With the beginning of every new year, we look ahead to helping more people find a happier life and a brighter future. Finding happiness may seem elusive to straight spouses and straight partners. The end of a relationship is never easy, even though sometimes it can be a relief. The road to a new beginning is filled with challenges. Everyone here at the Straight Spouse Network: Board Members, Staff Members, Support Staffers, Group Facilitators and Support Contacts, understand the difficulties they face. For the most part, we’ve met our own challenges, but we will never forget the struggles we had to go through to accomplish that.

When we reached out to the Straight Spouse Network, we trusted that this group of strangers could help us comprehend what was happening to us, and to find a path to healing. Now, we ourselves have become those strangers to so many. In time, we become comrades, coaches and confidantes, not strangers. Each volunteer feels a genuine empathy for every person who reaches out to us. They do so out of the goodness of their hearts. And their reward is watching someone who was broken and alone become strong and hopeful. So, in this new year, we wish all of you true freedom from sorrow and an abundance of hope for tomorrow.

Linda Ehle, Straight Spouse Network Staff

Our mission is to examine, understand, survive and tell the outside world about the Straight Spouse Experience. Please submit your original articles, personal stories, photos, poetry and original art that reflect your experience. You can use an alias, if you like. All submissions will be considered, professionally edited and a final proof will be sent to you for your approval. The deadline for our March 2019 issue is February 15, 2019. Send article submissions as embedded text, pdfs or Word documents. Art: 300 dpi pdf, jpeg or eps.

LindaE@straightspouse.org
From My Desk

Kelly Hollimon, Interim Executive Director
Straight Spouse Network

My straight spouse journey began in 2010. After 16 years, I decided that I could no longer tolerate the lack of physical and emotional intimacy in my marriage. I'd tried everything I could to fix it, but couldn't gain any ground. I knew that I might not find happiness if I left, but I was guaranteed to not find it if I stayed. At that point, the thought of staying scared me more than the thought of leaving. It was about a year and a half later that my ex admitted that he'd known all along that he was gay. He thought he loved me enough to make it work, to have a marriage and a home and children.

Unlike most straight partners, I couldn't envision my destination in those early days, nor could I see any pathway out of the woods. Determined to not let fear run my life, I consulted a lawyer to get a clear picture of what child support would look like in my state. I just kept waking up day after day, and tackled what I thought was the most immediate need. Some days it was a bold move, like opening a new bank account. Other days it was just making it through my work and the end of the evening. It was like feeling my way through thick fog, the only thing visible was the next step in front of me. So I just kept taking each next step until I could clearly see a new horizon.

My hope for all straight spouses/partners is that we'll continue to make strides forward in our journeys, whether those lead away from our current situation, or toward something better for us.

The Straight Spouse Network's goal is to help you to heal and become whole, help bring awareness to our plight and build bridges to understanding between our community and others. There is much work to be done, and the need just keeps increasing. As the Interim Executive Director, my personal focus is on ensuring our financial security, attention to logistics and collaboration with all our constituents. We want our organization to be able to continue our work and expand our help to even more people in need.

I wish you all great things in this coming new year!
Sincerely, Kelly

From the Editor

Linda Ehle
Straight Spouse Network Staff

On behalf of the Straight Spouse Network Staff, I want to extend our best wishes for all to have a peaceful holiday season and for all things positive in 2019, as we all continue our journeys.

In this issue, I've decided to look back at previous years and re-run what I consider some of our more significant past articles. For those who have read them, I hope you revisit them. For those who have not read these articles, I hope they help you understand your and other straight spouses/partners shared conflicts, affectations, challenges and possibilities.

In the coming new year, I look forward to bringing you new insights and information. And I'm hoping more of you will send us your stories to share.

Cheers to you all! Linda

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The Straight Spouse Network provides peer-to-peer support moderated by knowledgeable facilitators. We do not provide any professional services.
The last eleven months of triage statistics have been completed. One month to go. As of right now, they show that from January 2018 to November 2018, 1,665 people came to us for support. December is usually a busy month. Our history shows that during the holidays there is usually a spike in closeted people coming out. It will be interesting to see what the final count for 2018 will be.

When Straight Spouse Network was first established, the ways in which we discovered our partners weren't straight were far more organic than they are today. A straight mate almost always felt that something was wrong and was suspicious for many reasons; lack of intimacy, unexplained absences, secret phone calls, changes in personality, anger, frustration. Discovery came about when someone was outed, came out, or there was discovery through some sort of sleuthing.

Today there are a plethora of special phone apps and sites LGBTQ people use to find one another for various reasons or activities. For the last few years, the most prevalent way the truth is discovered is by simply finding messages left on a phone, sites visited on the internet, and unexplained expenditures on credit card statements. And those discoveries lead to all kinds of details if one chooses to follow that trail.

Even though it is far easier to find out the truth now, our numbers are going down. In recent years we were up to 2,000 people a year. So, even though discovery is so much easier compared to previous times, why are numbers going down?

One thing of note is that more people are not as compelled to stay together for religious purposes, so that doesn't seem to factor into lower numbers.

An average of 85% of straight spouses/partners are women. The past year has been filled with revelations of sexual harassment and predation, which makes it clear that far too many men still do not respect women. And that trend is reflected in gay men who believe they have the right to live a double life. An old school of thought has been rejuvenated: women are here to serve men, to be convenient shields so some men can stay closeted and maintain a ‘normal family life’ to help ensure they maintain a career, a standing in the community, and even to enhance their political standing.

This may seem like a bold statement, but it’s based on the real stories we hear. Too many men, no matter how ‘busted’ they are, still deny the obvious, adding to their straight partners’ dismay and confusion. So we’re seeing how the pendulum swings. Hopefully in the coming new year, it will swing the other way and more people, women in particular, will be liberated from a difficult relationship, and more people will feel comfortable coming out and living an authentic life. And if that happens, we’ll be here with improved and extended ways to support all straight partners in the future, no matter how high that number will be.

