The Spirit of The Straight Spouse Network

Sometimes winter seems like it will last forever. The good thing is, it’s temporary. Eventually the days will be longer and warmer again. Spring will lead to brighter days and new life. When a straight spouse begins their post-discovery experience, it can be like facing the coldest winter ever. But that changes with time, like the seasons. It may not be easy, but things do get better.

Since 1987, our mission has been to help straight spouses deal with their pain and confusion. We’re dedicated to supporting all Straight Spouses, whether their partners are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Cross Dressers, Gender Curious. We respect their difficult personal decisions, no matter what those may be. From mixed orientation marriage to standing by their transgender spouse as they transition, to divorce, we are all-inclusive. We advocate for LGBTQ rights in hope of seeing fewer people becoming Straight Spouses in the future.

Our dedicated Support Group Facilitators and Support Contacts are on-call day and night. They create a spirit of camaraderie as they encourage people to share their stories and confide in other group members who understand and truly care. And some are inspired to stay on to help others as they were helped. Connected in solidarity, they volunteer because they feel they are part of something much bigger than themselves. That is the spirit of the Straight Spouse Network.

News&Notes is the official newsletter of the Straight Spouse Network.

We welcome original articles, relevant news items, upcoming events, personal stories, photos, poetry and art pertaining to the Straight Spouse Experience. This newsletter goes out to thousands of people worldwide. It is your chance to help us educate the world about the realities and challenges of being a Straight Spouse.

Send Your Submissions All submissions will be considered, professionally edited and a final proof will be sent to you for your approval. The deadline for our April 2018 issue is March 5, 2018. Send submissions as pdfs or Word documents to Executive Director Stephanie Skylar, steph@straightspouse.org

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Stephanie Skylar, Executive Director

I have been doing just fine for years. So where is this pain coming from? Is it those old wounds rearing their ugly heads? Is it because I have more conflicts with people than I usually do? Is it because I am seeing every request for help that comes into the Straight Spouse Network and I am having sympathy pains?

I went back to my therapist. Yes, I still go periodically after 8+ years. I told her I need to operate at a higher level of humanness - I need to grow. Her assessment - not only do you feel bad/hurt about stuff, you feel bad that you feel the way you do. A double whammy!

When I get in a mood like this, I hit the books. This is my reading/re-reading list this month. Maybe you'll find a chunk of growth here too. Would love to discuss....

The Ten Things to Do When Your Life Falls Apart: An Emotional and Spiritual Handbook
By Daphne Rose Kingma

Maybe it's you – Cut the Crap. Face Your Fears. Love Your Life.
By Lauren Handel Zander

The No Asshole Rule
By Robert I Sutton, PhD.
(this one is really about the workplace, but can apply to personal lives!)

A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic and Hopeful Spiritual Community
By John Pavlovitz

Buddhism for Dummies
By Jonathan Landaw and Stephan Bodian

Wishing you find peace in 2018. Peace for you, your family, your community and our planet.

Stephanie Skylar, Executive Director
Straight Spouse Network,  steph@straightspouse.org

“I was just reading the most recent SSN and wanted to thank you and Barbara for your article on Gentle Men. It explains a lot. Kind of funny that my father, who is a narcissist, did not want me following in his career because I was too sensitive. I don't know Barbara, can you please thank her on my behalf? “

– Thanks again - Phillip S.

...”I'm sure the newsletter is a huge amount of work, .... Keep up the good work. By the way, I found this newsletter extremely interesting, especially the statistics on those who contact the network for help.”

– Barbara

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The Straight Spouse Network provides peer-to-peer support moderated by knowledgeable facilitators. We do not provide professional psychological services.
2017 was once again a very busy year. We had almost 2,100 straight spouses and straight partners come to us for help. That is an average of 173 requests for support every month. Those requests came from every state in the USA plus Washington DC.

