

INTRODUCTION

Same-sex couples can and do have stable, committed, satisfying relationships. In every healthy long-term intimate relationship, whether same-sex or different-sex,¹ partners need to develop good relationship skills and social support. In fact, same-sex and different-sex couples' relationships are more alike than different. There is one key difference, however: Unlike different-sex couples, same-sex couples face stigma, prejudice, and discrimination because of their same-sex attraction, their relationships, and the families they create. And they still do not enjoy the same access to social and institutional support for their relationship that different-sex couples often take for granted. These challenges, taken together, can cause a lot of stress—which we refer to as *minority stress* throughout this book. Same-sex couples need to learn positive coping skills and strategies so that they can meet the challenges of minority stress and thrive.

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Despite the unique challenges they face, same-sex couples have very few resources they can turn to. No one is more surprised by this fact than us! After all, the general alarm and anxiety about the fragility

and instability of different-sex couples' relationships is palpable. A quick check of the self-help aisle at our local bookstore reveals titles that promise the "4 keys," "8 conversations," "7 habits," "5 lessons," or, our favorite, "12 hours to a happy, satisfying, loving, divorce-proof marriage." Search "couple relationships" on the Internet and you will find millions of links to websites, blogs, advice columns, books, workshops, weekend retreats, and a myriad of other resources.

The vast majority of these available resources, however, are written for different-sex couples. They often focus on how couples can address the conflicts that inevitably occur between the two of them because, supposedly, "men are from Mars, women are from Venus." Resources that include same-sex couples are rare. Even more uncommon is any discussion of the effects of minority stress on same-sex couple relationships.

We wrote this book to fill that gap. Same-sex couples should not have to translate books written for different-sex couple relationships to make them applicable. Instead, they deserve resources in which they can recognize themselves and their unique experiences. They deserve a book that addresses their specific needs.

We want same-sex couples to have access to custom-made tools that they can use to help their relationships thrive. Therefore, in this book we (a) illustrate how minority stress shows up in the everyday lives of real same-sex couples, (b) help couples recognize and label their own experiences of minority stress, and (c) offer a rich variety of suggestions and activities that will help couples positively cope and ultimately flourish.

This book is based on the research that we have conducted for more than a decade on same-sex couples; minority stress; and positive lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) identity. As part of our research program (www.prismresearch.org),

we have interviewed more than 150 same-sex couples face-to-face about their relationships and their life experiences. We have also surveyed thousands of LGBTQ people, many in same-sex partnerships.

Many of the stories that couples have shared with us, the challenges they face, and the strategies that they have used to cope with minority stress are featured in the chapters that follow. Many couples we have interviewed shared their stories of successfully coping with minority stress. In this book, you will read many inspiring examples of resilience that illustrate how couples can address the minority stress in their lives in positive ways.

In every chapter, we build on the positive strategies that couples use and suggest others that can be helpful. You will see many examples of how you can build on your own strengths as a couple to create strategies that will work for you. You will find guidance for setting appropriate boundaries with others; using appropriately assertive communication skills; and creating positive social support in your family, workplace, and community. When we use positive strategies such as these, we begin to change our environment, making it a healthier place for us and for everyone else, too.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

This book is written primarily for same-sex couples; same-sex-partnered individuals; and individuals who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. We think the book also presents information and resources for individuals who identify as transgender or queer. So, where appropriate we use *LGBTQ* to signify this broad application. Because we (the authors) are also members of this group, we do not hesitate to use the words *we* and *our* as we talk to our primary

audience of other same-sex couples and LGBTQ-identified individuals. We want to explicitly join with our readers on a personal level, in solidarity and support for the joys and challenges that we all experience.

Although we recognize that not all close, committed relationships are pairs of individuals, we wrote this book with same-sex couples in committed relationships in mind. Individuals in other forms of relationships may also benefit from these examples and activities. Different-sex couples might even pick up a pointer or two to enhance their own relationships!

Same-sex couples are a very diverse group made up of individuals with endless combinations of complex intersecting identities and characteristics that cannot all be adequately illustrated in one book, such as this one. For this reason, we keep our focus on the minority stress experiences unique to being perceived as a same-sex couple. Unless it is directly relevant, we do not highlight or make assumptions about the other identities of individuals in the stories. For example, we do not label a specific couple member as identifying as bisexual or transgender or as a person with a disability unless that individual identity is directly pertinent to the minority stress that the same-sex couple is experiencing together. Our hope is that you will use the exercises in the book to reflect on how your own complex identities, personalities, histories, and social circumstances shape your unique experiences as a couple.