To see our Triage reports go to http://www.straightspouse.org/straight-spouse-network-dashboard/

Linda Ehle, Straight Spouse Network Staff
In May of 2018, we launched our podcast Straight Spouse Network VOICES. The response has been overwhelming. After airing 16 episodes, we gathered over 5,000 downloads in a short period of time. And we'll be back with more in February, 2019!

“Your voice matters,” says host Kristin Kalbli at the end of each episode. That is the reason why we have this important outreach. OUR VOICES MATTER! So often the straight spouse experience is overlooked or misrepresented in the general media. This podcast is our opportunity to “set the record straight” about a variety of experiences and perspectives as we cope with building our lives after an LGBTQ spouse comes out or we discover their secret.

In 2018 we featured men and women who told their own experiences: a husband whose lesbian wife told him that her partnerships with women were none of his business, a husband who is remaining in a mixed orientation marriage, a woman who developed a one woman stage show about being the ex wife of a transgender husband, several counselors, authors, an adult child of a mixed orientation marriage, plus other inspiring and educational stories and perspectives. In 2019 we will continue to present guests who have important insights that matter to all of us!

A podcast is not an inexpensive undertaking, especially when it is done professionally. We are applying for grant funding and sponsorship for our podcasts, to cover the costs for Studio time, editing, hosting and equipment. We're looking for generous donors, as well. If you would like to sponsor an episode, please contact us by emailing janet@straightspouse.org.

Find us on iTunes, iHeartRadio, and various other feeds. And you can join us from the link on our website, http://www.straightspouse.org/voices-the-straight-spouse-network-podcast/
We’re finally brave enough

to tell someone you trust that our mate isn’t straight. Unfortunately, far too often the response isn’t what we expected. “How could you not have known?”, “Oh, everybody knew but you”, “Oh, I’m how brave of them to come out.” Or, in my case, when I told my mother, “What did you do to make him gay, Linda?”

People wonder why we’re so upset; afterall, relationships end every day. It’s up to us to help others understand the serious nature of our situations and the trauma it causes us. Some months ago, I was with a group of friends and the subject of transgender people came up. I said a few informative things and the argument back was, “You can’t be a woman if you don’t have ovaries.” Then, “I don’t want to talk about this stuff, I only want to talk about fun things.” Another person said, “they (straight spouses) should just get a divorce and walk away.” So I talked about a few different cases in which people couldn’t simply ‘walk away’: A family with a limited income who had a child with special needs, an elderly couple on a fixed income, (very common) women who were stay-at-home mothers with no career to fall back on, spouses whose LGBTQ mates were quite prominent, and some who may be dangerous sociopaths. It was quiet for a moment and I thought maybe they got the message. Then someone turned up the music and opened another bottle of wine. Discussion over.

There is far more to it than whether a relationship ends or not. For a straight parter, the effects of having lived with a closeted person can last a lifetime, no matter how far they manage ‘move on’.

One thing I’ve tried to do in these newsletters is examine and explain various affects most of us have in common. And not with a mere mention, or in general terms, but in-depth, peeling back the complicated layers, one by one. We tell personal stories that expose how traumatic the upheaval in family dynamics is, and how much pain our families experience.

In this issue I’m rerunning articles that deal with real explanations for our collective affections. In the coming year, new, insightful subjects will be presented. Examining and understanding our very unique problems help us heal. Exposing that knowledge helps ‘outsiders’ comprehend our unique challenges. If more people understand why this is a big deal, then we’ll be on our way to actually changing things. In particular, the medical industry needs to recognize how we represent unique mental health issues. Too many of us suffer from PTSD, anxiety attacks, and depression. And every aspect of society is affected, from housing to the court system.

The bottom line is that it is unnatural for closeted LGBTQ people to be married to straight folks. We need to convince the gay community that the practice of marrying straight people is unethical, unhealthy and in most cases, does not work. We have the right to know the truth about someones true sexual preferences before deciding to commit to a relationship with them. We need to expose the negative effects that result from dishonesty. We do not deserve to be victimized, isolated or deprived of true intimacy. And ultimately, we need to do more than gather together and help one another heal. We are the effect of a cause. We need to end the cause, the reason we’re all in this same club. I hope the articles in this newsletter contribute to all the important goals we strive to meet. ◆

Linda Ehle
Ignorance Is Not Bliss
Or, why you shouldn’t protect your children from the truth

By L. Rueda, 2016

For the past eight years, time has stood still. When I look back at who I was before, I see an ambitious single working her way up the creative ladder of the bustling film industry in Los Angeles. I was on my own in a brave new world full of endless possibilities, building a life that would take me on great adventures. It was a life being built upon the foundation of everything I had learned throughout my childhood and all that I hoped to discover as an adult. Then the foundation crumbled.

I tend to use this analogy often in describing to others what my personal journey has been for nearly a decade. My foundation was my family. I always knew that no matter what choices I made and whether or not I was successful, I would be okay. I would be safe, loved and accepted unconditionally because of that strong foundation which my parents had laid out for my younger brother and I. They taught us that we could be anything we wanted to be, as long as we kept exploring the world, that our dreams in the clouds could be realized here on earth. That is what held me up until one sunny afternoon, when I received a phone call from my mother.

Through almost inaudible tears, she told me that my father was gay and that their thirty-two year marriage was over. The blow was not soft and the shock was impenetrable. That was when my world stopped turning.

As a young child, I never imagined that my parents would ever be apart. I had friends with divorced parents and saw their struggles, but never thought it could happen to me. I certainly didn’t expect that it could happen right before my 26th birthday. Thinking about it now, the fact that my father came out really didn’t faze me. Being gay was not the problem; it was the lie about who he was and how it hurt my mother that broke my heart. It was broken for both of them, and to be honest, it still is.

