

Questions for Therapist Carole Kirby on Counseling Gay and Lesbian Couples



Photo by Lori Fithian

Couples Therapist Carole Kirby, LMSW

Bill Zirinsky: *Carole, how did you come to do counseling work with gay and lesbian couples? And how long has it been?*

Carole Kirby: I realize that it may seem strange, but even as a little girl, I saw through the racism, sexism, and economic privilege that was so prevalent in my Texas upbringing. So, fairly early in my adulthood, I became an activist in social justice movements. My interest in working with Lesbians and Gays was just an extension of my effort to do my part in “righting the wrongs” of injustice.

BZ: *Do you counsel gay and lesbian couples privately, in addition to doing workshops and retreats?*

Carole Kirby: I have worked with Lesbian and Gay individuals and couples for 20 years, first as a straight Lesbian/Gay friendly therapist and then, after being in a ten year relationship with Lori, my partner, I even better understand the challenges and growth opportunities for Lesbians and Gays and their relationships.

I am a workshop presenter of **Getting the Love You Want Couple Weekends**. Some years ago, I gave separate couples weekends just for Lesbian & Gay couples thinking that was the best way to meet their needs. In the past few years, I only give workshops that are open to all couples – same sex and Lesbian & Gay couples. All attendees are aware ahead of time of the inclusive nature of the workshop and it works very well.

There certainly are issues for Lesbian and Gay couples that are unique to them, but for the most part, there are more similarities than differences. All the couples benefit from becoming aware of the universal nature of the challenges that couples face and that they are not alone.

BZ: *What’s been most challenging to you, in recent years, about your work with gay and lesbian couples?*

Kirby: Since Lesbians and Gays have had to face so much prejudice and often have a lack of support from friends and family, it’s hard for their relationships to endure. So, just like straight couples, they often wait too long to reach out for help making it more challenging to mend the hurts and create the mutually satisfying partnership they so desire.

Another challenge is helping individuals recognize and then gradually come out of denial about their internalized self hate. My job as their therapist/coach is to help them grieve, shed shame, and recover their rightful life energy and place in the world.

There’s certainly been progress, yet homophobia and heterosexism prevail. Without the rights of equality in marriage and job protection throughout the

states, it’s challenging to feel equal and entitled. When only one L/G person can adopt a child, it impacts the couple and the family. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” impacts everyone, not just those in the armed services. All of these injustices add to the challenges in the therapy process.



Do you find younger couples much less encumbered by not having lived in the closet to the degree as their elders, or by not having had to live with as much societal meanness and disapproval?

It’s delightful to work with younger couples who haven’t had as many oppressive experiences, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t vestiges of internalized homophobia that underlie some of the relationship issues. I wish more younger couples would reach out for counseling. If they did, there would be fewer short- term relationships that only add to the skepticism.

Can you describe a few of the exercises you regularly bring into your workshops for gay and lesbian couples, exercises which are framed differently from exercises you might introduce into a workshop for heterosexual couples, or a workshop for couples of all persuasions?

The approach I use with L/G couples is the *same* as with heterosexual couples. I use the theory developed by Dr. Harville Hendrix, which is called **Imago relationship therapy**. A center piece of Imago is a structure for talking and listening called the *intentional dialogue*. Each person gets an opportunity to share his/her thoughts and feelings without interruption and be heard and better understood by his/her partner. The readers could go to my website to get more information about Imago therapy.

The general issues for all couples are closeness/distance, power/control, inability to truly understand each other and accept difference, emotional/sexual intimacy, making the children their primary connection, taking energy outside the relationship, etc.

Using the dialogue, helping couples really hear and understand each other, is the method I use with everyone. However, Lesbians and Gays have additional issues that “overlay” and “underlay” the general issues. For example: the complexities and on-going nature of coming out issues are challenging for couples. Another issue that creates heartache for many L/G relationships is internalized homophobia, which is often denied as being a significant factor in their relationship challenges.

In all relationships, good communication is a key issue. Can you think of some examples of communication issues that you have found to be particular to gay men or lesbian women in romantic relationships?

