

# LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

A Collection of Articles



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# Lesbian Relationships: A Collection of Articles

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# Lesbian Dating: Life Before the U-Haul

## We Rush Into Relationships

Why is it that lesbians have such a hard time with dating? You know, going out with one or more women, maybe having sex, and not having to arrive at any permanent or long-term decisions about the nature of the relationship.

Why are we in such a hurry to make the relationship decision? You've seen it happen: two women start seeing each other and immediately they're a couple. Once they have sex, it's a sure thing: they are now in a relationship. Perhaps we should think about this. Maybe some of the problems lesbian relationships face arise from not having dated for longer periods of time.

## Proving Ourselves to the World

Perhaps we rush into relationships to prove to the homophobic world - and to ourselves - that lesbians exist. We do have relationships, and they do work. We're always so thrilled when two women get together - and that makes sense, in the context of homophobia. But maybe we should be more concerned about the quality of the relationship, and not assume that being in a relationship is better than being single.

## Skipping the Dating Part

Dating isn't easy. For one thing, some lesbians disapprove of other lesbians dating more than one woman. You've heard the putdowns - "She's a player/user/can't commit," and so on, as if dating different women is inherently wrong. It's easy to see how these stereotypes can develop; our only role models are straight men. But while there are definitely lesbians who don't treat women respectfully, we need to avoid thinking in stereotypes.

There are plenty of other reasons why dating can be hard. Dating

involves risk-taking -meeting new women, initiating conversations, asking women out, having an evening of conversation with someone we don't know very well, and maybe nervously thinking about sex (and, if so, how to initiate). We're not sure what to expect, and we risk being rejected. Many women also worry about whether they are attractive or desirable. No wonder so many lesbians skip this part, and rush into relationships.

And that's not the least of it. As lesbians, there really aren't many places to meet other lesbians, and the places that do exist aren't always the easiest places in which to be introduced. And when we're not in lesbian-identified environments, we aren't always able to spot other lesbians, or find a way to set up a date.

Dating also means coping with undefined situations - not knowing where you're headed, being unsure of what you mean to each other, and possibly feeling confused. For some lesbians, that unknown territory feels out of control and terrifying. To feel more secure, they immediately define the relationship and set clear parameters around it. But if the definition of their relationship is coming out of fear rather than what they actually want with a particular woman, it can be a set-up for failure. And since there are so many obstacles to dating, some lesbians stay in relationships longer than they want, precisely because they don't want to date.

### **Does Long-Term Always Mean Healthy?**

As a community, we tend to admire lesbians who are in long-term relationships. We're starved for good role models. But we applaud those relationships without even knowing their quality. And we've all seen - maybe even grown up with - straight married couples who stay together after it is healthy or good for either of them, because of family and social expectations, pressure, children, and so on. But we don't have to make the same mistakes. If we're with the woman we love, and it feels right, that's wonderful. But if not, we shouldn't let the fear of dating or rejection prevent us from finding happiness.

### **Taking Our Time**

It takes bravery and often conscious and deliberate effort not to fall

into a relationship after a few dates or sex. Setting boundaries, giving ourselves time to see how we feel, talking things out, and knowing the difference between raging hormones and love when ideally we want both, are not easy things to do. But they are possible. And maybe if we let ourselves date, we'll find that we have more time to decide what we really want. Because the choice of who we partner with shouldn't be made in haste.

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## Lesbian Relationships - Talking About Our Relationships

At one time or another most of us have heard or spoken the juicy words, "guess who so-and-so is seeing?" and "did you hear that so-and-so are breaking up?" Our interest in the ups and downs of each others' relationships is so great that our desire to hear more is not limited to the lesbians we know but to any one in our immediate and distant community (remember our focus on Ellen and Ann?) And while many lesbians gossip and speculate about other lesbians, how often do we talk about what's going on in our own relationships? I mean really talk - not only about what's good but about what's hard.