For the first few months, as my brother and I tried to wrap our heads around our new circumstances, I considered whether this would have been more difficult if my father had come out when I was younger. I thought about how I might have reacted as a toddler, a silly little girl or a gawky teenager. Was it better to find something like this out as an adult? With a fully developed brain and a little life experience, would it be easier? The answer is no.

My story is not unique, but I feel it is often overlooked. As a child of a straight spouse situation, there are two things that have been unbearable for me. One is seeing my mother in pain, grieving for a life she never really had. The other is the overwhelming feeling of guilt I have for still loving my father. If my father had come out earlier in their marriage, my mother would have had more time to find herself again, or at least her hope for a happy future. I could talk about why my mother has lost hope, or speculate on how my father really feels. But the truth is, I will never really know how this is for them. It happened to them, not me. In the same turn, my experience is singular to me and to all the other children who have gone through the same situation.

It is difficult for our parents to understand what we are going through because their pain is so great, so blinding. I do not blame them for this, for not seeing me. There is no simple way to navigate our feelings and all we can really do is be patient, be aware that each of
us goes through a grieving process, and above all, be honest with each other.

I know the urge to protect our children is fierce and often feels like the right thing to do, or the only thing to do. However, I can tell you as a child who never knew the truth, I really wish I had. Eight years ago, when my world went still, the momentum of my career, my relationships and my feeling of self worth were crippled and I am still trying to limp across the finish line. When the truth comes out, no one is safe from the hurt, no matter how old they are. All I want is for my mother to be happy again; truly, authentically happy in her life. There is still so much to look forward to. I want my father to find peace with his past decisions and know I will always love him. We will never be the same family unit we once were, but the love that brought us together in the seemingly distant past will always be there somewhere.

To whomever finds this article relatable, my message to you is this: do not protect your children from the truth, no matter what. Teach them that honesty is all that matters in life. We all learn early on that it is best to tell the truth, to confide in our friends and to not hurt others. Honesty is not just for others though, it is more important to be honest with yourself and to be true to who you are. If we could all do that and embrace all that makes us everything, perhaps we wouldn't feel so lost and alone. If my father had felt free to be who he was earlier in life, it would have allowed my mother to be free as well.

As children, our parents are our whole universe, they shape our world and make us who we are going to become. To see our parents in pain is too much to bear, because there is no way we can make it go away. Parents do not want to see their children in pain either, and that is why we want to shield them from the harsh realities of existence. We make decisions for our children and we want them to know that nothing is ever their fault, when it comes to these grown up issues at least. At the age of 10 I may have perceived that my parents split was my fault.

Next week I will be 34, and guess what - after eight years and dozens of therapy sessions later, that is how I still feel most of the time. My father waited to come out until my brother and I graduated from college, had jobs and were settled into our newfound adulthood. Sometimes I think he waited to make sure we were secure before announcing such a huge shift in dynamics. I love him for that, but I am also broken by the lie. At times I feel like my whole childhood was falsified, that nothing was real and that who I am now has lost any and all meaning. Depression and anxiety over not being able to help my mother, trying to understand my father and the yearning to find myself again is sometimes suffocating. Honesty would have saved all of us so much heartache. All I can hope is that if anyone who reads this is working through this struggle now, please remember that honesty is always the best policy. Please do not protect your children - because you can't, no matter how hard you try.

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It was 1966. Dave and I were driving home from a date one night and stopped at a red light. The green light traffic passed in front of us. “Dave, look. Isn’t that your dad’s car? Um...that wasn’t your mom in the car with him...” I said, a bit confused. I watched as his dad drove into a parking lot leading to a motel. “What is he doing?” Dave was quiet for a few minutes then reluctantly explained, “When I was little, I learned not to ask mom where dad was going on the nights he drove away after dinner.” “So, he cheats on your mom?” “I guess so.” I was shocked. “Does your mom know?” He said, “Probably.” After that, the subject was closed to discussion.

For almost seven years Dave was my world. We planned to get married. But I knew he'd cheated on me several times; like father, like son. I finally couldn’t take it any more and broke off our engagement. I dated around, concentrated on my career, and four years later I married Andy. A few years afterward, I heard that Dave had gotten married. One night I was visiting a friend and she told me about how Dave still had a roving eye. Like his father, he was going out on his wife.

When I married Andy, I just knew in my heart that he would never cheat on me. He never looked at attractive women the way Dave had. Over the years of our marriage, Andy didn't run around on me, but then, like many Straight Spouses, I never felt he had a true sensual desire for me either. Most Straight Spouses share common red flags: few PDA's during the relationship, rarely being complimented or congratulated on accomplishments, a disinterest or aversion to being sexually intimate. Many Straight Spouses talk about how their closeted mate never stepped in to defend them while they were being challenged unfairly by family members, friends or business associates. Another commonality is how they were contradicted when it came to disciplining their children. Of course, at the time, most of us did not know that our spouses were hiding in the closet.

Fast forward to the Post Revelation years. I’ve been in the Straight Spouse support group arena for nine years now, so I’ve had a lot of time to observe much of the fallout we have in common. One of the most significant observations that many Straight Spouses have described is how, after revelation, they begin to see their grown kids, families and friends display behaviors that reflect their gay partners’ past treatment of them. I’ve come to realize that our closeted mates’ behavior toward us influenced how those around us think we should be treated, and even influenced their emotional reactions to our post-revelation angst. Far too many of my group members...
who tried to tell their families and friends why their marriage was ending, heard this, “I don’t want to talk about it. You’re crazy.”