We also hope this book will be a resource for counselors, helping professionals (including medical and legal professionals), human resources personnel, clergy and spiritual leaders, and the family members and friends of individuals who identify as LGBTQ and of same-sex couples. Anyone who knows or works with a same-sex couple may benefit from reading about the everyday experiences of the many same-sex couples whose stories are featured in this book. By understanding the kinds of environments, supports, and

strengths that help these couples to thrive and flourish, anyone can become a more effective ally and advocate.

HOW MINORITY STRESS AFFECTS SAME-SEX COUPLES

Most same-sex couples experience some form of minority stress—a concept that describes the unique, chronic stress experienced by people who are perceived to belong to a stigmatized social group. Minority stress is over and above the typical stressors that anyone might experience, such as the stress of driving home in rush-hour traffic or the stress of trying to balance a bank account so one can pay his or her bills. Minority stress includes (a) experiences of prejudice or discrimination, (b) anticipation and fear of rejection, (c) decisions about when to conceal or disclose our identity, (d) negative feelings we have internalized about our identity, and (e) efforts to cope with the stress that stigma creates.²

Although minority stress affects any person with one or more stigmatized social statuses (e.g., people who are African American or differently abled), in this book we use the concept to highlight the extra stresses that same-sex couples experience. Prejudice based on stigma can be expressed in both subtle and in blatant forms, which can make it difficult for couples to recognize and label these stressors. Sometimes couples don't realize the impact of these stressors until one or both partners begin to experience psychological or physical health symptoms.

The first step in dealing with minority stress is to recognize that it is a normal reaction to stigma. When we understand that stigma is at the root of the minority stress that we experience, we can begin to gain new insights and a new perspective into its effects on our daily lives as individuals and as a couple. These insights can help us transform stigma into an opportunity for positive growth.

As we say many times in this book, the problem is stigma. Same-sex couples are *not* the problem and are *not* to blame for minority stress. Stigma is toxic and must be eliminated for all families to have the opportunity to thrive.

Stigma is perpetuated by a culture that supports different-sex couples while devaluing or excluding same-sex couples from these same support systems. In the United States (and in other countries around the world), people grow up in a social system that supports *heterosexual privilege*, which is the unquestioned acceptance of heterosexuality as normal, natural, and expected. Teaching people that same-sex relationships (nonheterosexual) are inferior to different-sex relationships (heterosexual) and creating policies and stereotypes that support this belief is called *heterosexism*. Minority stress, as experienced by same-sex couples and people who identify as LGBTQ, results from living in a heterosexual society that privileges heterosexual identity and devalues nonheterosexual identities.

When we live in a toxic environment that is discriminatory or even dangerous, we have to find ways to cope. Our efforts to cope with these stressors can add more stress. Finding and using positive coping strategies to deal with minority stress is essential to our health and happiness as individuals and as a couple.

To help you begin to recognize and reflect on the minority stressors in your own lives, in each section of the book we describe common minority stress experiences that couples encounter in different social contexts. The contexts that we focus on are our family of origin, our family of creation, religious institutions, the workplace, our communities, and laws and policies that affect us. We suggest a variety of positive coping strategies that couples can use to overcome minority stress and strengthen their relationship in each of these contexts. The stories and activities in this book offer insights and practical ideas to empower couples with new under-

standings and new tools for dealing with stigma and the minority stress that it creates.

HOW WALKING THE DOG BECOMES MINORITY STRESS

Imagine Sean and Jake, a 30-something couple who live in a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood. One Saturday morning, while walking their dog, they hear someone yelling insulting remarks about gay people. Sean and Jake ask each other, “Did he intend for us to hear that?” They aren’t sure. They seemingly forget about the incident and continue their day, going to a movie, having dinner with friends, and picking up groceries on the way home.

The next evening, as they walk their dog to the park, Sean and Jake find themselves avoiding touching. Later, they wonder out loud if they should take their rainbow bumper sticker off their car. Over the coming weeks, they start to pay close attention to the smallest indications that their neighbors might be politically or religiously conservative, assuming that this knowledge would tell them whether their neighbors accept them or not.