### The Myth of the Perfect Lesbian Relationship

It sometimes feels like a risk to be honest about our relationships - as if there's an unspoken myth that all lesbian relationships are perfect and the same. If ours doesn't measure up to the ideal model, there must be something wrong with us.

Our need to proclaim and protect our love in the context of a lesbian-hating society often feels like pressure to hide the struggles in our relationships for fear they'll be used against us. This need to defend our relationships and present a perfect image can lead to our minimizing and denying the problems that do exist.

### We Create Our Own Relationships

In truth lesbian relationships can vary a great deal. How we construct our relationships is both a reflection of the wider heterosexual model as well as a reflection of our own creativity to create relationships within a void. With few or no models to look to, we are often freer than heterosexuals to create relationships of our own choosing rather than ones based on social conditioning and expectations.

Some lesbian relationships exist outside the mainstream heterosexual model, operating on entirely different values. They may embrace non-monogamy, be poly-amorous, live in separate homes for

years, be committed to resolving their problems while staying together for "as long as we are good together" rather than "till death do us part", and relate to each other as equals and friends as well as lovers. Being in a lesbian relationship can feel like starting from scratch - we get to ask ourselves what kind of relationship we want rather than feel compelled to follow some Hollywood model.

But it's not always easy to be so inventive. We don't live in a vacuum, there are social pressures on us. For lesbians, homophobia can present an obvious pressure and strain on our relationships.

### **The Pressure of Homophobia**

Many lesbian relationships suffer under the critical eyes of homophobic family and peers. Arguments about whether or not to come out, with whom and when can occur. Even when there is agreement not to be out, there may be differences between women about how far to go to hide their relationship. Where only one woman isn't out, her repeated denial of the existence of the relationship may leave her partner feeling hurt, insecure, and unloved. The one who isn't out may even blame and resent her partner who serves as a reminder of her own secrecy and feelings of guilt. Both women may feel depressed, irritable, and unhappy and take it out on each other.

Hurt and angry feelings can lead to arguments, insecurities, and worries about the stability of the relationship. In this situation, it is vitally important for both women to talk about how they are feeling, and hear and understand each other's concerns and fears.

Even when both women are mostly or completely out, homophobia can, take its toll -because of harassment, fear of harassment, times it's scary to be out and you pull apart from each other, rumours that get started, assumptions that are made about you, and so on. Repeatedly framing the problem as homophobia, rather than an inadequacy on the part of either women, helps to lay the blame where it belongs and instead of fighting about how to handle situations it is far better to bond over a mutual problem and find your way through it together.

## Doubly Stigmatized

When there are differences between women, based on such things as race, culture, age and sexual identity it can be an additional hurdle to cross. Added to this is the reality that too often even lesbian friends can be critical and unsupportive of overt differences between women assuming that it will never work out. This can be particularly devastating and isolating to a couple - to be rejected by both the mainstream and their own communities. Although this reluctance on the part of friends to accept your partner often changes over time, it's still very hard for couples to be doubly stigmatized. Couple in these situations often feel like they have to present their relationship and partner as perfect because everyone is expecting them to fail. This is too much to expect of yourself. Finding people who support your relationship is so very important, even if it means going to couple's therapy for awhile.

## Having Time Apart

It's not uncommon in the beginning of a relationship for lesbian couples to spend all of their free time together - basking in each other's love and mutual discovery. Friends may be dropped, separate activities cease, and the relationship becomes like a cocoon. This may feel really good to both women for awhile. But, in time, this total focus on each other decreases usually with one of the women expressing a need to have space.

She may need time alone, or want to spend time with her friends. If she's felt it for awhile, it may come out abruptly or desperately. Either way, her partner may hear her as saying she needs to get away from her. Feeling hurt or rejected, she may get upset or angry and question her lover's love or commitment. The one wanting space may feel misunderstood, suffocated and possibly controlled, and then feel an even greater need for space. Not a good combination!

Short of lots of mutual understanding and reassurances at this point or shortly thereafter, many couples end up arguing. Rather than figuring out how to support each others' needs for separate time, they may only get time apart after a fight which is not satisfying for either woman.