**A TEACHABLE MOMENT**

A Straight Spouse confided in me that recently her son, Nick, went out on a casual date with a nice girl. After the date ended, the girl walked to her car which was parked pretty far away. It didn’t occur to Nick that he should walk with her to her car. His mom normally wouldn’t tell her grown son what to do. But when she found out about how that date ended, she decided to say something. “Son, when you were growing up, you never heard your dad say to me, ‘I love you, you’re pretty.’ He never had my back,” and she went on to cite that whole litany of past unchivalrous examples. “I know you’re not in love with this girl. But she really likes you and she deserves respect.” Nick got it. He texted the girl a nice thank-you message.

Our LGBTQ spouses’ negative treatment of us was a bad example, even if subtle. They set the tone for how we “deserve” to be treated. Those close to us were watching, and many were inadvertently influenced. The name for that is Emotional Contagion and psychologists have been studying it for centuries. If you google it, you’ll see a plethora of books and articles on the subject; mostly clinical studies. If you’re in therapy, you may have already discussed the term with your clinician. If not, now you know what it’s called.

Besides adopting our spouses’ attitudes toward us, an additional effect of the contagion can be that our kids are also affected by the negative emotions we were suffering at the time; depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem. Most Straight Spouses know that list. Our afflictions can have contagious second-hand effects on our kids. So, we have a double edged sword here.

There is no way to simplify what a Straight Spouse endures. When we’re faced with the possibility of our marriages ending, it can be far more complicated than when a marriage between two straight people ends. After my relationship with Dave ended, I didn’t feel the same kind of sadness I did when my marriage to Andy ended. During my years with Dave, I truly experienced fulfilling intimacy. No matter how hard I tried, that kind of fulfillment never came to fruition with Andy. It wasn’t his fault; it just wasn’t in his nature. But how he obviously felt about me left a lasting impression on my family, friends and, I suspect, some of my business associates.

It takes time to untangle such complicated behavioral influences. Once the problem is defined, we can work on the solution. The best weapon is a Positive Attitude. It’s difficult for many of us to get over the anger, but that can be our biggest enemy. Too many of us dwell on the deception and betrayal we’ve felt. But over time, it’s worth working on letting it go. Our kids don’t want to see us sad or depressed, because it makes them feel the same way. So we have no choice, it seems, but to keep our ‘lows’ to ourselves and share our good moods when we’re having a great day.

When Nick’s mom told him why he probably didn’t walk his date to her car, I saw it as a chance enlightenment for all of us. I was lucky to find a teachable moment. It set me on a quest to learn more. And I’m focused on listening to all my peers and while they share their stories, I’ll harness more teachable moments whenever I find them.

_Linda Ehle is a professional writer/editor/art director. These are her personal opinions and observations._
He never said he was gay. I just thought he was being a gentleman while we were dating, since he wasn't physically into me. He never said he was gay. I thought he just wanted to hang out with his buddies for long periods of time, week-end after week-end. I just thought he didn't want me to drop by his condo because he was a messy house keeper.

He never said he was gay. I just could never pinpoint his whereabouts when he'd been out until the wee hours of the morning. I just thought he wasn't very romantic when he gave me an engagement ring he'd hidden under the bed after we had “done it”.

He never said he was gay. I was trying to slow dance with him. He said, “You want it all, don’t you?” I just thought he was too tired after partying and drinking at the wedding, to consummate the marriage. I just thought he was being mean when he said, “what's the matter with you?” when I dressed in a sexy nightgown on the honeymoon.

He never said he was gay, when nine days after I married him, he stopped coming home every night. Then he started sleeping in the other bedroom. I cried endlessly and begged to know what was wrong.

He never said he was gay, when I told him this behavior was not normal for newlyweds. I threatened to leave because the hurt, neglect, and lack of intimacy was emotionally killing me. He said he was a drug addict, when his absence, indifference, silence, and sexual passivity could no longer be ignored.

Ten years later...
He never said he was gay, when he would wait until I fell asleep before coming to bed, and never touching me. Or when he took a job in another city for a year and would only fly home on the week-ends.

Twenty years later...
He never said he was gay, as his emotional absence, indifference, silence, and sexual passivity continued. Or when I told him I had met someone who had shown an interest in me and I wanted to go see him. He just dropped me off at the airport, and said “Maybe HE can give you something I CAN’T.

He never said he was gay, when his preference for intimacy style abruptly changed. I asked why a thousand times.

He never said he was gay, when he would talk to the neighbor for hours in the front yard after getting off work. I just thought he was being inconsiderate of me, while I was waiting in the house for his company.

He never said he was gay, when he discovered he had prostate cancer. He never asked me to go to any of his doctors’ appointments. He just said he was going to have surgery on such and such a date. And he said that I had wished cancer on him. His anger started to slowly escalate. I repeatedly told him he was scaring me.

Thirty years later...
He never said he was gay, when he didn't acknowledge our anniversary. He was just more and more irritated with me and at whatever I said or did. He was angry that I had gotten water on the plants while washing the outside windows. He clinched his fists, started breathing heavy and looking at me with evil eyes.

He never said he was gay, when I dropped a pillow, blanket and night bag over the balcony and I drove away while his back was to me.

He never said he was gay, after it had been three weeks since we’d had a face to face conversation. Or when I told him how much I loved him. Or when I asked him to say something, anything. He only responded with, “I don’t know what to say”.

He never said he was gay, when I said, "Sometimes enough is enough”. Or when I filed for divorce.

He’s never said he is gay …. I wonder if he ever will
I should have known...

You saw little red flags. Your husband was obsessed with Madonna. Or your wife was obsessed with Madonna. You thought, “that’s kind of gay...”, then, “Ridiculous. I’m just being paranoid.” Your first reaction was denial. Psychologically, denial is actually a good thing. It’s a little gift from your brain that gives your mind time and space to prepare for an inevitable, painful truth.