We had pleas for help from virtually very major continent: Asia, Africa, America, South America, Australia, Europe. Requests were very heavy from Canada; they came from Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

They came from the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia. And from South Africa, Uganda, Nairobi and India. Australia and New Zealand are very active considering their sizes. There were two requests from Puerto Rico and three from Colombia, South America. Then there were the requests from Poland and Romania. And Europe: Spain, Italy, Germany.

But the most notably active foreign location is the United Kingdom. Most of the 54 requests we received from there came from England, in and around London. But some were from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and even the Isle of Man. This UK phenomenon has been ongoing with a consistent average of nine requests per month.

Some requests come from women living with husbands who are stationed overseas with the United States military. And the number straight partners in non-married couples looking for support are also on the rise.

We have groups in numerous countries and we have a special team of Support Contacts who reach out to people in far away places. We have Support Groups and Support Contacts in most US states. We have groups in Canada. We are always looking for more recruits to meet the growing demand. We provide not only support, but important, educational information and tools for coping that all straight spouses desperately need in order to make unexpected, life-changing decisions. We get so excited and jubilant every time a new volunteer joins our team. It’s going to be a busy 2018!

– Linda Ehle-Callens, Facilitator Liaison, Web/Data Manager
For me, nothing is more powerful than finding the right words to express what I think, how I feel, and what I can do to try to make sense of the world around me. In all things, seek ye first mental clarity, that’s my motto. So it may come as no surprise that I’ve developed a lifelong habit of reading books, especially well-crafted memoirs. After the unexpected happened to me, I found myself compelled to write my own.

I was smacked with a major curve ball in my life on St. Patrick’s Day 1990. After 12 years of marriage, my husband spilled the truth that he struggles with same-sex yearnings. I was devastated. So I did what I’ve always done when I feel doomed: I began my quest to find books relevant to my situation. But I could not find any books on the subject anywhere. I found plenty of books about when a mother or father or son or daughter comes out of the closet. But I couldn’t find one about a straight husband or wife whose partner turns out to be gay. I would’ve done anything back in the early 1990s to cross paths with a memoir written by a straight spouse. Even now, too few memoirs are published from the straight spouse’s perspective.

As we all know, in the growing lineage of coming-out stories, the straight spouse is likely to get short shrift. Developing empathy for the woman whose husband turns out to be gay often takes a back seat to the drama of the husband’s journey in resolving his sexual identity. Such women are more likely to be regarded as clueless idiots lacking gaydar, that supposedly innate ability to detect someone is gay. Some are regarded as the victims of master imposters or scam-artist husbands, co-conspirators, secret keepers, or punch lines for a bad joke.

With few exceptions, our experiences as straight spouses are poorly understood because we remain silent, sometimes for good reasons. So it’s no wonder why so many people have little understanding of the straight spouse perspective.

Everyone’s story is different, and complicated. For me, it takes a book to try to capture the upheaval and emotional roller coaster of coming to terms with this unthinkable and life-changing situation. I hasten to add I got myself in some serious trouble along the way. I can now declare, loud and proud, that I have an important story to tell.

Continued on page 5
A Memoir Continued

Here’s a tip: You can use my book as a litmus test to figure out how others may respond to your story, when you decide to talk about it, if you do. In other words, I have a hunch that anyone who is not a straight spouse who reads my book will stop and think about what it’s like to be the straight spouse and how important it is for straight spouses to have emotional support from others.

— Vivian Fransen

An Excerpt from
The Straight Spouse, A Memoir
by Vivian Fransen, published by Open Door Publications, 2017

On a Wednesday evening in June, Victor insisted we were reasonably intelligent and sophisticated adults who could sit down together and watch the PBS broadcast of a BBC production of The Lost Language of Cranes. He didn’t tell me much about the movie, other than “it’s not about those long-legged, long-necked birds.” He did tell me a review in The New York Times mentioned this movie contained a homosexual coming-out as a plot element.

