



WHEN YOUR SPOUSE COMES OUT

A
STRAIGHT
MATE'S
RECOVERY
MANUAL

CAROL GREVER, MA
DEBORAH BOWMAN, PHD

**When Your Spouse
Comes Out**
*A Straight Mate's
Recovery Manual*

HAWORTH Series in GLBT Family Studies

Jerry Bigner, PhD
Editor

When Your Spouse Comes Out: A Straight Mate's Recovery Manual
by Carol Grever and Deborah Bowman

An Introduction to GLBT Family Studies edited by Jerry Bigner

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Recovery Manual*

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We dedicate this book to straight spouses the world over, and to their gay partners and families. Their perilous personal journey is examined with compassion and understanding on these pages, with the hope that the stories and principles offered here will support healing and full recovery for all. We are especially grateful to the generous individuals who allowed us to interview them and to use their experiences to help others on this path.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carol Grever, MA, experienced the shock of her husband's disclosure of his homosexuality after they had been married more than thirty years and had reared their two sons. She successfully recovered through all the stages of straight spouse healing, and has become a recognized spokesperson on straight spouse matters with wide exposure on network radio and television, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. She is a former English professor and staffing company owner. Ms. Grever's published work includes *My Husband Is Gay: A Woman's Guide to Surviving the Crisis*, which has been translated into Thai and Spanish, and a collection of poetry, *Sun of a New Dawn*.

Deborah Bowman, PhD, is a Professor at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, where she founded the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology program and the Wilderness Therapy program. She teaches a variety of courses, including Gestalt Awareness, Professional Identity, and Group Dynamics and Leadership. Dr. Bowman has worked with a wide range of issues as a clinical psychologist with over 19 years of experience in private practice. She is a director and professional trainer with the Boulder Psychotherapy Institute offering courses in Gestalt Therapy, the Child Within, Creativity, and Dreamwork. Dr. Bowman's work has appeared in the *Gestalt Review*.

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Foreword

How I wish this book had been available when my husband came out to me in 1972. We had been married only seven years when he fell in love with Gordon. In retrospect, I was lucky, for John told me before he told anyone else and before he became sexually active. Although I experienced the feelings of other straight spouses, I believe his initial honesty allowed us to become and remain close friends after our divorce two years later.

In the early 1970s there seemed to be nowhere for me to turn for help—no books, no PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), no Straight Spouse Network. Even the medical and therapeutic communities were ignorant about what I was going through. My physician recommended a therapist who wanted me to free-associate about my father to figure out why I had chosen a gay man to marry. A divorce recovery group I attended told me I was lucky my husband hadn't found another woman. I was isolated and in crisis, believing I was the only person to whom this had ever happened.

Grever and Bowman's fine book not only relieves the isolation that occurs when a spouse comes out but offers hope for recovery. Through the stories of others they outline the practical ways straight mates can survive the experience and move forward into their own lives. They never make it seem easy, for it isn't, and they honor the suffering, the struggles, and the pain. They acknowledge that the process of recovery will not be quick and that the length of time needed will vary with each person. They are also clear that there is not one way through this experience. Every straight spouse must find his or her own path.

I think many of us in this situation would prefer to be given a definite plan to follow that will assure us of recovery. This manual does not provide a simple method, however, for the authors know that true healing is complicated and multilayered and ultimately comes from

the inside out. Instead of step-by-step instructions, the book provides the straight spouse with a map of the territory that includes vital information, suggestions, encouragement, and the stories of others who have survived and thrived. Even thirty-four years after my husband came out to me I discovered new insights into my own experience by reading *When Your Spouse Comes Out*.

Most helpful to me was the authors' emphasis throughout the book on the process of *awareness, insight, and action*. *Awareness* is the willingness to attend to our own feelings, thoughts, and needs. *Insight* follows when our awareness allows us to more accurately perceive the external environment. This clarity allows wise choices that lead to *action*. The process they outline encourages us to recognize our own power in the healing process. The authors cannot tell us what to do, but they can help us discover for ourselves our own road to recovery. Although I did not have their help those many years ago, I now understand how in the middle of crisis I found the courage to leave therapy.