## Dealing With Our Differences

Dealing with differences can be a real challenge for couples. As lesbians, we love that we're both women - our sameness feels good and right. We delight in each other, our bodies, doing things together, swapping clothes, sharing food, music, ideas and laughter. But, when we hit a point, or too many points, of differences we may feel uncomfortable, scared or angry. From the less important things like when we go to bed, to more important things like not getting along with each other's friends or not enjoying the same social activities, eventually we discover that we have differences.

Our difficulty dealing with differences may be due to a discomfort with the separateness they can create, or the fact that differences challenge our assumptions about the way people or relationships "should be like". Maybe we think that feeling separate is not okay or means there is a problem when it's actually a very healthy thing and helps us to feel even closer. Maybe we're uncomfortable with our own privilege and how that gives us power in the relationship.

If our identity is wrapped up in the other person, we may believe that our differences mean that there is something wrong with us or them but differences are just that - differences. They don't mean anything more than that - the challenge is to accept our differences and even rejoice in them. We can learn from each other's differences. A partner who needs a lot of space may learn how to set her boundaries clearly and compassionately. A partner who needs less space may learn the value of space or to not feel abandoned when her lover takes space.

Our inclination can be to suppress differences that arise - worried that they mean something is wrong with the relationship. But, suppressing differences only leads to flat, stifled relationships or the opposite - lots of fighting. Unacknowledged or undervalued differences lead to resentment, can dampen sexual desires, fuel power imbalances and lead to despair, frustration and bitter arguments. Letting differences out into the light of day and not attaching any negative meaning to them goes a long way in a relationship. Noticing, talking about and appreciating differences can prevent all sorts of problems.

## Dealing With Conflict

When resentments do build up, many women avoid addressing them.

Many of us are never taught ways of dealing with our anger and conflict. Many women try very hard to get along and to minimize differences or feelings of anger and resentment. But, our anger doesn't go anywhere and usually builds up and comes out in indirect ways which is usually hurtful to the other person and the relationship.

Airing resentments is really important and women often have to work at doing this. Taking time to listen to others' resentments can help. Listening to and understanding each others' anger goes a long way. It's not about who's right or wrong but about understanding each others' perspectives.

Sometimes a good remedy for a relationship problem is to talk to a trusted and supportive friend about what's going on in your relationship - not in someone else's relationship! Our struggles are not so very different from each other and we can learn from hearing how other lesbians have handled their problems - something we don't get to hear enough about.

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## Lesbian Couples and Friends: Is There Enough Love to Go Around?

Why is it that lesbians can neglect or forget their friends when they get into a relationship? Whether it's the quality and intensity of our friendships that change, or the fact that we no longer make new friends, or that we rarely meet with friends independent of our partners, it always seems to happen once we're involved with someone.

### Our Needs Change When We're in a Relationship

Granted, after being in a relationship, our needs and interests change. Some lesbians want to connect with other couples or develop mutual friends. Some feel satisfied that their emotional needs are met by their partners. Others feel that their relationships demand a lot from them emotionally, leaving them less to offer to friends. While all of these are reasons to make some shifts, they don't compensate for the loss of a trusted friend. Or the independence and closeness that can be gained by hanging out with your own friends.

### Friends Can Feel Like a Threat

Some lesbians are convinced that other lesbians are a threat to their relationship. They're afraid they will lose their partner if she goes out and has fun with other lesbians. They insist on always getting together with their partner's friends, and can't understand why she might want time alone with them. If you feel secure in your relationship, it isn't a big deal if your lover sees her friends alone, or even if someone flirts with her. If you don't feel secure in your relationship or don't feel you can trust your partner, then that's the issue that needs to be addressed, not your lover seeing her friends.

