What professionals need to know about Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People

Many Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People report difficulty in finding therapists, counselors and other mental health professionals who are sensitive to their needs and experiences. Many trainings exist to teach professionals to be sensitive to the needs and struggles of LGBT+ people, however, there are close to no training programs to teach professionals how to help Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People.

In general, when dealing with Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People, it's a "both/and" situation. While not all LGBT+ Partners disclose their authentic sexual orientation or gender identity, for those ones who do, it is true that they have been through quite a journey to get to the point where they can come out. And it is also true that their coming out will impact their Straight Partner or Partner of a Trans Person, profoundly and possibly adversely. Both partners' journeys and experiences are true and require sensitivity and validation.

To help professionals better understand what it's like for Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People to experience disclosure or discovery, we've compiled this list and an extensive resource library.

1. While it is important to validate the LGBT+ Partner's coming out experience, it is equally important to validate the impact their coming out has on Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People, and any children the couple may have.
2. Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People often feel invisible because the greater community, including the media in cases of celebrities who come out, are almost entirely focused on the LGBT+ Partner and their experience.
3. People often do not know what to say to be supportive of Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People, resulting in feelings of isolation or even invisibility.
4. Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People often feel shame an embarrassment that they didn't see or notice red flags or signals that their partners are LGBT+. This is compounded when others ask them how they didn't know. Others may ask what they did to "attract" a gay or trans partner. While there are often signs that were missed or minimized, and analysis of these can be useful in helping the Straight Partner or Partner of a Trans Person to build confidence in

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their ability to trust themselves going forward, this must be done without shaming them for being naïve or willfully blind. It was the LGBT+ Partner's responsibility to disclose, not the Straight Partner's or Partner of a Trans Person's responsibility to guess.

5. If there has been infidelity, there may be an attempt by the LGBT+ Partner to justify it as "sexual experimentation." To the Straight Partner or Partner of a Trans Person, however, infidelity may be experienced as an Intimate Partner Betrayal Trauma, and they may be experiencing Post Betrayal Syndrome.

6. Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People may grapple with a sense that their partnership was based on a lie, that it was fraudulent, or that their LGBT+ Partner never truly loved them.They may feel used as a "beard" or for children. They may feel robbed of years of their lives or their youth.

7. Partners of Trans People may grapple with their own sexuality and identity if their partner transitions genders. They ask themselves if staying with their partner makes them a lesbian or gay. They may grapple with waning attraction to their trans partners and feel guilt over that. They also worry about being labeled transphobic if they are no longer attracted to their partners. Social repercussions are very real for Partners of Trans People.

8. Gender transition of a partner brings up complicated feelings and boundary questions for Partners of Trans People. Sharing clothing, makeup, products, etc. have to be negotiated. Partners of Trans People may be asked to share titles ("Mom") or holidays (Mother's Day or Father's Day) that are meant to honor them, and they are entitled to their feelings about that. Transition is expensive, and the financial well-being of the entire family must be weighed. Boundary violations are common during transition and therapists need to be prepared to help Partners of Trans People know their boundaries.

9. Children of transgender people are deserving of robust support. Discussions around the changes to family language (names and pronouns) will have an impact on children. Children adjust better if their feelings about their parent's transition are honored and validated.

10. The fact that an LGBT+ Partner is leaving the Straight Partner for someone of the same sex does not make it easier for the Straight Partner. In some respects, it is harder.

11. Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People often struggle with trust issues for years after learning a partner is LGBT+. They may not trust themselves to be a sufficient judge of other people, and they may not trust other people to be honest with them about who they are.

12. Discovering you are in a Mixed Orientation Marriage without your knowledge or consent is

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a deeply disorienting experience. It is life-changing and often shakes the very foundations of a person's core concepts of what is real.

13. With Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People, we consistently see evidence of Complicated Grief ("a persistent form of intense grief in which maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional behaviors are present along with yearning, sadness or preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the person" lost), Ambiguous Loss (loss with no answers, closure or catharsis), Disenfranchised Grief (grief that society does not recognize as a legitimate or valid) and Intimate Partner Betrayal Trauma (deep, persistent psychological wounds from broken trust in relationship). This makes healing more difficult and more complex.

14. This experience happens to people from every religious background, every ethnic and racial background, every political belief system, and every region of the globe.

15. Many Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People started out as and continue to be LGBT+ allies even as they feel feelings of deep anger and betrayal toward their LGBT+ Partner.

16. People often mistake anger at an LGBT+ Partner over deceptive behaviors or infidelity for homophobia or transphobia.This can have a silencing effect on Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People.

17. How the LGBT+ Partner comes out (or doesn't) matters to the long-term healing of the Straight Partner or Partner of the Trans Person, and the success of any co-parenting relationship.

18. While most Mixed Orientation Marriages will end in divorce, some will try to make it work. They will choose to remain in monogamous relationships or they may open their relationship to outside partners. Either way, Mixed Orientation Couples need appropriate support.

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