Sean and Jake become hypervigilant and preoccupied with concerns about their neighbors’ perceptions of them. These thoughts trigger internalized stigma; specifically, they worry that perhaps they brought this incident on themselves somehow, by being “too gay.” They find themselves fearing that other neighbors and people in their community may reject them if they are honest and open about their relationship.

Their anxiety starts to feed upon itself. The more they hide their relationship, the more isolated and alone they feel in their own community. The more isolated, alone, and shamed they feel, the more they fear rejection and the more they hide. Their isolation makes them feel even more unsafe and guarded. They increasingly perceive that disclosing their relationship is risky and dangerous.

Sean and Jake are experiencing the minority stress process. First, Sean and Jake experience *prejudice* (the loud, derogatory remarks). Second, they react by becoming self-conscious and hypervigilant as a way to *anticipate rejection* or other prejudicial events. Third, they start to *conceal* their relationship (they stop touching in public). Fourth, negative feelings about being gay that they learned as children are triggered (*internalized stigma*), which make them even more anxious and fearful. Finally, they *cope* by isolating themselves in their own neighborhood.

Many times same-sex couples fail to notice the extent to which they are caught in a cycle of minority stress. They become accustomed to these experiences and acclimated to the stress that they feel. Sean and Jake, for instance, may not realize how much effort they expend speculating about what their neighbors think of them. They may not realize that their isolation is harming their relationship as a couple. They may blame each other instead of focusing the blame on the real source of the problem—stigma. They need to interrupt this cycle.

HOW COUPLES CAN DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH MINORITY STRESS AND THRIVE

Same-sex couples, such as Sean and Jake, can benefit enormously from learning how to recognize and positively cope with minority stress. Creating a positive identity as a same-sex couple involves actively thinking about social expectations and reimagining our lives in new, creative ways. Doing so can help us replace negative ideas with positive ones. Our thoughts are just thoughts, and it is entirely possible to replace unhelpful and problematic thoughts with more helpful and supportive ones.

Sean and Jake can also learn skills and strategies for building emotional closeness in their relationship. Using good commu-

nication skills with our partner helps us to recognize and identify minority stressors. Communicating effectively can also help us explore how our current coping strategies may be adaptive but ultimately unhelpful. This is the first step toward adopting new, more positive coping strategies that will be healthy and helpful over the long term.

Couples such as Sean and Jake can benefit from social support in their families and communities. Creating social support for our relationship is another important coping strategy. Cultivating a network of friends and allies around us helps us have a sense of belonging and a safe space where we can get support for our relationship as we deal with the outside pressures that create stress in our lives.

Couples need to practice prizing their relationship and asserting appropriate boundaries when others devalue them. They also need to learn ways to trust their partnership in the face of life's challenges. All of these strengths and skills take practice. Welcoming people into our lives who validate and celebrate our couple relationship can help us as we practice our skills. The good news is that same-sex couples can build enduring and satisfying relationships by recognizing and reframing minority stress experiences as opportunities for enhancing their relationship skills, for building their social support networks, and for taking positive action. In this book, we suggest specific activities that can help couples to better understand and manage the minority stress in their lives.

A satisfying relationship is good for our mental and physical health. A strong, loving relationship makes us more confident, more resilient, and better able to cope with life's challenges. Solidifying a loving partnership can make a positive difference in the physical and psychological health and well-being of couple members. To do this, we need the appropriate resources, tools, and skills to nurture our relationship.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We have organized the book into six parts, each devoted to one important environmental context: our family of origin, our family of creation, our religious community, our workplace, our neighborhoods and local communities, and laws and policies. Each part of the book includes several chapters. Each chapter focuses on one minority stressor, which is illustrated with stories about real same-sex couples. These stories are composites of many similar stories that we have heard in our interviews. All of the names, of course, have been changed, and the details of the stories have been modified to obscure individual identities. So, if you think you recognize someone, that's probably because these minority stress stories are still all too common.

Although we focus on one minority stressor in each chapter, remember that all of the minority stressors are highly interrelated, as illustrated above with Sean and Jake. Internalized stigma, for instance, may make us anticipate rejection and thus hesitant to disclose our same-sex relationship. Because these minority stressors are related to each other, you will see overlap between the topics in the chapters. Life is often complicated, and so is minority stress.