Sometimes red flags are so explicit there should be no question: damming texts, photos, rooms strewn with sex orgy leftovers, porn. When evidence is so obvious, does that stop the mind from denial? No. Again, your mind automatically goes into self-protection mode to slowly let the shock wear off before it allows you to recognize and accept harsh reality.

Sometimes it seems impossible to break free of the denial, especially when you hear, “It’s not what you think,” or, “A friend used my car”, or “I must have been drugged”, or “I love only you”.

How denial works

At first it is a protection. But if it goes on too long, it can be harmful. You know your spouse’s extramarital activities can be dangerous to your health. You realize a marriage devoid of intimacy is dangerous to your emotional health.

When vets returned home from Viet Nam, they didn’t talk about their war experiences. Many went into denial and were plagued by those memories for the rest of their lives. But there is more compassion for today’s returning vets. Recently one of the recommended treatments for soldiers, many living in denial of their PTSD, is participation in support groups where they have open discussions with other vets. This is proving to be extremely healing.

Some psychologists suggest that one of the best ways to get past denial is to talk to someone you don’t know. The right therapist might be of great help, if they happen to have a frame of reference.

Straight Spouse Network volunteers are a very specialized group who have seen a myriad of traumatic situations in those who contact the network for help. Group facilitators have lived through the difficulties and challenges of learning their spouses are LGBT, have been in groups, and have found resolution in their own situations and have come out the other side. They are a point of reference for those just starting the journey.

The most difficult thing for many Straights is just going to that first meeting. When they do, and start sharing and comparing their stories, they find the strength and courage to finally break through the barrier of denial.

The first step in truly moving forward is recognizing that we all experience denial, how it works for us and how we can and must eventually let it go. When we do, we can finally begin to move forward, make important decisions and start living a better life.

– Linda Ehle
On January 16th, 2018, we had an email from Marie. She was preparing to participate in the Toronto Women’s March, for the second year. She'd decided to do something to represent the Straight Spouse Network, in solidarity with the fight for women's rights and the #MeToo movement. Note: Statistics from the last year clearly indicate that about 80% of straight spouses are women. Her enthusiasm lit up my spirit as we frantically emailed back and forth. What did she need, what could I churn out asap for her? I dropped what I was doing and went to work.

Marie had actually put together a handout describing our mission using quotes from our most recent newsletter. Together we did edits, added more complete information and our logo. After several frantic rounds, she was armed with a flyer, mission handout and art for a sign. Over the course of that afternoon and next few days, we formed a lasting bond. I will forever be inspired by this feisty, brave woman. At 75, Marie held her own amid the young folks. During her life, she has endured much physical pain and struggled to survive against impossible odds, and still has that fiery fight in her.

On January 20th, 2018, Marie was amid thousands of women and allies who descended on downtown Toronto. When back at home in Collingswood, she sent me this report:

“DID IT !!!!!!!”

“At the last minute, my daughter-in-law came with me to be sure I was safe. She was Great! We joined the assembling group of marchers at City Hall. Using my cane for stability, I moved through the mob, smiling and distributing Straight Spouse Network flyers and handouts, letting the Straight Spouse Network sign I was wearing do the work, as I greeted other marchers. I zeroed in on those with rainbow flags, reassuring them that the Straight Spouse Network supports LGBTQ rights. There was no push back and everything was very positive, though I’m sure most had no idea about our issue. But just to be acknowledged was a start!

One woman said this was “cutting edge,” our group was “something new.” I showed her our Mission Statement handout stating ‘since 1987’, not exactly new. There were so many agendas! There were Comfort Women from WWII, groups demanding equal pay, Teachers Federations across the province, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, to name a few. All of which we support of course!

Finally we began the march of many blocks filled with people holding signs and flags and beating drums, and crowds of people on the sidelines cheering us on.

There was a group with Papier-mâché puppets, Moms and Dads with strollers and bewildered babies holding signs, young women with ‘I fight like a Girl’ signs. And in this ‘women's march’ there were many men, like there had been last year, marching in solidarity. I stopped for a bit and stood on the side to cheer also, showing our sign to the marchers as they passed.
Our arrival back at City Hall ended the march, where some gathered again and others broke off. The jammed traffic crawled past, as roads had been blocked, so I displayed our sign to those onlookers and the folks on the streetcars, also. I did see some puzzled faces of course. Photographers were everywhere and I know some caught images of our sign. Don’t know if it did any good, but I certainly hope so. And after all the frantic preparations and apprehension, it wasn’t scary after all. Would I do it again? You Bet! Next time maybe YOU can join me!"

Marie’s Story
Marie is a native of Canada and has a large extended family which has been there for 16 generations. She and her husband taught on exchange in England during the first year of their marriage. “He’s an only child of orphaned parents. I was eldest of 5, who ran away from home as soon as I could. So, my husband and I were opposites.” Years later in Canada, after their sons were born, Marie taught school, received a government grant to set up a home day care network, started a baby sitting co-op, was a YWCA group leader, and helped establish Mothers Support and Preschool Groups. As her accomplishments grew, she began to suffer from Repetitive Strain Injury. She was forced to take an early retirement after 16 years. It was a five year struggle to regain full use of her hands. “When you are physically diminished, all you feel is the state you are in. You don’t ‘battle on,’ you just breathe, and take your 15 minutes of self-pity as long as possible,” she muses.

When her husband retired, they moved to small town on Georgian Bay, where Marie began following her interest in Family History and genealogy. “I found, to my amazement, that many of my French Canadian ancestors had been kidnapped by Indians in New England, settled here and never went back.” She attained an ancestor’s archival manuscript, studied paleography, and over the next four years transcribed the 825 pages of “execrable penmanship.” She returned to England to gift it to the History Centre and museum. The research helped distract her from her constant health issues. And then she was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer of the stomach.