### Feeling Insecure

Some lesbians feel insecure about any close relationship their partner has, usually with a single lesbian, but not always. Relatives, men, and straight friends can all feel like a threat when someone is insecure because of their life experiences, or when the relationship is going through a hard

time. If you feel insecure because of past experiences, you may want to see a counsellor to work it out. If it's an issue within your relationship, you may want to try couple counselling. Whatever the source, it's important to look at the deeper issue, and not get stuck on the trigger.

If your conversations remain at the level of your being upset with your partner because she's spent time with her friends, your partner will only end up resenting you for interfering with her friendship(s). This, in turn, will create distance and hostilities between you. Instead, try talking with each other about how you both feel when she sees friends. If your feelings are connected to past experiences, talk about that. Ask for what you need from each other to make this work -- where she sees her friends and you feel more confident about yourself and the relationship.

Some lesbians feel fine about their partner seeing friends independently, but may feel threatened by a particularly close friendship. This can be hard to deal with. It's important to talk about your feelings with your partner, and hopefully she will be able to hear and reassure you. Again, the issue is not about the friendship, but about your wanting to feel close to and secure with your partner.

### **We Can't Meet All of Each Others' Needs**

Some lesbians believe that their partner's friendships are an indication of something missing in their own relationship, as though they should be able to meet all of their partner's needs. No one can meet all of another person's needs. In fact, seeing friends usually improves relationships. Having enjoyed an evening with a friend, your partner will feel happier and revitalized which can benefit both of you, especially if you don't give her a hard time about it.

### **How We Think About Love**

Sometimes underneath these insecurities and jealousies is the belief that if your partner really loved you, she would love only you. You might think that if she goes out with a friend at a time when you're free, she's choosing her friend over you. This is a misunderstanding about love. Everyone is capable of loving a number of people at the same time. Her choice to see a friend is just that -- a decision to see her friend. It is not a competition with you. So don't make it into one by giving her a hard time.

Encourage and support her to see her friends, and do the same for yourself. If you feel insecure, talk about it. You may find that rather than threatening your relationship, seeing friends leaves both of you feeling better about each other.

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## To Come Out Or Not To Come Out: That Is The Question

Coming out is often presented as something that is not only healthy for us, but our political duty. But is it realistic to assume that we can always come out everywhere we go?

### There are Different Factors Involved

Our ability to be out depends on how we are feeling, what we anticipate the outcome to be, and how important it is in that moment. I mean, let's face it, do we really want to correct every salesperson that assumes our girlfriend is our sister, daughter, mother, or "only" a friend? I know I don't. Yet it's been important for me to ask for same-sex spousal benefits everywhere I have worked.

Not all workplaces and families are the same however, and some present bigger risks than others. Anyone who says you must be out everywhere all the time either doesn't understand the possible risks involved, or hasn't been harassed, disowned, closeted for a long time, lost their job, or had their life threatened.

### Being Out is Important

Being out is important. It's vital for our visibility in the world and our integrity. When we don't come out, we can feel uncomfortable or shameful, like we're hiding something bad, or lying about who we are. The more we come out, the more we resist the sometimes overwhelming opposition to our existence. We need a visible and vocal presence to respond to the homophobic backlash. But I don't think that this means that we should feel guilty for not being out everywhere at all times.

### There are Risks Involved

I think it's important that as lesbians we understand--and not just intellectually--why some lesbian don't come out, or may only come out in certain areas of their lives. This probably includes all of us some of the time. There are real threats out there, including being fired, losing family or

community, children being put in jeopardy, harassment, violence, and loss of monetary support. It may be the best thing to make a deliberate choice to not be out in a given situation because it could threaten our physical or emotional safety and that's not only okay, but advisable.

## **We are all Effected by Homophobia**

Even if we are able to be out in our jobs, with our families and friends, and in public, we are still effected by the threat of homophobia. After all, unless we always behave as freely as we would in a world free of homophobia, we are censoring ourselves, perhaps without even realizing it. Even lesbians who make a point of being blatantly out, which I admit to doing sometimes, are reacting to homophobia and not just being who they are.

