The acute care first aid kit

Navigating discovery/disclosure that your partner might beLGBT+

OurPath provides this Acute Care First Aid Kit of advice and resources for Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People who suspect, discover or learn through disclosure that their partner is LGBT+.

If you are having thoughts of suicide or considering harming yourself, there are resources available to help you immediately. In the United States, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, as well as prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones. For people outside the United States, please look for similar lifelines in your own country. The International Association for Suicide Prevention publishes a list, which can be found here: https://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres/.

STEP 1: SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

- **STI testing.** If there is any chance your partner has been unfaithful, it is strongly recommended that you get a full STI panel as soon as you are able.
- **Visit your healthcare provider.** Emotional distress can lead to disruptions in sleep, concentration and appetite, and can increase stress, anxiety and depression. While these are normal emotional and physical responses to disclosure or discovery, they can adversely impact your physical and mental health, especially if they last for some duration. Workwith your doctor to make sure your physical health needs are addressed.
- **Find a therapist or counselor.** Getting competent professional help is important self-care right now. Just like your healthcare provider will help you with your physical symptoms, a therapist will help you address any emotional pain. You may be experiencing a broad range of difficult-to-process emotions, including betrayal, fear, anger, sadness, and shock. Disclosure or discovery can shatter your trust in yourself and others and undermine your sense of reality. Seeking help to navigate this psychological terrain is a sign of strength and resiliency.

STEP 2: SEEK SUPPORT

- **Build your personal support network.** Now is the time to ask for help from close family and friends. Many Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People suffer in silence. You may feel that you must protect your LGBT+ Partner's sexual orientation or sexual identity,

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or you may have agreed to keep it confidential. When this happens, Straight Partners find themselves in the closet with their LGBT+ Partner, and this can cause tremendous psychological stress. While OurPath does not condone maliciously "outing" LGBT+ Partners, Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People have a need and a right to get support. If possible, negotiate with your LGBT+ Partner whom you will tell to get support. If negotiation is not possible, remember that you have a story too, and you get to choose when and how you share your story with support networks, healthcare providers, therapists and counselors.

- **Find other Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People.** You are not the first Straight Partner or Partner of a Trans Person. In fact, OurPath is made up of many Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People who have committed to helping others like us. OurPath hosts an Open Forum where you can share your stories, concerns and questions anonymously with other Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People. Additionally, consider filling out a Support Request so we can match you with a Support Contact, who can connect you with other community support options.
- **Draw strength from your faith or spirituality.** While OurPath is not a religious organization, we encourage Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People who consider themselves to be religious or spiritual to draw strength from religious or spiritual communities during challenging times. Positive (not negative or shaming) community support can be vital during this time.

STEP 3: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

- **Be kind to yourself.** A physical injury requires time to heal. So does emotional injury. The future you had envisioned with your LGBT+ Partner is in doubt, and your past together may be in question. There is nothing wrong with taking the time you need to grieve, cry, sleep or rest. If you can take time off work (e.g., vacation, short- or long-term disability) to work through your initial shock or trauma, do so. You may also need to dial back commitments to others at this time. The only person who chooses what you need to do right now is you.
- **If possible, reduce or avoid excess stress.** Do your best to take the pressure off yourself right now. You don't have to have everything figured out right away. Put aside large, stressful decisions until you are better prepared to deal with them. You may have many challenging choices ahead, such as how to make your marriage work, whether to seek a divorce and how to work through finances, legal issues, parenting time and disclosure to children. These decisions do not need to be made today. Give yourself space to rest and process.

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- **Ceasing physical and emotional intimacy with your spouse.** Occasionally disclosure can bring a couple closer together, at least initially. Sometimes there is even rekindled sexual desire between the couple. If this is you, it's a good idea to be aware of the possibility of trauma bonding and be mindful that the renewed intimacy with your partner may or may not be healthy for you. More often, disclosure is a shock to the system and may illicit intense and difficult emotions. Taking some emotional space from your partner may help you avoid trauma bonding and help you get in touch with your own inner wisdom about the situation. If there has been infidelity prior to discovery or disclosure, or if sex outside the partnership continues after discovery or disclosure, some Straight Partners find it best to suspend physical intimacy for a time. It is important to protect yourself from STIs, at least until you have clear ground rules for sexual contact (both within and outside the partnership) in place.

STEP 4: ADJUST YOUR MINDSET

- **Try not to blame yourself or get caught in a guilt spiral.** So many Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People struggle with self-blame, shame and guilt for "missing the signs" their partner was LGBT+. You may feel foolish or clueless or fear others will judge you for not knowing your LGBT+ Partner's actual sexual orientation or gender identity. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

  Disclosure is their responsibility, not yours. It is their responsibility to tell you, not your responsibility to guess.

  When someone is in denial or lying to themselves, it is not your fault that you could not see they were also lying to you.

  You trusted your partner, loved them, and assumed the best about them. This does not make you a fool.

  Many LGBT+ Partners have had indications of their same sex attraction or gender identity since childhood or adolescence. For complex reasons, they compartmentalized these feelings and kept them secret. You are not accountable for uncovering what someone else felt the need to keep hidden.

- **Assert yourself.** You have a voice. You are empowered to make decisions about what happens in your life and in your home. Set and maintain your boundaries for how you choose to live your life and what you need from your partner. If you set boundaries, be prepared to back them up. It's time to make yourself a priority.

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- **Acknowledge that your recovery process might be a roller coaster ride.** Human emotions change frequently, especially during times of extraordinary stress. Expect your levels of pain and grief to change daily or even hourly in the beginning. You will have many ups and downs as you progress through this journey. In the beginning, the downs are long and severe, but over time they will become shorter, less intense and less frequent. The ups will become longer, higher and more frequent. When you feel the worst, try not to panic and remember that you are at a natural low point that will likely pass in a few hours or in a few days.
- **Allow yourself to feel and express your emotions.** It's OK to not be OK! Your emotions are real and valid, and it is counterproductive to bottle them up or suppress them. Cry, scream (in private), punch something (soft), and hug people who will hug you back. It is ok to cry in the line at the grocery store. Allow the emotional energy to move through you; the more permission you give it, the better you will feel afterward.
- **You are not required to emotionally support your LGBT+ Partner right now.** Society (and some of our partners) expects Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People to support the choices and actions of our LGBT+ Partners as they embrace their previously hidden sexual orientation or gender identity, regardless of the impact behaviors and choices may have on partners or children. Indeed, people may congratulate your LGBT+ Partner for coming out of the closet. You are not required to support your LGBT+ Partner's behavior or actions which have had adverse impacts on you; nor should you feel guilty about your feelings. Your LGBT+ Partner cannot help who they are, but they are accountable for how they behave.
- **You can do this!** Right now, you are probably feeling overwhelmed, and you may wonder how you will survive this, but you will. Take it a day at a time. You will find the strength to handle each step in this process at the time you need it.

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