“Oh, I’ll watch it with you. It’s just a movie on TV. I’ll give it a chance.” But it turned out to be a powerful movie that spoke directly to my fears. After 30 years of marriage, the main female character in the movie—a copy editor—discovers the truth: First, her 20-something son announces he’s gay, and then her husband reveals his gay sexual escapades during their marriage. This was a double whammy, a double dose of dealing with two coming-out experiences in her family at the same time. I found the movie devastating, yet I kept my feelings to myself—too scared to start a conversation with Victor that might make things worse for me.

“Can you handle this movie okay?” asked Victor.

“I don’t know. It’s really painful to see this woman go through such emotional turmoil. A little too close to home, isn’t it?”

…For Victor, the movie was all about the coming-out experiences of the two men. But for me, it was all about the woman, who tells her husband at one point: “Think of me for once…My life’s like the punch line of some stupid joke.” That’s exactly how it feels.

The message of the movie became clear to me: Life was unfair for everyone involved. All the denial and deception caused unbearable pain. The situation seemed hopeless to me. Witnessing another woman go through a similar situation made my own feelings come to the surface.

I felt myself sinking lower and lower, consumed with a sense of utter hopelessness and concluding that my life was a hopeless mess and I was a hopeless mess. I’m just not strong enough to survive this hard punch, I lamented.

Vivian Fransen’s writing experience spans over 30 years working with a wide range of organizations. She has published dozens of feature stories for New Jersey newspapers and magazines. She currently is a self-employed writer, editor, and proofreader. She earned a master’s degree in public administration and a bachelor’s degree in sociology. She shares her passion for memoirs and provides information about relevant resources at her website: straightspousememoir.com
It’s amazing! The Pentagon has finally spoken. Yes, UFOs are real. But, you know, they have been investigating them from as early as 1947. Most of us kind of knew, after all, people have been seeing UFOs going back to pre-historic times. But since the military said it wasn’t true, we were supposed to accept, or pretend, it wasn’t.

If the Pentagon can come out and finally admit the truth about UFOs, why can’t we convince people of one of the most basic issues about our reality. It’s an issue that nearly every Straight Spouse understands: Gay people should not marry straight people.

At first, most straight spouses have no idea they’ve married a gay person because those LGBTQ people decided to present themselves as straight. Eventually, we knew there was something not quite right. Granted, some gay people are honest and do share that they had some same-sex attraction, and perhaps intimate experiences, in their past. A straight person in love can truly believe “that was then, this is now, and he/she loves me”. They think they can live with it, conquer it, ignore it. They don’t fully realize how that fact will affect their relationship or marriage in the long run.

One thing we also know, is that the truth always comes out. Either a closeted person gets to the point that they cannot live a lie any longer or the double life they’ve been leading is somehow discovered. No matter how it happens, the fact is that if you are a bird, you should be flying around freely, living in trees with other birds. Choosing to stay in a cage is self-torture. Being put in a cage by family, religious or societal pressure is simply a form of torture; not just for the repressed, but for the people who love them, as well.

We need to listen to Mother Nature, she is a great teacher. If people knew the truth about keeping birds in cages, they may not be so eager to adopt them. On the positive side, birds become attached to, and dependant on their keepers. They are beautiful, intelligent creatures who can be loving and entertaining. But the down side is that over time, most of them, no matter how they were attained or how much they are loved and how well they are cared for, cannot adapt to a life so against their own nature. In time, the will become agitated, rock back and forth, pull out their own feathers, bite their keeper, and finally, they literally go completely insane.

Humans are perhaps a bit more complicated than birds.
Caged Bird  BY MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” from Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?
Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou.

Cages  continued from page 6

But we're still nature's creatures. If we deny our own natural instincts, or are denied them, we suffer from a form of failure to thrive.

So, what is our role in this situation, on a personal level? If you care about someone who needs to come out, you have to help them unlock the cage, no matter how much you love them. Whether they want to stay or fly away, you have to accept that they cannot be held back from being who they really are. If their civil rights are being compromised, we have to be the voice of reason. We have to be honest and open. Straight Spouses see their families being harmed as a result of discrimination against, and suppression of LGBTQ individuals. Aliens are real; so are transgender, bisexual, gay and lesbian people; and so is the Straight Spouse Experience.