In addition to the external risks we face, we are all affected by the relentless homophobic conditioning from families, religion, schools, culture, media, etc. These have an accumulated effect on how we feel about ourselves.

For example, some lesbians feel insecure about the validity of their sexuality. This makes a lot of sense in a context where there are very few, if any, models to affirm our sexuality and to tell us that being lesbian is not only okay, but is fantastic. Most lesbians go through some period of internalized homophobia. We need to find ways to talk about this, including how we are effected in the privacy of our bedrooms. Just because we are out of sight of homophobes doesn't mean that we can suddenly turn off the effects.

## **We Need to Choose**

It's not always clear what to do about coming out. Sometimes our fear tells us that there is danger ahead and we need to be careful and protective. That is a smart thing to listen to. Other times, it's fear that's getting in our way and there is no danger. At those times we need to find a way to act or speak through our fear.

When we come out even when we are afraid, we feel a whole lot stronger and better about ourselves. But when we come out when it's not the right time for us we feel pressured or unhappy about it. The trick is figuring out the difference. Instead of assuming that it is always better to be out, let's help each other figure out the differences between when it wouldn't

serve us to be out and the times when our fear is controlling and silencing us.

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## **Breaking Up Is Hard To Do**

When we first fall in love, we don't expect to break-up. It may not even occur to us, even if we've been through a break-up already. We're dizzy with the excitement and euphoria of love, certain that this time will be different. The longer the relationship continues, the more certain we become. Yet break-ups do occur.

### **You May Still be in Love**

You may still be in love, but the distance between you has grown too wide, or the arguments too frequent and painful that it feels impossible to continue. Whether you were the one to leave or your lover left you, a break-up usually means you'll feel sad, disappointed, abandoned, betrayed, scared, confused, and jealous.

### **You Won't Always Feel this Way**

While it may seem to you that those feelings will never go away, they can, and will, if you let them run their course, and talk about it. The temptation may be to run away from your feelings, keep busy, drink, start dating or use other distractions, but it's crucial that you find ways to let yourself feel all of your feelings and get the support you need to do that.

### **It's Can Feel Like a Death**

You may go through some of the same feelings you'd go through if someone you loved died - in a way breaking up can feel like a death has taken place. You may experience disbelief, shock, denial, anger, depression, regret, attempts to reconcile, fear, panic, and then acceptance, hope and the ability to trust again.

Not everyone goes through all of these phases or feelings, and not necessarily in that order. Many lesbians feel disbelief, fear, sadness, anger, relief and make attempts to get back together all at the same time. And many lesbian relationships break-up before they officially break-up. So while it may seem that someone is doing well after a break-up, maybe she knew for some time already and hadn't told anyone.

A break-up is rarely easy, even when it's your choice. There may be a mixture of conflicted feelings - you may want nothing to do with her and get back together all at the same time. Usually it's the hardest for the one being left and it can take longer for her to get over the break-up, after all it wasn't her choice or decision.

## **Break-Ups Happen in Different Ways**

Break-ups can happen hard and fast, ending in a blow up. Or they can be slow and subtle, with two women living together for an extended period of time with little or no communication, sex or happiness. Break-ups can be abrupt, with one woman suddenly announcing that she is leaving, or they can be gradual, with both women slowly coming to realize that they don't want to be together anymore. Abrupt endings may feel more devastating at first, while those that drag on can take much longer to find clarity and closure.

The truth is, how you feel after a break-up depends on a lot of things, including how long you were together, how intensely you feel about your lover, whether or not you chose to break-up, whether or not there was abuse, what kind of interactions, if any, you still have with your ex, how and why your past relationships ended, your childhood experiences of loss and abandonment, and how much support you have.

## **Losing Your Community at the Same Time**

In the lesbian community, you can suddenly feel like your whole world has shrunk after a break-up. Friends that the two of you knew together may no longer speak to you, especially if you're the one doing the leaving. Regardless of the situation or our lack of knowledge about the situation, we can be quite judgmental toward the woman who decides to leave.

