

THE LESBIAN LOVE COMPANION



How to Survive Everything from Heartthrob to Heartbreak

by Marny Hall, Ph.D.

The Lesbian Love Companion

Also by Marny Hall, Ph.D.

THE LAVENDER COUCH:
*A Consumer's Guide to Psychotherapy
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SEXUALITIES

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How to Survive Everything
from Heartthrob to Heartbreak

Marny Hall, Ph.D.

Illustrations by Jim Coughenour



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To
Scout, Scamp, Perky, Snipe,
Kamela, Leander, Mrs. Smiley,
and the Tasty Butterfish

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Some of the stories in this book were based on actual interviews and life experiences, some are composites based on my professional work as a counselor. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the women who shared their stories with me.

The Lesbian Love Companion

Introduction

Where did the passion go?
Have I made a mistake?
Is it really over?

The questions sneak up in the dead of night or assault us in broad daylight—the questions we whisper to ourselves or hurl at the strangers who were once our lovers. And when silence is our only response, we seek out professionals who can solve our painful riddles. After all, therapists are *supposed* to have the answers.

A lesbian couples' counselor for years, I had learned my craft well. I knew when to console and when to confront, when to probe and when to shut up. I knew how to stop a fight, how to start a dialogue, and how to assign exercises that would be helpful even if partners didn't bother to do them. But when it came to the inevitable what-went-wrong questions . . . I hadn't a clue. After a painful breakup of my own, I decided it was time I found out.

In 1985 I began interviewing long-term couples about their recipes for longevity. And I kept interviewing them.

After ten years of tracking a handful of couples through good times and bad, breakups and new beginnings, the formula for permanent partnerships still remained elusive. But along the way, I found out something even more intriguing: lesbian couples are gifted storytellers. It was this storytelling ability, developed out of necessity in a straight and often hostile world, that strengthened these couples' partnerships.

It makes sense. If we don't tell our own thick-and-thin parables, no one else will. When times are hard, chances are no beloved aunt is going to take us aside and insist that if she and Uncle Jake could make it . . . well then, by damn, so could we! There are no legal documents in the desk to certify our unions, no romantic movies on TV that celebrate our love. There is no church, no community, no government, no timeless tradition to reinforce the story of our togetherness and continuity.

It's up to us to do it ourselves. And we do. We tell our stories with cards and flowers, with plans and promises, with private rituals and public ceremonies.

But, as every good storyteller knows, the course of true love never runs smoothly, and somewhere between once-upon-a-time and happily-ever-after something awful happens: perhaps a value clash congeals into a permanent power struggle; maybe a trusted friend turns into a new lover. In spite of best efforts, the struggle may prove too much for us. The relationship ends. But, oddly enough, the story goes on.

But now it takes another form. Happily-ever-after turns into she-done-me-wrong or, even more commonly, I-done-myself-wrong: I chose badly, moved in too quickly, was too

much of a co. They are stories we know by heart. Why? Because we've all told them. Again and again.

What I came to realize during my ten-year quest was quite simple. The forever-after story is compelling, but we need more than one way to think about partnerships.

Most of us aren't going to stay with our first, second, or even third partners. And in the face of devastating change, storytellers don't suddenly stop telling stories. They come up with reasons—explanations for why things went wrong and ways to avoid future catastrophes. Unfortunately, our determination to do it better next time around may only set us up for a new round of rapture and rupture.

The ideal of the perfect (or perfectible) couple is great—if you happen to be a therapist or the author of a how-to book. For most of us, however, trying to become a lesbian poster couple is a disaster. It reduces our remarkable array of relationships to one pass/fail model and turns us into intimacy overachievers or abysmal failures.

But what if, in addition to forever-after (or failed-forever-after), we had plenty of alternative ways to view the inevitable ups and downs, the surprising twists and turns in our relationships? What if, for example, we could see the conflicts that ruffle our relationships as positive—evidence that the Dora Doormat in all of us has finally been able to stand up for herself? Or what if, instead of regarding a new attraction as the beginning of the end, we saw the arrival of *the other woman* as perfectly normal, an envoy from the outside world we may have been neglecting?

In this new way of viewing relationships, anything is possible. The old bugaboo “lack of commitment” can suddenly

look like day-at-a-time wisdom, and even those heartbreakers—unwanted endings—can turn into new beginnings. And the best part is that such transformations are within reach. We don't even have to stretch our imaginations to make up such stories. The raw material is all around us.

Out of a history of invisibility and silence, lesbians have devised some of the most unique (and creative) ways of having relationships—ways that defy convention and sometimes appear downright crazy. We are everywhere. And when it comes to loving, we are also everything: Sexual tourists and merger queens, bisexual dabblers and chat room Romeos, polymorphous perverts and permanently asexual partners. But whether we like our sex spicy or bland or not at all, whether we break up regularly or stay together for keeps, whether we are partnered or embedded in a sprawling network of friends and other lovers, one fact is clear: our love lives are just as diverse as we are. And trying to fit our unique rhythms into forever-after is rather like Cinderella's sisters trying to jam their toes into those dainty slippers. One-size-fits-all ends up fitting no one. Our relationships need to be just as diverse as the other aspects of our lives.

This book won't tell you how to become a perfect couple. It won't tell you how to jump-start flagging passion or live happily ever after. Our attempts to achieve these goals have added to lesbians' already-ample supply of self-doubts.

But the chapters ahead *will* give you a detailed tour of relationship options. By providing concrete examples and simple, easy-to-follow steps, *The Lesbian Love Companion* will guide you out of the not-good-enough framework that,

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