Her husband was very supportive, challenging doctors, finding medications and giving hands-on care. “I almost died twice... and wanted to. But, even though it took years to get my brain somewhat back, and the aftereffects of ‘extreme chemo’ (Osteoarthritis, cracked vertebrae, dental problems) make me vulnerable to this day. But, hey, I dropped from a size 18 to a size 10!”

Wed’d been together 46 years when our marriage took a 180. I was hospitalized, thinking suicide.”

Her husband went to Arizona. “I stayed here. Bloody house kept breaking, gas fireplace, etc. Couldn’t open jars with my weak hands.” Her husband returned for Christmas and began doing repairs. They have remained together. “I never thought I’d still be with him. I had the mediator and lawyer ready, have the Divorce Coloring book ready. He’s trying to be husband from heaven. Says he’s too old to do otherwise.” Marie’s health issues still prevail. She finally has a good counselor, validation and plans to work on preparing her manuscript for possible publication in the future.

“Going to the March last year gave me such strength. Then I made it to Annie Tulk’s group in Toronto and together with June we started the group in Barrie. Have about 8 members there. I am 75 and live in Collingswood so winter weather is sometimes a challenge. When I told my husband I wanted to march again, he said I should pick a cause. VOILA!! Straight Spouse Network! I picked the right time to tell him, of course he was afraid I’d single him out, but I reassured him it was much bigger than him. He drove me down to Toronto.”

By Marie E. and Linda Ehle

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Married to a Transgender Person

A Series of Revelations

“Sandy” climbed the stairs to the attic with the box of Halloween decorations. She put it back in its usual place on the shelf. As she took down the Christmas box, she noticed the lid on the old trunk in the corner was ajar. She bent down to close it and saw some things she didn’t recognize. With a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach, she lifted the lid and saw several items; underwear, some dresses and some high heels. She pulled out a long, black dress. Size 14; not her size. She’d never seen it before. She laid it on the floor and fished out a pair of beige lace panties. They were hers; they’d been missing for weeks. They were soiled... “Max” appeared behind her. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded. That’s when she just knew. And Max slowly began to tell her everything....

That’s one story. There are many more like it. A wife will discover her husband is dressing in ladies clothing. It’s confusing and shocking. The husband may come up with awkward excuses, trying to minimize the significance of his compulsion, or to quell the shock. But the truth always emerges, many times very slowly. “2013 - He had been changing his looks for months. He was growing his hair, got braces, got a nose job and was completely hairless...He was tanning once a week. He was wearing skinny jeans and tight T-shirts and he was claiming it was simply a mid-life crisis... he kept sneaking off into corners whispering with a bisexual friend of mine. The next day, he told me he was gay... A couple of months later he revealed that he was a cross dresser. A few months after that he revealed that he identified as a female but would never be willing to lose his genitalia. In January 2016 he told me he was looking into sexual reassignment surgery.”

A Transgender person goes through many stages when deciding to let the real person inside of them finally emerge. From dressing in women’s clothing, to the decision of taking hormones, going to therapy, and all the steps toward a possible transition, a wife helplessly watches as the man she loves slowly disappears. “Mostly she likes to grow her hair long and wear make up in public, then on occasion dress up at home. Currently, she just wants to express herself as a feminine guy, and NOT transition, but she has considered hormones. She’s still deciding exactly how far she wants to go.”

Many wives of Transgender persons talk about how dependent their spouse is on them. Quite often, their spouses want to be more like girlfriends... “For the first 2 years after he came out to me, he chose to privately express himself: He began to buy female clothing and undergarments. He began to grow his hair out and he began shaving off all of his body hair. He began to sneak clothing in his bag to work...he would change at work in order to pretend to be a female.” ... “I noticed that he constantly wanted to role play as a woman in the bedroom...I finally said, ‘If you want to wear my clothes, I’d rather you do it when I’m home and know about it, than come home one day and be surprised.’ The look on his face told me everything... so I dressed him up. He’s more into make up than clothes, but that’s how my knowledge of it came around.”

“She wants to be invited to everything like she was before, which is silly because she is no longer my significant other...She is unclear about what I DO and DO NOT want to hear regarding her transition... Also, she is struggling to realize she can no longer exercise her White Male Privilege... she has to be respectful and considerate of others. She very often is only focused on her journey and her challenges and what she needs – which, at the risk of being insulting – is a very male mind set.”

Sometimes the transgender spouse will even convince their wife to go shopping with them for women’s clothing. They’ll ask for make up and hair advice. At first, wives may go along with this, at least temporarily, reluctantly, because they truly care for their
spouse and want them to feel supported in their self-discovery. They really don't know what they are truly facing. “I tried to be supportive. I went to transgender group events, marital counselling, and individual counselling. I took him clothing shopping and helped him learn make-up and hair techniques. I thought with enough exposure I would be able to be okay with the man I married choosing to live his life as a female. I was not.”

A wife’s support during the coming out process is a loving and noble thing to do, but it can ultimately take a psychological toll. The wife’s needs and emotional health are often not a consideration. They are expected to make the transgender person’s experience more important than their own. “I feel like spouses of the transgender persons (or gays) get overlooked. I found that people were so ready to throw a parade for my husband finally living HER truth that they literally forgot to have one second of compassion for the fact that my life was turned upside down. It is so easy to now understand the pain the transgender person endures when they are not living authentically, that there is so little if any thought given to the pain the spouse experiences when he/she is offered the revelation.”

From a Transitioned spouse, “I told her it was time she addressed me by my new female name and used female pronouns. If she couldn’t, we could no longer be friends. She said I was mean. I said...it is hurtful when you call me by my dead name.”