In each chapter, we ask couples to do a Pause and Reflect activity in which they think about their own experiences. These activities are intended to increase couples' awareness of their own unique life experiences. Often, couples benefit from simply stopping, thinking, and talking together about their experiences and what these experiences mean for them.

Talking to each other about your experiences and how they impact your relationship can enhance the intimacy in your relationship and keep you strongly aligned as you collaborate to create a meaningful and joyful life together. Don't limit your conversations to just each other, though! It is very important that couples have meaningful connections outside their own relationship. Have some

friends over for coffee and get their take on the challenges and opportunities they have experienced.

At the end of each chapter, we suggest a Guided Activity to help you turn your insights into action. We hope to give you some new ways of thinking about your relationship and some new tools for managing stress and promoting well-being. Ultimately, we want to help you to mobilize your strengths, resources, and skills and use these to protect your well-being and enhance your relationship.

We hope that these activities are helpful. Not everyone will need or want to do every activity. Pick the ones that seem most helpful to your situation and your relationship.

As we noted earlier, every same-sex couple is unique. Our experiences are shaped by age, personality traits, individual histories, class, ethnicity, race, religion, national origin, geographical location, economic resources, education, and many other individual characteristics and social factors. The exercises in this book are designed to allow couples to give voice to their own unique experiences and to devise their own unique action plans.

This book is not meant to be read in one sitting. Take a break. Go for a walk, play with the kids or the dog, listen to some relaxing music, or make dinner together. Come back when you are ready.

We recognize that the issues that we are asking you to think about and work on can be very challenging. They can evoke strong emotions. That's OK! If you are feeling overwhelmed by negative feelings, remember that they are only feelings. Take a deep breath and let it go. Our strong emotions come and go. Try not to get attached to them. Instead, be curious about your feelings and the important insights they may provide.

The Pause and Reflect and the Guided Activities have been adapted for same-sex couples from common techniques and exercises that counselors use to help people gain insight and then take action to improve their lives. We hope this book will be therapeutic

in the sense that it will be helpful and supportive. However, this book is *not* a substitute for professional counseling or psychotherapy.

If you and your partner are struggling with basic communication and conflict resolution, you may need additional resources to improve these skills. There are many resources for couples that focus on the interpersonal skills that couples use to manage their relationship. Finding an affirmative and skilled therapist may be helpful if you are having difficulties communicating and negotiating with each other.

Ultimately, the cure for minority stress is ending all stigma and prejudice against same-sex relationships and individuals who identify as LGBTQ. We will accomplish this goal, together, by using our strengths and resources. Meanwhile, having a supportive and compassionate partner as we journey through life is a wonderful gift. We want to support you as a couple in transforming your minority stress experiences in ways that help you to create and maintain a happy, satisfying, and enduring relationship.

Guided Activity: What I Love About Us

Take some time together to share your responses to the following.

1. What do you appreciate about your partner? What do you appreciate about your relationship and your life together? Take a moment to reflect on the positive qualities of the relationship you are building together.
2. Make a list of the positive relationship qualities that you think may be at least partially due to being a same-sex couple. Remember to express confidence that you are both growing and learning together and will continue to do so by sharing your thoughts and feelings in this way.
3. Think about things you want to do and small actions that you want to take as a couple in response to the insights you gained from this time of reflection and sharing with each other. One action may be to read this book together and try some of the activities!

HAPPY TOGETHER

Same-sex couples deserve to thrive! We wrote this book to empower couples with new insights and new actions that can contribute to a happy and healthy relationship. Some people might argue that the tide has turned and same-sex couples are on their way to being treated just like different-sex couples. Some folks may think that same-sex couples are already treated equally and that there are no unique issues that same-sex couples face. Same-sex couples, on the other hand, know the reality of continuing minority stress. Same-sex couples, more than ever, need the tools, resources, and role models to pursue their relationships, happy together.

NOTES

1. We choose to use *different-sex* instead of *opposite-sex* as a more accurate label for couples who are perceived to be heterosexual. The term *opposite-sex* implies that only two sexes exist, which is not accurate. Furthermore, this term suggest that these two sexes are “in opposition,” which plays into our cultural mythology about the “battle of the sexes.” Changing our language opens up new ways of thinking. New ways of thinking open up new ways of being. We encourage our readers to experiment with using this term in their own everyday conversations to see what happens.
2. Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 674–697. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674