Couples that you spent time with may not know how to relate to you now that you are single. Social settings in the community that the two of you went to together may hold painful memories for you, which can be particularly hard in smaller communities. You might run the risk of bumping into her before you're ready. Many lesbians find themselves avoiding community events, which leaves them feeling even more isolated.

## **How to Relate to Your Ex**

Some lesbians are able to maintain friendships with their ex-partners right away, others take months or years, and some find it too painful or impossible for other reasons. Not seeing your ex for some period of time after a break-up can help in some instances. It can help you to stop trying to save a deadened relationship, prevent pointless arguments, and give you both time to feel what it's like to be apart, and to create a new relationship with each other, if that's what you decide to do.

Sometimes seeing each other is a distraction from feeling the pain, sometimes it eases the pain and is an important part of letting go. There is no right way, only what feels best for both women. When you have different needs, often the woman needing more space feels pressured or guilty, while the other feels abandoned and rejected.

## **We All Need Our Friends**

Friends can be invaluable at a time like this. Many are sympathetic, usually having been through their own break-ups and can help by providing you with much needed understanding, a sympathetic ear and validation. Although friends can carry their own baggage about break-ups and be cynical or dismissive, in effect tell you to "get over her".

This is not supportive and you may find it hard to find the support you need. Many lesbians go to therapy after a break-up. Therapy can help you to grieve and let go, as well it can help you to reflect on what happened. It can be so tempting after a break-up to conclude that relationship don't work out or that you'll never trust again, and feeling that way can be a natural part of grief. But at some point you'll want to see what you can learn about yourself and relationships, lessons that will help rather than hurt you - lessons that will free you to love again.

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## Talking About Lesbian Partner Abuse

Many of us, when we first come out, are drawn to the lesbian community with the dream of finding an all-embracing, welcoming community. Abuse in lesbian relationships doesn't even enter the picture. After all, we are eager to meet other lesbians, find a sexual partner, make friends, fall in love, and at long last, find a place where being lesbian is not only accepted, but celebrated. The road getting there may have been a hard one, with people trying to stop us from being who we are, and ridiculing, rejecting, or hating us, but finally we have a community.

### We Can Ignore or Dismiss Problems

The rejection, isolation, and violence in our lives as marginalized people can intensify our desire for a safe and united community. But sometimes this desire can be so strong, we can make the mistake of dismissing, ignoring, and even denying problems that exist within the lesbian community.

I have repeatedly made this mistake. When I first heard about violence in lesbian relationships, I found it hard to believe. It did not fit my idealized image of the lesbian community. Even when I acknowledged that it happened, I minimized the reality. "At least it doesn't happen as often as it does in straight relationships," I would say. I was trying to avoid how I truly felt about the issue.

I soon realized that it was only by facing the painful truth about lesbian partner abuse that we could truly make our community the safe place we want it to be. By dodging or ignoring the issue, we become part of the problem. We create an environment which isn't receptive to hearing lesbians speak of their abuse, or to helping them find the safety and support they deserve.

### We Need to Listen to Abused Lesbians

When we don't listen to and support survivors of abuse in lesbian relationships, we fail to support other lesbians who need us. For it is lesbians who are in the best position to understand the issues that are particular to abuse in lesbian relationships -- such as an abused lesbian who insists to her

parents that her relationship is wonderful for fear that if they knew, it would confirm their believe that lesbian relationships aren't stable. Or the lesbian who knows about abuse dynamics in straight relationships, but is unable to admit or even talk about the emotional abuse that goes on in hers.

As a community, we are beginning to offer some support to abused lesbians, but it's usually limited to lesbians that we do not personally know. Somehow, we have a much harder time believing abuse took place when the lesbian disclosing it, or her partner, is someone we know. Perhaps it becomes too real to us. Or maybe it confronts our stereotypes.

### **Disbelief and the Fear of Talking**

Too often I've heard lesbians say that when they disclosed abuse to another lesbian, they were told: "But I've met her, I can't see her doing that," or "But you're a strong woman -- why didn't you just leave?"