After many sessions with the therapist I had been sent to, I became *aware* that the process we were engaged in was not helpful. We were getting nowhere, and I began to feel like I was drowning. This awareness led me to *insight*. I was able to accurately assess the situation: By her identifying as central what she believed to be my choice to marry a gay man, she was ignoring my fear, anger, and pain. I realized I was with the wrong therapist and I took *action*. I terminated our relationship. I have since recognized that moment as a turning point in my own recovery. I had discovered that I knew what I needed and had the power to make my own choices.

Over years of working with straight spouses, both individually and in support groups, I have witnessed the power of learning the process of *awareness, insight, and action*. Grever and Bowman, through stories, reflection questions, and suggested activities, walk their readers through this process in relation to fear, isolation, shame, self-doubt, anger, and grief. Gently, without judgment, they encourage us to name our experience, gain whatever understanding we can glean from it, and use that knowledge to make wise choices. By presenting the common and almost universal experiences of the straight spouse in this way, they avoid giving us a formula for healing.

In the section on grief I was excited to discover the term *complicated grief*. I have always known that I grieved the loss of my marriage and the future we had planned and that I had experienced all the

stages of the grieving process. Still I wondered why it seemed so hard, and I wondered why I had thought and later heard a number of other straight spouses say, “This would have been easier if he had died.” Grieving a loss through death is a *simple grief*, by no means easy and certainly painful, but grieving with most deaths is public and does not involve shame and isolation. If our spouses had died we could have mourned them surrounded by love and support.

Grever and Bowman also provide information about other factors that lead to the experience of complicated grief, such as the effects the coming-out process has on family and friends. Because one partner is lesbian or gay, others are forced to face or deny their own feelings, prejudices, and misunderstandings about homosexuality—and neither path is easy. Therefore, many friends desert both partners. However, if the reason for the divorce is kept secret, undeserved blame is often aimed at the straight spouse, further complicating the grieving process. If there are children in the marriage, their needs and feelings must also be considered. Their reactions to discovering the homosexuality of one parent and the possible loss of their family as they know it will add to the grief of both parents.

Multiple losses and unresolved earlier losses also compound the grief of the straight spouse. I recognized myself in this section of the book. My husband and I had no children, so I did not have to deal with that complication, but my grief was intensified by the death of my father three years earlier, which I had never fully grieved; the judgment of my mother that caused us to be estranged for many years; and the loss of my in-laws, who wanted nothing more to do with me. Because John wanted his homosexuality to be a secret, I cut myself off from all my friends. I was in the throes of complicated grief for years. How good it is now to have a name for what I was experiencing so many years ago. I am reassured that what I felt then was normal, for I wondered at the time if I were going crazy.

The final chapter of this wonderful book is congruent with all that has gone before. The authors do not tell us how we might be positively changed by this wrenching experience, but they do tell us that our lives can be transformed. They share stories of people who have survived, healed, and are now thriving in their newly created lives. Grever and Bowman point out some common themes in these stories, such as recognizing one’s own needs, living with new goals, and

nourishing the spirit. They end the book by giving us an image of healing that speaks to the wonder and power of the human spirit.

This book will touch readers in different ways. I picked out the sections that spoke to me. You will find different stories and themes to clarify your experience and assure you that you are not alone. There is something within these pages for everyone who has experienced the coming out of a spouse, as well as for those who love us, and for the professionals who will be there to help us. Grever and Bowman have given us a compassionate and professional manual for recovery. As you read, allow their words and wisdom to nurture your spirit and give you hope.

*Reverend Jane E. Vennard
Senior Adjunct Faculty
Iliff School of Theology
Denver, Colorado*

Preface

“I’m gay!”

When a heterosexual’s mate utters these words, life changes in an instant and will never, ever be the same for either partner. My husband of thirty years disclosed his homosexuality and we suddenly found ourselves in a completely different realm. With his one sentence, “I have homosexual tendencies,” we both plunged into a crisis of identity. In those first few days, my mind was pummeled by disbelief, disorientation, fear, confusion, deep sadness, and anger. Trust was gone. Our plans evaporated. I was in shock.

The ensuing months were chaotic, as my husband and I worked together and separately to understand how our lives would go on. Could we remain married? Would the family be destroyed? Were we trapped in secrecy? Would we die with AIDS? Could I meet my deepest needs, married to a gay man? Would I grow old in lonely isolation? Hundreds of unfamiliar questions battered my heart and mind.