I don’t think couples have communication issues per se, but rather issues connected to childhood hurts, disappointments, and insecure attachments that they bring to the relationship hoping to have a more positive outcome. They aren’t aware and don’t understand the impact of these underlying issues. Couples do need to learn some new ways to talk, listen, and understand each other. I help them develop the discipline and patience that it takes to be able to differentiate, to hold onto his/herself while truly allowing a partner’s reality to come forth. By so doing, both individuals in the coupleship get to show up. Without deeper understanding and compassion for each other, they will be stuck in a power struggle and eventually have a lifeless, unhappy relationship.

Each individual is unique. I know it’s hard to generalize. Even so, can you think of a particular aspect of gay men partnering which comes up, again and again, in your work? And what about a particular aspect of lesbian partnering which is a recurrent theme?

I have more experience with Lesbian partnering as women are more apt to seek therapy. Given that Lesbians are socialized as young girls and then as young women, it’s hard for them to differentiate and deal with difference and conflict. They often suffer from “the tyranny of the nice and kind”, Carol Gilligan’s term for women in general, and it’s certainly applicable for Lesbians. For this reason, some describe Lesbian couples as being “enmeshed” or “merged”. Helping Lesbian couples break out of symbiosis into comfortable differentiation is a recurrent theme. It is recurrent theme for *all* couples; however, “merging” seems more prominent in Lesbian couples.

The socialization of males in our patriarchal culture cuts boys and men off from certain emotional feelings and encourages competition. The result is often discomfort with the expression of feelings, needs, and desires, all of which are key aspects of emotional intimacy. Gay men often suffer even more intensely with homophobia, as the culture is more tolerant of two women being together than two men. It's another element of sexism.

If a young boy was taunted and bullied because he didn't fit the male model of what a boy should be, then he brings that deep hurt into the relationship. All of these things that are specific to Gay boys and men are the extra challenges that Gay couples work with in therapy.

Issues around sexuality, desire discrepancy, pornography, and affairs are issues that often come up in therapy with all kinds of couples. Sexuality outside the relationship is more common with Gay males; often times it's consensual. In my experience, I have found that it undermines the intimacy of connection even when consensual,

What do you love most about working with gay and lesbian couples; what is most satisfying?

One of my long time goals has been to help folks (that includes me) create safe, loving relationships. I'm particularly well placed and knowledgeable about heterosexual privilege given that I have lived heterosexually for most of my life. I also now have ten years experience in a Lesbian relationship. I know what it is like not to feel comfortable walking down the street hand-in-hand with my partner.

As I mentioned earlier, at the core of my being is the desire for social justice, so counseling Gay and Lesbian individuals and couples is my contribution to *one* of the changes that need to happen in our culture. *I want folks to be able to love whom they choose and love well.* I enjoy helping *all* couples and find it particularly gratifying to help Lesbian and Gay couples believe in their capacity to love and be loved. They deserve my support, advocacy, and love!

Anything else you'd like to share, or add?

Gay and Lesbians need allies in obtaining their rights and their rightful place in society. I hope the readers will support the legal right for Gay and Lesbians to marry, the right for two parent adoption, the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell," in the armed services, and for protection in job discrimination. Naturally, I hope Gay and Lesbians will empower themselves by doing what they can to right these wrongs.

Thanks, Bill, for giving me the opportunity to share some of these thoughts.

###

(Carole Kirby's website address is: www.therapy4couples.com. Her phone number is 734-424-2797.)