For most of us, it can be hard to disclose problems we're having in our relationships. We might feel embarrassed, ashamed, or protective of our partner and relationship, and so put on a protective front. Imagine those feelings of shame and embarrassment being magnified one hundred times, then another hundred, to the point where you feel the abuse is a negative reflection on you.

An abused woman will often believe that the abuse proves there is something wrong with her. Of course, this makes her reluctant to tell anyone. If the victim is a survivor of child abuse, her shame and trauma are increased even more, as well as the likelihood for her silence. And of course, no one likes to be the topic of gossip, and that is one thing that spreads quickly through the lesbian community.

If the couple has been together for a significant amount of time, or if either partner is a well-known figure in the lesbian community, there may be even greater pressure to pretend everything is fine. This may also be true if the abusive woman is a woman of colour or a member of another oppressed group; the abused woman may refrain from saying anything in an effort not to fuel racism or any other "ism."

## Forms of Abuse

Partner abuse may not be overt. It may happen inconsistently, both of which leave the woman feeling confused and uncertain whether or not abuse has taken place. Pressure for sex can be misinterpreted by the abused partner as romantic overtures. Constant criticism may be excused as attempts to help. But whether the abuse is overt (such as hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, and forced participation in any sex acts), or covert (such as emotional manipulation, isolation, use of control, humiliation, and undermining someone's self-esteem or free will), it is devastating to a woman's sense of herself and her ability to make informed choices. It's precisely because abuse makes a person feel confused, fearful, self-blaming, and ashamed that she is limited in her ability to trust her feelings, to make decisions, and to protect herself by leaving.

## Specific Issues for Abused Lesbians

The impact of partner abuse, whether experienced by lesbians or straight women, is the same in many ways. However, because the abuse occurs in the context of homophobia and sexism, there are a number of things that are different for abused lesbians:

- Because the abuse involves two women, many people do not take it seriously, viewing it as "mutual abuse." This is a myth.
- Many people don't believe that a woman is capable of causing significant physical damage. Another myth.
- A lesbian who chooses to call the police may face all kinds of homophobia, preventing many lesbians from making that call in the first place.
- The criminal justice system often does not take abuse in lesbian relationships seriously, putting lesbians at further risk by not intervening when called.
- Parents and friends may be homophobic, making it harder to talk about the abuse, for fear of proving them right about so-called "dysfunctional and miserable" lesbian relationships.

- With the occasional and limited exception, there are no support services specifically for abused lesbians.

While we know about the kind of violence men can perpetrate against women, we're usually unprepared for it coming from a woman. It may be more of a shock, feel like a deeper betrayal, be more isolating, and be harder to define, given most definitions of abuse exclude lesbians. And worse, if you and your relationship is closeted, you may find yourself with even less support than others, and feeling very much alone.

### **Abused Lesbians Need Safe Places**

Having safe and supportive places to talk openly about partner abuse is critical to healing. Lesbians are rarely provided with opportunities to feel their pain and anger at having been abused, to reflect on what happened, and to untangle self-blaming beliefs so that they can move on from their abusive ex-partners. They often feel they have to avoid social outings, and may become very isolated in an attempt to avoid the woman who abused them.

In fact, many lesbians have no one they can turn to, because everyone they might be able to talk to, including support services, know, or know of, her partner. Some survivors of partner abuse recall how they turned to other lesbians for support and received little or nothing, while their abusers received great amounts. If they mention this, the women giving support to the abuser might say that they have no way of knowing who is telling the truth. This is rarely an issue a straight woman will have to face.

The whole issue of who to support needs to be looked at in depth on its own. But what I can say here is that both women need support -- the abused woman, to overcome the damage, and the abuser, to stop the abuse and look at what fueled it. However, the abused woman takes priority, and needs to be given a place of safety.

