

## The Homosexually Oriented Man's Relationship to Women

Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

The primary focus of reparative therapy for men is always on the healing of *male* relationships. A reparative therapist strongly encourages the establishment of healthy, non-erotic friendships with men.

There comes a time, however, when some clients evolve to a point of readiness to enter an intimate relationship with a woman. This readiness must be expressed by the client himself, and cannot be encouraged by the therapist in the same way we would urge a client to seek out male friendships.

Furthermore, the therapist must bear in mind that any success with women *will not endure* without the continuation of the client's ongoing, satisfying male relationships.

To understand the particular challenges of the homosexually oriented man in his relationship to women, we must first begin by understanding the classic triadic relationship which is seen so predictably in the history of our clients. This triadic relationship throws the boy on the side of the mother, with father isolated from his wife and son. This misalignment gives the boy a distorted perspective of himself in relationship to the masculine and the feminine. The boy's father remains a mystery, and his mother is all too well known.

In a more balanced family structure, father offers the boy the male perspective. He teaches the boy how to relate to women and models this way of relating. Where there is an over-intimate and intrusive mother, the boy learns from an involved and healthy father that the best way to relate to such a mother may sometimes be simply to *ignore* her.

In life, men and women are always challenged to try to understand each other. Straight men are often accused of failing to meet this challenge, and it is said that they are typically insensitive to women. Paradoxically, however, it is the same insensitivity which *allows* the heterosexual man to develop an intimate relationship with the woman. He is not so tuned in to females that he overreacts and loses himself in response to their needs. *Women are mysteries*, but this is the price the straight man must pay for the development of his heterosexuality.

If the straight man can be faulted for insensitivity, the homosexual man can be faulted for being too sensitive to women and emotionally over-involved with them. Said one homosexual client as he reviewed his failed female relationships,

"I have learned to be too open to women in an unhealthy way." Growing up like most prehomosexual boys, he had been too intensely tied in to his mother's emotions.

Another client said, "I always felt responsible for my mother's feelings. I felt like I had to keep her happy." Because he did not have a father who could intervene to break up this unhealthy overintimacy, we could say that he was abandoned and betrayed by the masculine.

Let us consider normal masculine development as a series of pendulum swings. As an infant, the boy first swings toward the feminine as he identifies with the mother. He then reaches the opposite axis of the pendulum when he later identifies with his father. When he has achieved normal male identification, he remains at this masculine polarity throughout latency and early adolescence. Then sexual interest in females initiates a swing back to the feminine. Because he is in a firm possession of his masculine identification, he is drawn to renewed intimacy with a woman. We might say that he is *armored with masculinity* and can risk emotional closeness without feeling overwhelmed and annihilated by the feminine. Engulfment by women is a primal fear of all men, but it is particularly threatening to the man who is insufficiently armored in masculinity.

Lacking this masculine armor against the engulfing mother, the prehomosexual has no other defense than to retreat into the false self that mother encourages in him. The false self is mother's creation—she wants a compliant, well-behaved, good little boy. In compliance, the boy proffers this appealing image for his mother's consumption, behind which he hides his true identity in self-protection.

The term "consumption" indeed captures many a boy's experience. It is as if his mother needs to *consume* something of him. Her need to consume typically derives from an emotionally unsatisfying relationship with her husband, which has thwarted her natural feminine need to be intimate with the masculine. Lacking a satisfying relationship with her husband, she turns to her small son (who she can control and mold; and he has none of the objectionable aspects of her husband) and in her possessive love, she "engulfs" him.

Rather than surrendering the essence of his being—which includes his natural masculine strivings—the boy offers his mother a false exterior image. He becomes the good little boy on the outside, but on the inside, he remains intensely confused about his needs and his identity.

*continued on page 25*

As the client now approaches the challenge of an intimate adult relationship with a woman, this drama of the early relationship with the mother will be re-enacted.

### Two Phases in Relationship to Women

Let's consider the two phases through which the client proceeds in a heterosexual relationship.