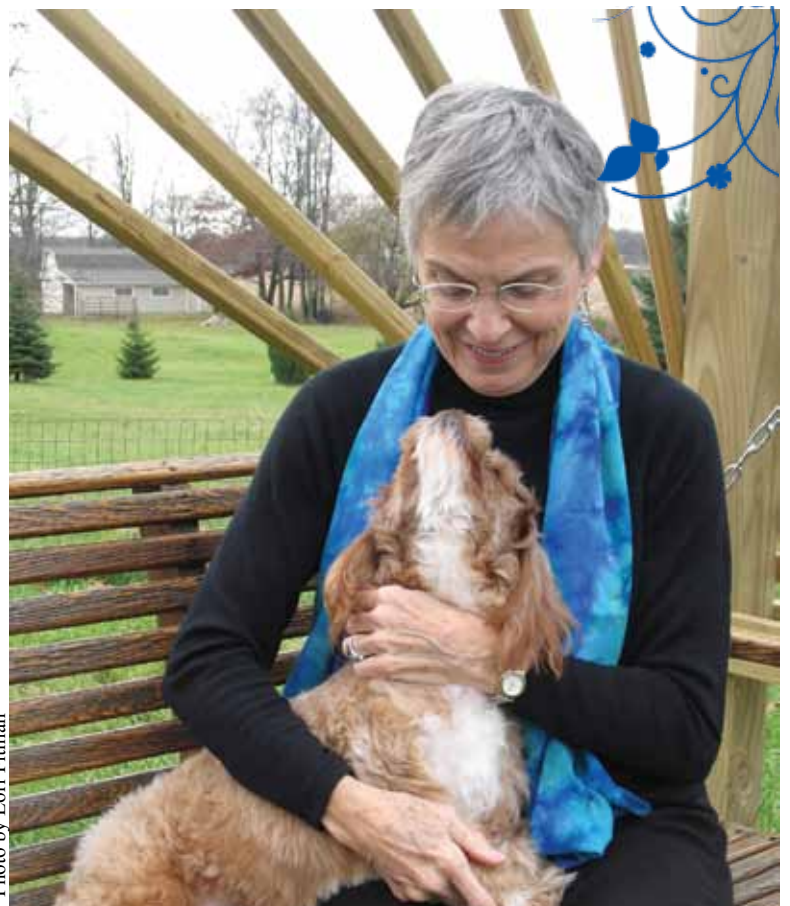


Photo by Lori Fithian

For info about Carole Kirby's upcoming workshops, see her ad on page 55.



THE YOGA SPACE

Iyengar Yoga

Journey
Toward Awareness

Certified Instructors
Sue Salaniuk
Sally Rutzky
Nancy Udow

180 Little Lake Dr. Ste. #1 | Ann Arbor
off Jackson betw. Wagner & Zeeb
(734) 622-9600



www.yogaspacespace.info

Sing with Me!
The More We Get Together
Nurturing Relationships Through
Music, Play, Books & Art
A Resource & Activity Guide
for Families & Educators

More Than a Class
Research based program
nourishes your child's brain
& affects total development.

Mixed Age Class
Birth - 5
Tues., Wed. 9:15 or 10:45

**Music, Movement
& Make Believe**
Integrated Arts For 3 1/2 - 5s
Wed. 12:30-2:30

Baby and You
A Special Class for Infants
and the Grown-Ups
Who Love Them...

A warm, gentle, nurturing
environment of
activities to support your
daily routine.

Together we will bounce,
chant, wiggle,
play instruments,
listen, rock, folk dance,
share huge-lullabies
and more. Tues. 12:30

Staff Development
Family Concerts
School Assemblies for
Pre-K - 2nd Grade

Gari Stein
garistein@aol.com
www.little-folks-music.com
ph/fax 734-741-1510

...with a variety of massage
and spa therapies

relax

renew

refresh

Mention this ad and receive
10% off your service with
Tristin, Colleen or Elizabeth.

Appointments available 7 days a week!

In Touch
Therapeutic Massage
734.994.7822
intouchtm.com

- * INEH worldwide teacher for subtle body energy healing classes since 1999.
- * Chosen "Best Massage Therapist" in Detroit. Toured as massage therapist for "CATS".
- * CranioSacral / FlowerEssence Therapy / detox footbaths Energy Healing sessions / 30 yrs. serving the holistic community.
- * EFT sessions for relief from depression, stress, fear, and pain.

Sacred Space Healing

Laurie Akerros MA, LMT 734-255-2677

