not make me straight, but built bridges with other straights men and made me a stronger gay man.

### Myth #2: Having permission to explore your sexuality in ways other than heterosexual can make you gay.

**Truth:** If someone suddenly comes out as gay or lesbian, that can make people think that they can change their orientation, being straight one day and gay the next. However, if people felt free to explore sexual and romantic orientations of any kind, they would then not have to suppress their innate sexuality and need to come out later in life.

### Myth #3: Being sexually abused as a child can make you gay.

**Truth:** Totally false! Sexual abuse cannot shape someone's orientation. But it can shape behavior and confuse individuals as to what their real sexual orientation is. Adult males who abuse boys sexually can cause what's called homosexual imprinting: The boy can grow up and re-enact his own sexual abuse by seeking out sex with other men. This is not homosexuality, since it is based only on behavior.

After psychotherapy clears away the trauma, often the imprinted behavior subsides and the sexual abuse survivor's true orientation—either gay or straight—surfaces. There is a link between early sexual trauma and later sexual acting out, which can include same-sex behavior. But again, the link explains behavior only, not orientation.

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# Extreme Makeovers, continued

## **Myth #4: Homosexuality is just sexual behavior.**

**Truth:** It's also about attachment and attraction—psychological, emotional, mental, and spiritual—to a member of one's own gender. For gay and straight alike, behavior follows from one's orientation.. Gayness and lesbianism are sexual and romantic orientations, based on the heart.

## **Myth #5: Homosexuality can be prevented.**

**Truth:** Totally untrue! By trying to prevent homosexuality in a child, all the parent winds up doing is shaming and abusing the child, causing gender confusion or low self-esteem, no matter how gentle or loving the way they do it is. In my office, countless gay men and lesbians have shed tears remembering how a parent took away their toys or imposed stereotypical male or female behaviors on them as children.

## **Myth #6: Homosexuality is an "alternative lifestyle."**

**Truth:** Gay or straight, we are taught since childhood the homonegative belief that being gay is more difficult way to live. Calling homosexuality "alternative" implies that heterosexuality is the standard. But this "straight alternative" of heterosexual living is actually harder for gays and lesbians, and can lead to depression and self-defeating, even self-destructive behavior. For gays and lesbians, heterosexuality is an alternative lifestyle!

## **Myth #7: Homosexuality is caused by a smothering, over-protective mother and an absent, emotionally distant father.**

**Truth:** Very early on, a mother can tell that there's something different about her child, and may she will be more protective to prevent him or her from being teased and abused for being a gay

or lesbian. The father, sensing that his son might be gay, will distance himself but most often, won't know how to react.

Historically, schizophrenic children were believed to be the product of "refrigerator moms." Later, we learned that schizophrenia is a biological disorder and that the mothers acted cold toward their children after feeling a lack of attachment in return. One day, I believe, we will learn that children are biologically gay or lesbian, and that a parent's response to their sexual orientation absolutely does not form it.

## **Myth #8: Anyone can choose to change one's orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.**

**Truth:** Anyone can choose to live as they wish and be anything they want to be. But orientation is as stable as temperament. Children are born with a definite temperament that can change somewhat as they move into adulthood and learn to adapt, but it stays mostly within the same range.

The same is true of homosexuality. People can change their lives to support a heterosexual life style, but do not change their true sexual orientation. Study after study shows that for those who try and change their sexual and romantic orientation, the relapse rate is very high. I suspect that those who've been "successful" at changing their orientation were not essentially homosexual to begin with, but were either acting out sexual abuse (acting-out is behavior only), or were bi-attractual, tending more toward woman than men. This is entirely different from changing one's basic orientation.

## **Myth #9: Everyone is born straight.**

**Truth:** There is no scientific evidence that people are either born straight or born gay. Anti-gay fundamentalists,

and other extreme makeover artists like reparative therapists, assert that no one is born homosexual. That is their viewpoint only, since no scientific data supports any genetic or biologic basis for opposite-sex attractions.

## **Myth #10: Adolescence offers a second chance at heterosexuality.**

**Truth:** By the time individuals become teenagers, their sexuality is set. We are now seeing more and more adolescents, gay and straight alike, experimenting with same-sex and opposite-sex behavior. They are not magically converting to one orientation over the other, simply playing and experimenting—and ultimately, not afraid to give themselves full permission for self-discovery. I'd say they're to be admired. They seem to understand that in the end, your orientation is your orientation, whatever that may be.