First: "Casual relationship" – characterized by acquaintance and friendship.

Second: "Serious relationship" – characterized by romantic and sexual feelings.

For the homosexually oriented man, the casual acquaintance/friendship phase is all too easy. He will find himself talking comfortably with a woman in the same easy way he talked with his mother or older sister. In fact, a continuation of a relationship with a woman in this way often serves as an avoidance maneuver to delay the more serious challenge of a romantic/sexual relationship. For him, the move from casual/friendship to romantic/sexual is treacherous and may be doomed to failure.

Impatient with the shallowness of the relationship, the woman typically initiates the shift to the romantic/sexual. She desires greater closeness with this new kind of man who—unlike the other men she has dated—is patient, gentle, sensitive, well-mannered, and an engaging conversationalist. He is very understanding and very interested in her experiences. She may well be delighted. She says, "This man's interested in my mind—he's not just after my body." (Little does she know, that's part of the problem!)

An example of the difficulty in the shift from casual to serious is seen in the situation of a 28-year-old medical student who was once in therapy with me. This client put a lot of pressure on himself; as a high achiever, he expects to get a wife the same way he got his medical degree—simply by pushing himself to do it. During the casual phase of the relationship, he is charming, witty, and in-tune with the woman. He easily establishes a comfortable relationship with her on the first few dates, and she adores him. He calls himself, "King of the First Dates." Then he begins to feel the woman's expectations; she obviously wants more. Suddenly he feels the shift happening within himself, and "something dies inside of me."

On the third date with one woman, he was sitting across from her in a restaurant. While she was chatting away, suddenly it seemed that right before his eyes, she grew ugly. He became annoyed with her; her voice began to irritate him. He dropped her off and acted out homosexually with a stranger he picked up in a bar. It was a classic case of defensive detachment; he needed to "recharge himself" after being depleted by the feminine.

Unlike the homosexual, the straight man's pathway to the woman is first through a sexual attraction. Only later does he get to know the woman as a *person and a friend*. The problem with the young medical student was that he tried to imitate the straight man's way to a woman. He tried to date her right away, which for the homosexual man is deadly.

Rather there seems to be a different pathway for the homosexually oriented man, and this has been told to me by many men who have since married and come out of their homosexual backgrounds. The three stages must come in a different order: first friendship, then affection and finally sexual expression of that affection. Very often the man with the homosexual background will maintain a friendship with a woman for a number of years before they become more serious.

These clients will eventually report emotional and sexual satisfaction with their wives, but interestingly, many will say that they are not sexually attracted to other women. This may be difficult to understand when one is a heterosexual man, but is good news to wives!

There are two kinds of anxieties that the homosexually oriented man experiences: one kind of anxiety about men, and another about women. With men, he is always anxious that he will be rejected and will not *get enough* of their masculinity. With women, he is anxious that he will get too *much* of them; women will intrude into his emotional life and overwhelm him, as probably happened in his early relationship with his mother. As he gets closer to a woman, this anxiety manifests itself as a fear of sexual performance. Actually, this fear is not so much about sexual performance as it is about trust. If he learns that he can establish and maintain a trusting relationship with one particular woman, without having to fear emotional engulfment by her, then sexual expression of his affection will naturally follow.

### The Challenge

For the man with a homosexual background, the challenge is to enter into a relationship with a woman *while maintaining a sense of self-possession*. The job of the therapist is to monitor the client's internal sense of self as he approaches the woman. The therapist keeps the client honest with himself and prevents him from falling into the false self, which he will easily do as he did in relationship with mother. While there may be numerous versions, the typical false selves that emerge in a relationship with a woman are:

1. The passive-compliant.
2. The theatrical entertainer.
3. The empathic counselor.

The therapist is watching for the client's tendency to abandon himself and slip into one of those false selves when he is with her. By becoming too sensitive to the woman's

expectations for him, he abandons all of *his* needs and wants and desires for her needs, thus losing his self-reference.

