



I've built a life with a woman but I'm gay. What should I do?

▶ DEAR JOE ▶

I'm a gay man, but I'm married to a woman and we've had kids together. I suppose I only really admitted to myself that I was gay when it was already too late. Obviously we've built a life together, and I don't want to leave her but I want to be gay too. Is this possible or am I being selfish to even consider it? I only want what's best for everyone, but feel I need to be true to myself. LEWIS, MAIDSTONE ▶

HI LEWIS

Yes it is totally possible and many couples do it. The problem is mostly going to be the judgment of others toward both of you. Everyone has an opinion on this. Gay people think that you should come out and divorce, otherwise you are keeping a foot in heterosexual privilege. Straight people might think she should divorce you and get on with her heterosexual life. They judge the gay spouses for why they married in the first place. Others judge the couple if they choose to remain together and make a go of it.

In this case you wrote in for my best judgment, so here it is including things to consider in coming out to your wife and staying married.

When a gay person comes out to his or her straight spouse, the couple is likely to embark on a roller-coaster ride of emotional stages that often encompasses humiliation, revenge, renewed hope, rage, and finally, resolution. While each couple is unique, these stages can serve as a rough road map for therapists trying to help mixed-orientation couples make sense of their feelings, communicate honestly, and ultimately make informed, healthy decisions about their future.

HUMILIATION: GAY SHAME

When the gay spouse comes out of the closet, the straight spouse tends to go into one – bearing the secret that they are in a mixed-orientation marriage. The humiliation stage occurs when the gay husband finally comes out to his wife and both begin to agonise. At this stage, both spouses feel humiliated. Straight spouses often blame themselves for not keeping their gay spouse interested in them. Some even think there was something they did that caused their spouse to have gay sex. Straight spouses also question whether or not they ever really had anything in terms of a marriage.

My goal is to help straight spouses understand that there was nothing they did or said – or didn't do or say – that made their spouse gay. Their spouse entered the marriage with a LGBT orientation from the start.

Heterosexually married gay men and women do love their spouses. The gay spouse does marry voluntarily, usually a person of the opposite sex with whom they are already good friends and often sexually attracted to, with whom they are having satisfying and gratifying sex.

Heterosexually married gay men feel enormous responsibility and guilt. It takes them years to get through feeling that they've ruined everyone's lives, including their own. "How could I have done this to my spouse? They didn't know. This isn't fair to them. It's my fault entirely, and I should suffer!" is the mantra they chant, humiliating themselves by taking on 110 percent of the accountability.

Yes, they need to take responsibility for not having come out sooner and avoided heterosexual marriage. Yes, the straight spouse may not have consciously known. But again, when I talk with the spouses of gay men and women, usually there are personal issues on their side as well. It's often no accident that they married a spouse who couldn't commit completely or be intimate and available, the way a straight spouse could.

THE HONEYMOON: BRINGING BACK THE INITIAL ROMANCE

This new pledge of staying together is initiated in the next stage of the coming out as being a mixed-orientation marriage. Both spouses want to stay in the marriage for good reasons and really love each

other. They go back to what originally drew them to one another and a sort of re-romanticising starts happening. Both feel loved unconditionally because they are willing to stay together, even with the sexual orientation differences, and they renew their marriage vows to each other on an emotional level.

RAGE: PROTESTING THE LOSS OF THE MARRIAGE

Here both come to the limits of what's possible. The straight spouse is usually satisfied with the way things were before they learned about having an overtly gay spouse; thus getting back the person they married. But the gay spouse starts to realise that they can't retreat back into the closet. This means different things for different couples, and they tend to feel the same loss that began to weigh heavily on them before the disclosure.

The straight spouse may feel satisfied with having back the spouse they married. But the loss the gay spouse feels starts to weigh heavily, as they begin to realise that they couldn't go back into the closet.

The straight spouse understandably becomes angry at the gay spouse for not being able or willing to go back into the closet. The gay spouse becomes angry because they feel pressured to do something they know they can no longer do.

If a gay spouse were only sexually and not romantically attracted to men, they might have a chance at staying with their straight spouse. Men like this whom I've worked with use pornography and the Internet to satisfy their needs, without needing to act on them. Their wives know, and they make it work. But some men want to connect with other men in emotional and relational ways, more than just sexually.

RESOLUTION: A FAMILY AFFAIR

This stage is affected by various factors such as children, social considerations, age of the couple, belief systems and personalities, as well as levels of sexual openness between the couples. Whether or not the couple has children, this is very truly a family affair, since in-laws must be told, and reactions from the families of both spouses will be part of the process.

Should they stay together, or should they separate? This is a question each partner should ask, and answer jointly: What type of marriage do they want? Will they be monogamous? Will they have an open marriage sexually? What have they invested so far, and if they do break up, what's at risk?

Whatever you decide should be between the two of you and not from the pressure of our culture, therapists, religious leaders, family or friends. Sadly, many couples who stay together end up living in a closet together to avoid the judgment coming from others.

For your mental and physical health and the welfare of your wife and any children involved, go forward with integrity, honesty and informed consent on everyone's part. Whether or not you stay together, I think that you and your wife are very brave individuals exploring how to proceed with your mixed marriage.



DR JOE KORT IS A LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER AND BOARD-CERTIFIED SEXOLOGIST. HE IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF *10 SMART THINGS GAY MEN CAN DO TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES*
JOEKORT.COM