One important thing to consider very seriously is this: Many Straight Spouses stay silent. They remain in the closet, or cage, with their mates, whether the doors have been opened or not; whether their mates have chosen freedom or not. But there are many of us who have not stayed silent. There is freedom in being honest; in being truthful when someone asks, “why did you get divorced?” When we say, “my husband, my wife came out and is living their true life,” it frees us from someone else’s closet. And it gives others a dose of reality.

– Linda Ehle-Callens
I started on this journey in 2007. During the ensuing three years, I attended Straight Spouse Network support group meetings, no one ever talked about having a transgender or a cross-dressing mate, or a bisexual mate, either. In fact, it wasn't until about seven years ago, when I started facilitating a group myself, that I met a spouse married to a transgender person. Not long after that, a woman whose husband was bisexual finally arrived on the scene.

A few years back, I worked on rebranding and revamping our website and added more content. Amity Buxton's research on bisexuality is featured on our website. That information is key to understanding bisexuality. With that and new information on the subject, and especially knowing people in marriages with bisexuals, I have a much more expansive view of bisexuality now.

There is a big divide in variances when a spouse is bisexual. Straight wives discover their husbands are having sex with men and women. That can be extremely confusing for a straight wife. But it's a sure bet that he is bisexual. We always say that being bisexual does not give someone a free ticket to cheat. So the bisexual spouse - man or woman - who is secretly with both men and women is truly breaking that rule. They are demonstrating that they do not respect their spouse or the marriage. People leave their partners for having affairs with the opposite sex. It's a double whammy when straying involves both sexes.

Most women I've met in that situation have made the decision to divorce. Even so, over time, they have had difficulties because their ex-husbands are in the same town. Some of them frequent popular places, picking up women or men. A very uncomfortable situation can arise when an ex-wife is dating or socializing with friends; there is always a looming fear of seeing their ex in public. It can be difficult to enjoy going anywhere. And with the women I know in this situation, too many of those ex-husbands do not come out to their families. So, many may never be able to have a true sense of closure.

Of course there are bisexual men who love and are dedicated to their wives. They would never be with another woman because that desire for intimacy is fulfilled. But at the same time, they cannot ignore their natural desire for sexual fulfillment with men. And the same dynamics are faced by straight men who discover their wife or girlfriend is bisexual. However, statistically, women are more apt to be honest about their sexuality with their mate.

Amity found in her research, and the realities I've witnessed bear this out: A third of married couples decide to stay together and agree on a set of rules to make it work. Some couples agree on complete monogamy. Some are more progressive, or open minded, and allow certain side relationships. And other couples agree to have an open marriage where both husband and wife have sexual freedom with the security of sharing the household responsibilities of living together.

When a couple has been in a long term marriage, those compromises make a lot of sense. There can be complicated family dynamics and financial considerations that make separation an almost impossible choice. Being dedicated parents is a major consideration. And for older couples, starting a new life is often not a feasible option.

In the past year, there has been an increase in younger straight spouses as well as boyfriends and girlfriends or fiancés coming to us for support. A younger couple who has not been together very long is more likely to find it easy to separate. But statistics show that some of those unmarried couples have been together for substantial periods of time. The longer the period invested in the relationship, the more complicated the decisions become. Bisexuality may be an explanation as to why some people hesitate to set a date.

No matter how much love and dedication there is in a bi/straight relationship, the challenges are huge. No matter how hard a couple works at it, there is never a guarantee it will last. But, would bisexual people be better off if they never married? Should they be deprived of the joy of having a family? As difficult as it is for a straight spouse, the challenges if being bisexual need to be met with a degree of understanding, sympathy, patience and unfathomable strength.

It's a big responsibility to be a facilitator. We have to stay informed. We need to be knowledgeable in all LGBTQ areas so we can be as supportive and helpful as possible to all straight spouses while they navigate through such difficult and uncertain journeys.

- Linda Ehle-Callens, Group Facilitator