### **Holding Lesbian Abusers Accountable**

As a community, we have struggled with little success to find ways to hold abusers accountable. Some lesbians have spoken of going to a woman's shelter, only to find their abuser there already, and being turned away

themselves. Other lesbians have talked about how, before or after they disclosed the abuse, they heard that their abusers were claiming that they had been the abused ones in the relationship.

### **Listening To Abused Lesbians**

Partner abuse in the lesbian community is an important issue that I hope we can keep on trying to address. If a lesbian shares her story with you, I hope you can recognize the great strength it took for her to do that, and I hope you'll listen supportively, without blame or judgment. There is much strength and love in our community that we can draw on for inspiration when dealing with this difficult subject.

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## Are Some Lesbians Attracted to Men?

Do you think that it is possible to be lesbian and sexually attracted to men? What about lesbians who have sexual fantasies that include men? Or lesbians who have relationships only with women and occasionally have sex with a man? If you have any of these feelings or experiences, you are not alone, and they don't have to diminish your lesbian identity.

On the other hand, if the thought of one or all of these upset or anger you, you are not alone, either. As lesbians, we can be sensitive about these issues, and with good reason.

### Understanding Why Some Lesbians are Uncomfortable With the Topic

It's not hard to understand why some lesbians might not trust lesbians or bisexual women who include men in their sex lives. In a world where we are told that lesbian relationships are a fad, a phase, less significant than straight relationships, don't last, are unhappy, unstable, and lacking because there is no male involvement, and that all we need is a "good fuck," it can be hard to feel open to lesbians or bisexual women who want, or do have sex with men.

We want the world to recognize lesbian relationships and to understand that we are perfectly content and sexually fulfilled with women. It is within this context that it can be hard for some lesbians to hear that other lesbians' sexual fulfillment includes fantasies and sex with men. It sounds too familiar to what homophobes say about us, and so we distance ourselves from them and refuse to listen.

But are we getting anywhere by not listening to each other? I don't think so. Sometimes, our community can feel pretty polarized and divided.

### Bisexuality May Not Be The Answer

Many people think that there are two narrowly defined sexual orientations for women --lesbian and straight -- and that women fall neatly into one or the other category for the rest of their lives (or at least once

they've come out). Deviations from these categories upset a lot of people, including both those who support and those opposed to lesbian sexuality. In response, a third category is introduced: bisexuality.

There is a tendency to view bisexuality as fitting anyone who doesn't neatly fit into the other two; kind of like a "dumping ground" rather than a viable alternative in its own right. But even this third category hasn't resolved the issue because it would mean, for example, grouping women who form all of their emotional and sexual relationships with women and occasionally have sex with men into the same category as women who form all of their emotional and sexual relationships with men and occasionally have sex with women.

### **Sexuality As a Continuum**

Maybe it's more helpful to view sexuality as being a continuum of different sexual desires and behaviours, and that it's possible to move a little, or a lot, on the continuum. Perhaps there is even a continuum of desire and another continuum of behaviour, which explains why we fantasize about all kinds of things that we are not interested in acting on. This would explain why lesbians who occasionally sleep with men identify as lesbian. Most of the time they are at the far end of the continuum where they have relationships exclusively with women. A small minority of the time they move on the continuum and enjoy a night of sex with a man.

### **Our Sexuality Isn't Simple**

Many lesbians (and others, too) would prefer the simplicity of saying a lesbian is one thing and one thing only, but it just doesn't reflect the sexual desires and behaviour of all lesbians, and we don't resolve anything by saying that lesbians who sleep with men aren't "real" lesbians. The question is whether or not we can listen to lesbians without judgement, and be open to understanding their feelings without having to categorize them.

### **A More Diverse Community**

In the end, the fact that there are lesbians who sometimes have sex with men, and bisexual women, doesn't diminish or take anything away from the many lesbians who have no sexual desire for men; nor does it decrease the importance of countering heterosexist and homophobic myths. We can

only gain by acknowledging and respecting the sexual diversity of our community; in doing that, we gain a richer and more varied community.

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