That initial crisis was the beginning of a more complicated journey. Awash with doubts, we took many months with many false starts to work our way through waves of confusion. Even with counseling and our best efforts it took a long time to begin healing, to gain clarity, and finally to regain an optimistic sense of self. After four years in the closet of secrecy, we finally did separate and divorce amicably, but the emotional toll was heavy.

Afterward, I engaged these hard-won personal lessons to encourage others who found themselves in mixed-orientation marriages. I wrote *My Husband Is Gay: A Woman’s Guide to Surviving the Crisis* (Grever, 2001), revealing my experience and that of twenty-five other heterosexual women whose husbands had come out. Focusing on that event and its immediate aftermath, it was a crisis survival handbook for straight wives. Courageous, determined women demonstrated on its pages that a mixed-orientation marriage need not be entirely destructive to either spouse, despite initial shock and inevitable suffering.

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The hopeful thesis of that book touched thousands of women in many countries of the world. Though all the straight spouses who shared their stories in *My Husband Is Gay* are Americans, women in other cultures identified with our experiences and understood. The book was first distributed in English-speaking countries and I heard from women in the United States, England, Australia, South Africa, and Canada. Later, when it was translated into Thai and Spanish, other women who grew up in vastly different cultures in Asia and Central/South America also responded. In matters of the heart, we are all the same. People everywhere need love and security, deep trust within the family, and a safe environment for their children. Though our languages and geographic locations differ, our shared hurt is familiar and we comfort each other via the Internet. Worldwide exploration of this subject proves that homosexuality is a fact of life in all cultures, and when gay people marry heterosexuals, the entire family experiences radical challenges and upheaval.

My Husband Is Gay explored the *initial crisis* faced by straight wives, but early survival is only the beginning of a longer process. Key questions begged answers. Are there differences in the way men and women perceive the straight spouse situation and deal with it? What pitfalls do people encounter and how do they bridge them? What are typical long-term challenges? What are some secrets of successful rebuilding and renewal? I continued interviewing straight spouses to find answers, finding more than forty role models who have walked this path, some for thirty years or more. Their stories provide answers that can help overcome other deep personal losses as well, whether related to mixed-orientation relationships or not.

This new book, *When Your Spouse Comes Out*, explores long-term healing for both male and female straight spouses. Co-author Dr. Deborah Bowman, a clinical psychologist and professor in the Transpersonal Psychology Department at Naropa University, brings both counseling experience and academic training to the project. She identifies patterns in the case studies and provides a psychotherapist's insight into straight spouses' unique challenges. She also offers solid therapeutic techniques for self-help. This book attempts to identify practical steps that successful individuals have taken to keep this one traumatic event from ruining their future. True stories prove that, for most, the damage is not irreparable. When they are fully healed, straight spouses can craft a new reality and thrive again.

The book is divided into three sections. In Part I, *Ground—Understanding Contrasting Patterns*, characteristic but diverse reactions to the coming-out event reveal typical stages of coping by straight spouses. Case studies form a mosaic of personal experience, creating the ground for Part II, *Path—Self-Healing Guide for Straight Spouses*. This middle section defines and interprets immediate personal challenges, family and social concerns, and long-term obstacles. Here, Dr. Bowman's expertise sheds light on core issues. Finally, Part III, *Fruition—Thriving After Crisis*, examines the fruition of lessons learned on the straight spouse path and suggests some secrets of transformation.

True stories of straight mates, both male and female, illustrate chapters in each section. Spouses' experiences are told in their own words, taken from the interviews. Only their names have been changed to protect their identity. Their direct quotations are integrated into the text and are *designated by italics*, rather than by endless quotation marks. The intent is to have these real people speak directly to the reader. Questions and activities at the end of each chapter reinforce the ideas presented and help readers apply others' wisdom to their own situation. The result is a self-directed path to recovery, which can be used individually or in the context of a support group. Two appendixes contain a compilation of exercises and activities plus additional resources.

Whether facing the straight spouse challenge isolated and alone or working with a support group as a participant or facilitator, you are invited to join us on this journey to renewal. We invite you into this poignant world of real people whose former lives were shattered. Watch and learn how some picked up their broken pieces and transformed them into wholeness. Practice their techniques for healing. Their triumphs and disasters and shared wisdom can point the way toward greater awareness and the possibility of thriving after crisis.