### Trust

The successful shift to heterosexual marriage is all about trust: "Can I trust this woman with my feelings? Will she do to me what my mother did to me? Will she not manipulate, confuse? Will she fail to see me for who I am, and smother me with her expectations? Will she act like she cares for me but really use me or try to control me? *Will I be able to be myself?*"

The essential task is to *substitute trust* for the anticipation of betrayal.

The role of the therapist is to listen for self-compromises. In particular the therapist is listening to how the client thinks he hears the woman's expectations of him. These are often projections or exaggerations. The therapist may suggest that the client go back to the woman and check out what he imagines her expectations are. Again, we see in the therapeutic relationship the mentor role, with the therapist providing the masculine perspective. The therapist is the father, the masculine frame of reference from which the boy learns how to be a male in relationship with women.

### The Women They Marry

Approximately 80 percent of the married, homosexually-oriented men I have worked with had wives who were aware of their struggle with homosexuality. It is definitely an advantage to the man if his wife is informed about his struggle. The wife may be surprisingly accepting and tolerant of his difficulties. I am continually amazed at the woman's ability to be accepting and supportive of her husband. Most women can summon great emotional resources to understand and support their husbands if their husbands are honest and they include them in their struggle. The wife will usually be a very strong and loyal ally if her husband makes her a partner. But if she senses that she is being excluded from the process—if he is secretive and does not call on her as an ally—then she may radically switch, withdraw support and become very critical.

### The Ongoing Need for Male Friendships

No matter how successful his relationship with his wife, the man with the homosexual background will always need to have good male friendships. Many wives—even those wives who did not know that their husbands had a homosexual problem—have told me that when their husbands spend time with their male friends, they are happier and more attentive at home, and more emotionally available to them and the children. Conversely, wives will report that when their husbands withdraw from men and fail to maintain male friendships, they become withdrawn, moody and emotionally unavailable to them and the children.

## Intensity of Sexual Experience

Reparative therapy has been criticized by gay-affirmative therapists as simply behavior modification. They say that it results in nothing more than the suppression of homosexual feelings. To support this criticism, such critics claim that married, homosexually oriented men report that their early homosexual experiences were more intense than their sexual experiences are now with their wives. This intensity difference is used by gay apologists as proof that reparative therapy is repressive.

However, this one-dimensional consideration of "intensity" is in fact a false measure. Gay sex is neurotically driven, and therefore it possesses a neurotic energy. The compelling, addictive dimension characteristic of gay sex is not about sex itself, but is a function which stabilizes the fragmented personality structure.

The homosexual will use sex for many secondary reasons, such as giving a sense of order to inner chaos, and containing feelings of inner fragmentation. Homoerotic orgasm provides a temporary, tension-relieving connection with the male sex, from which the gay man has defensively detached himself. Heroine also provides an intense, exciting high, but it depletes the person, leaving him emotionally drained and depressed and in need of another "fix." This same emotional dynamic is described by many homosexuals in reference to sex. The fear often associated with anonymous sexual contacts adds a further exciting charge of intensity.

One client who has had over 2,000 anonymous contacts admits gay sex is "incredibly intense—no doubt the most pleasurable thing in my life." Yet this man confesses that afterwards he is "wiped out, depressed, sad and discouraged." These feelings, lasting from one to three days afterwards, cannot simply be attributed to homophobia, but rather indicate a self-defeating addictive pattern.

A good measure of what is "right" is the feelings one is left with after sex. Men with a homosexual background who have married describe a qualitative difference in their sexual experiences with their wives. While these experiences are of less intensity, they are richer, fuller, and more emotionally satisfying. These men describe a feeling of "rightness" and a natural compatibility. As one married man said, "When I compare my intimate experiences with my wife to my homosexual experiences, it seems like we were little boys playing in the sandbox."

In contrast, the married man with a homosexual background may find conjugal relations to be less intense, but he is left with a sense of rightness, contentment and well-being. Rather than feeling depleted, he is renewed, feels satisfied and good about himself, and experiences himself as an integral part of the heterosexual world. ■