

## **Staying Closeted: Despite increasing acceptance, many men remain hesitant to come out about their sexuality**

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ALBANY, N.Y. - After dating for nearly three years and living together for more than two, Lisa and Ryan needed to have a serious talk. She wasn't sure if he was breaking up with her or proposing.

Instead, he told her that he was attracted to men.

Lisa and Ryan are pseudonyms, but they are a real couple, friends of mine who are in their late 20s. Their romance met its demise because of Ryan's realization. Even today, when there is greater societal acceptance of same-sex relationships, and thus less reason to stay closeted, experts say that gay and bisexual men date women - and even marry them.

"People sometimes suppress their feelings because they have family pressure to marry traditionally and have children," said April Masini, an online advice columnist with AskApril.com. "Some people just want to avoid confrontation and disappointing others, so they don't come out."

Think of former Gov. James E. McGreevy of New Jersey or Colorado minister Ted Haggard, who were both disgraced and lost their jobs after revelations of same-sex relations.

Ryan first realized his interest in men more than six months before telling Lisa. He hoped that it was a phase, one that would pass. He works in a high-profile position and believed that being open about his sexuality, even just to family and friends, would ruin his career.

If the unveiling of this news wasn't enough for Lisa, he then asked her to keep it quiet. She could tell her parents and closest friend - that's it.

To everyone else, the story would read like so many other broken relationships: He simply fell out of love.

Lisa was devastated. Though she'd called their relationship "rocky" for months, she was unprepared for his news and found it difficult to deal with two major issues:

- She recognized the torment that her best friend, the man she thought that she'd

marry, was going through and she felt sorry for him.

❑ It made her have doubts about herself.

Had he told her there was another woman, that he had fallen out of love or even that he had cheated, she would've been less shocked and had an easier time dealing with the heartbreak, she says. This kind of dumping - a "bomb dropping" as some experts call it - was unlike anything she, or anyone she knew, had gone through. She partially blamed herself.

"Women often ask, 'Am I so unattractive that I made him gay?'" said Joshua Estrin, the author of the advice book *Shut Up! And Listen to Yourself*. He holds a master's degree from Columbia University in human behavior and gay and lesbian studies. He said, "If the man is gay, you really need to focus on that it wasn't your fault. Genetics got to him before you did."

Estrin said that women, especially, have a hard time helping one another in this situation. Friends who are usually there to rally around one another start thinking about themselves, leaving their heartbroken gal pal feeling isolated.

"Women think, 'If my best girlfriend didn't see it coming, and her gaydar was off, is it going to happen to me?'" Estrin says.

How true.

Since Lisa's tumult, I think every guy I date could be gay. Their dedication to the gym and their appearance, which once attracted me, now evokes questions and concern. The giddy excitement that I got over a guy's interest in music or performing arts is now offset by concern that he doesn't like football quite as much as he should.

I know, I know. These are stereotypes. But, as Estrin said, stereotypes are stereotypes because there is an element of truth.

People had mentioned to Lisa for years that they thought Ryan might be gay. She dismissed it.

As the story played out, Ryan went on to date men, but has yet to enter another relationship. He's still not out to his family or most of his friends. He apologized to Lisa for what he put her through, but said he's glad he didn't wait until after they were married and had kids.

There is a lesson here, Estrin said.

"If you are questioning your sexuality, you have the responsibility when you enter a

relationship to not pull someone into your drama till you've worked it out," he said.

"Before you pull someone into an intimate relationship, take a moment to step back and decide if you're ready to be in any relationship."

Lisa's new boyfriend is a guy who she asked - straight out - about his sexuality. He told her he is straight. She believes him.