The Medical Condition
There have been eras in history where transgender people were maligned, considered insane and even imprisoned, punished, experimented on, tortured. In this more informed and accepting society, we know that transgender persons are recognized as having a medical condition, not a mental illness. Most people know from an early age they are ‘different’. But all their lives, they are up against the ugly echoes of past ideals, uninformed parents, and rigid religious beliefs. Denying, or suppressing the need to express one’s transgender identity, can however, lead to depression, serious personality disorders and even psychosis. So, it is difficult not to feel empathy for the plight of transgender persons. One can only imagine how confusing it must be for a child to feel trapped in the wrong body. “I knew at age five I was different and identified as a girl. I prayed every night to wake up as a girl with a closet of dresses... I hated being a boy and doing boy things. By age 10, I was dressing in my mother’s clothes and putting on makeup and intentionally allowing her to find me dressed. I would tell her, I am a girl... After five times or so they took me to a psychiatric center....my parents told me I would be committed if I did not stop dressing and insisting I was a girl. I was terrified.”

If He Knew, Why Did He Marry Me?
Should the choice to marry simply be to see if it can fix something inside? Yes, being transgender is complicated, to put it lightly. But, like other non-straights who marry, many times the main consideration seems to be about their own agendas, not the straight spouse’s feelings. Maybe some do love the straight spouses they marry. But is it really love if someone is harboring deception from the beginning? Many straight spouses don’t think twice; when they find out their husband has been dressing in women’s clothing, they are out of there without a moment’s hesitation. But others, even though hurt and confused, stay and truly want to help their spouse. It comes down to the individual capacity to endure an ultimately difficult situation.

We live in a society that is designed for partners. Everyone is a little nervous when it comes to the prospect of actually “tying the knot”. As future Straight Spouses, a whole lot of us had subliminal pre-wedding jitters. But, how did someone who knew they were transgender justify their marriage proposal? “I posed this question to my ex-spouse on numerous occasions, ‘How did you not know you felt this way when we got married?’ I asked this question because I would never have married him, nor would I have chosen to have children with him if I had known he wanted to live his life this way. His response was, ‘I have felt this way since I was 8 years old. I attempted to lead a hetero-normative life because I felt, with the right tools, I would be able to make peace with my biological gender. Unfortunately, I can no longer live this lie to myself.’”

Telling The Family
Adults have a hard enough time with the Transgender revelation, but the shock factor may be far too overwhelming for younger children. Older teenagers may be able to understand the reality, but even for adult children, it is very difficult to grasp and accept the idea of a father morphing into a woman. The whole concept is inconceivable. “My ex-spouse has not seen the children in over a
Therapy is key to both the Straight Spouse and their children of all ages in coping with realities that seem so unreal. Fortunately, the issue has had a good amount of public exposure, so adult extended-family members are probably fairly informed. Shock is still to be expected, but hopefully understanding and acceptance are as well. But for children, it is an extremely delicate process and lifelong challenge. One Straight Spouse said, "(we have) No children. THANK GA WD!!" Another said, "We have not ... discussed this with ... or in front of our children. Family and close friends have been extremely supportive by not disclosing this information to our children. I will continue to wait until he is ready to reveal this information to our children."

This puts a new twist to the old idea that it's better to stay together "for the sake of the children." Staying together can create an uncomfortable, even toxic atmosphere, even when both parents are straight. So the challenge of keeping a family intact when one parent is transitioning is a daunting prospect.

Stay or Go?

A transgender person who has transitioned, or a transexual, is in all aspects, a woman. That woman can be attracted to men, or to women, or be bisexual. This "fluidity" adds another layer to a straight spouse's decision process. Many transitioned women who are lesbian want to stay with their wives. This usually doesn't work for obvious reasons. Some couples do stay together, but as in all mixed-orientation marriages, a whole new concept of marriage and rules has to be created. The majority of transgender/straight couple marriages do not survive.

"We chose to part as I did not want to live with and remain married to a woman. We are now divorced."

"My advice: If you have any doubt as to whether you can accept your spouse as they transition, ANY doubt, then you need to separate immediately."

"Initially we chose to stay together. However, things got really stressful for both of us, especially since I'm very religious and highly emotional. I was struggling how to accept her, and if it was morally okay to do so. Currently, we are separated, but trying to see if we can work things out."

"We are legally separated. We have investments to protect and insurance. She would love nothing more than for us to live together and be in an indefinable kind of relationship but I don't want that."

Advice from the Straight Spouses

"I would suggest trying a couple of different counselors... And, I think it is good, if you can afford it, for each person to have their own separate counselor, plus a marriage counselor. We tried both of us using the same lady, and ...Either she wasn't the right counselor, or I needed my own. I felt like we focused too much on his transgender, and not about my own feelings."

"Do not personalize this. It's not about you. You are good and fine and you didn't do anything to bring this upon yourself... Do not let ANYONE convince you 'You HAD to have known...’ That is simply their fear showing. There is no reason to be embarrassed. We all feel it at first. I remember feeling ... I wasn't lovable...not a real woman. But I spent a great deal of time with some male friends ... and realized that simply was my ego lying to me. When I let go of the idea that if I were different my life would be better, the embarrassment fell away. I was left with a blank chalkboard and a curiosity about what would be written up there next; all the while knowing I could also wipe that new written thing away with a swipe if I wanted to. My future and my outlook are mine to define and that is not embarrassing."

"Let go of anger. Fighting so hard for the life you lost...is going to exhaust you ... All you have is now, this moment. Don't hold onto something that will ruin your moment. Let go of the old dream and allow yourself to dream a new one."

Share Your Experience

Don't segregate yourselves. The Straight Spouse Network support groups are for all Straight Spouses. Support groups include Straight Spouses of gay men, bisexual men and bisexual women, husbands of lesbians, spouses of pansexuals who are into all sorts of sexual explorations, and a great number of people married to transgender persons. We strive to support, heal and enlighten one another, as group facilitators and group members alike. We're here to educate one another and ultimately Society on the whole.

"The network and groups have allowed me to meet other individuals with similar feelings of loss. I found the message boards and in person meet up to be helpful. I have made peace with my ex-husband's transitioning and I thank Straight Spouse Network for aiding me in my journey to acceptance."◆

- by Linda Ehle

Many thanks to and all the women who contributed to this article; especially Arianna, Chelsey, Rae, Alex and Wendy.
In 2007, after almost 34 years together, my husband “Andy” finally admitted he was gay. During the long discussion which ensued that night, we briefly pondered staying together. But it was too soon for any concrete decisions. I cried myself to sleep on the couch. When I woke up the next morning, Andy was picking up his briefcase and leaving for work, as if nothing had happened.

When Andy got home that evening, he enthusiastically announced that he’d joined an LGBT swim team. During discussions over the next few nights, he said these things: “You’re my best friend, I’ll always take care of you, I thought I did a good job,” and “I thought you’d just have affairs.” What he did not say was, “I love you. I want to stay with you.”

After all our years together, it was difficult for me to simply, suddenly let go. For a few months I continued to entertain the idea of staying together. I googled all over the place and learned that “there are rules you have to follow.” So I googled on until my brain ached, but I never found those elusive rules. By that time, Andy had moved out. One afternoon a stranger handed me an envelope and said, “You’ve been served.” I had no idea that Andy was filing for divorce. But I did finally accept that our marriage was history.

Nine years later, I sometimes wonder how it would have played out if Andy had said he wanted to stay with me. I don’t think about that out of nostalgia or regret, but as a Support Group Facilitator. All of us Facilitators have a considerable number of new Straight Spouses come to us saying they’re considering staying in their marriages. The fact is, we’ve been in mixed orientation marriages all along; most of us just didn’t know it. But once the revelation was made, the entire make-up of what was a marriage is no more. Deciding to stay together isn’t exactly continuing the marriage; it becomes a re-creation of the marriage.

We’ve been in mixed orientation marriages all along; most of us just didn’t know it.

WHY SOME COUPLES CHOOSE TO STAY

Last month I sent out a request for people in MOMs to tell me their stories. The responses were few but substantive. I believe some people didn’t respond because their experience in staying together was difficult and extremely private. That choice presents unforeseen challenges and sometimes pain. The responses I did receive were very candid and insightful.

When someone says, “I still love you and I don’t want to leave,” it’s a game changer. According to MOM responders, one major reason for staying together was because the couples truly loved each other. This is understandable, especially because these particular marriages had been long-term. Other reasons were financial considerations, or religious beliefs, or the fact that there were still young children at home. Many factors make the decision to stay together as difficult as deciding to separate. I don’t see that anyone who made the decision to remain together did so lightly.

FINALLY, THE RULES AND NONNEGOTIABLE DEAL BREAKERS

The official rule book I was searching for doesn’t exist. Every couple has to create their own rules to fit their unique lifestyle. Here are some individual rules included in separate responses. Some are individually specific but some can apply to any couple.
Always communicate honestly, discuss changes and problems coherently. Sometimes couples seek joint therapy to help the process.

- A limit or ban on internet or phone app activity
- Agree that both spouses can have sex with other people. Some agree to continue being intimate with each other.
- No extra-marital activities in the shared home
- Inform each other of outside activities, and no one has veto powers.
- Trans/non-trans marriage: no transition, no overt female dress
- Monogamy only
- Separate finances
- Shared household chores and responsibilities
- Quietly accept that there may be ‘dalliances’, but they always must be kept discreet.
- Treat each other with respect and loving behavior, always making each other the primary focus.
- Some couples share their marital dynamics with extended family and friends, while other couples feel more comfortable keeping their lifestyle private.
- Concentrate on the Good outweighing the Bad
- Figure out what YOU want before you try to figure out what YOU BOTH can live with.

EVERYTHING CHANGES

In her research, our founder, Amity Pierce Buxton, Ph.D. found that approximately one third of Straight/LGBT couples stay together. After about three years, half of those unions end. It’s important to note that our participating MOM Spouses have all been in very long-term Mixed Orientation Marriages now. Here is some of their advice and some cautionary notes:

Keeping your Open Marriage a secret can make it difficult to have outside intimate relationships and puts both spouses in the closet. One Straight Spouse stressed the importance of developing your own individual support and friends in addition to your couple-friends.

Many MOM couples have very inactive or unfulfilling sex lives with each other. Even with the best of intentions, sex with each other tends to slow down and sometimes end after a time. Sometimes the gay spouse has more resources, and remains sexually active outside the marriage, while the Straight Spouse does not have the same advantages. Not everyone can live in a sexless relationship. Even after a very long period has passed, some of the Straight Spouses realize that things can change. They have to accept that there is always the possibility their gay or lesbian spouse may eventually fall in love with someone else.

Even if a couple truly loves each other, one of the biggest challenges for the Straight Spouse is learning to trust again. Once someone has cheated, it takes a great deal of fortitude to forgive, accept that reality and feel comfortable about the future. This is where communication and honesty are most important. Also important: don’t dwell on the idea of your spouse being intimate with someone else.

If you work, focus on that, on your career and the fulfillment you derive from it. Nurture your interests: family ties, athletics, exercise, music, art, craftsmanship, cooking, travel, gardening.

A true family spirit should be the legacy we all leave for our sons and daughters.

Most couples are parents and have extended families. Those relationships may have to be rebuilt along with rebuilding the marriage. Everyone deserves the comfort of familial support and enjoyable family gatherings and life's celebrations. In the end, a true family spirit should be the legacy we all leave for our sons and daughters.

*Sincere thanks to everyone who shared their stories, insights and advice. This information is sure to help other Straight Spouses more fully understand the challenges they may face.* ~ Linda Ehle, Straight Spouse Network