

Book Review:
Coming Out Straight:
Understanding and Healing Homosexuality, by Richard Cohen

Reviewed by Philip M. Sutton, Ph.D.

"Seeing individuals come to understand the deeper meaning of their desires, and seeing them become freed from those chains that bound them for years, is both moving and gratifying. This process takes years. There is no quick fix in matters of the heart" (p. 99).

In *Coming Out Straight*, Richard Cohen uses the stories of his own life and the lives of a number of his clients to show that change is possible. He explains both *why* and *how* it is possible for a person to heal out of homosexuality and transition into heterosexuality.

In Part I, Cohen presents his definition of homosexuality as a Same-Sex Attachment Disorder (SSAD) and explains his understanding of the basic causes of same-sex attractions.

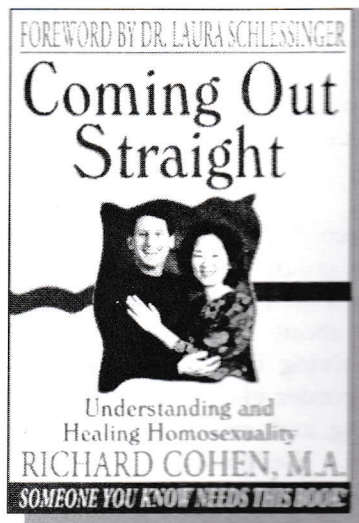
In Part II, Cohen outlines a four-stage model of recovery from SSAD through overcoming. He describes a number of behavioral, cognitive, emotional and psychodynamic tasks that are necessary for a person to heal the past psychological wounds and to overcome the present self-defeating, self-protective behaviors.

In Part III, he offers advice for "Healing Homophobia" through compassionate understanding and wise interventions that avoid the extremes both of condemnation and rejection of homosexually oriented *persons*, and of condoning and acceptance of homosexual *behavior*.

He lists the factors that predispose a person to homosexuality: "heredity, temperament, hetero-emotional wounds, homo-emotional wounds, sibling wounds/family dynamics, body-image wounds, sexual abuse, social or peer wounds, cultural wounds, and other factors: divorce/death/intrauterine experiences /adoption/ religion."

It might have been more helpful to readers if Cohen had more clearly distinguished the factors which have broad clinical and empirical support—particularly, parental abuse and neglect—from those factors that are more speculative, such as intrauterine influences.

Cohen is a second-generation reparative therapist who is as zealous about helping others find and facilitate healing as he was zealous to find healing for himself. Unlike the concepts used by first-generation reparative therapists who



were trained largely in the psychoanalytic tradition, many of Cohen's concepts and recommended techniques appear to reflect the influences of family systems therapy, the recovery movement, faith healing, and the holistic health movement in mental health and pastoral counseling.

Therapists more versed in psychoanalysis and traditional reparative therapy may find it challenging to translate some of Cohen's ideas and language, such as the "adult-child" and "inner-child," and what he describes as the need to "balance both light and dark energies" through fun and play into concepts with which they more familiar.

And although spirituality is not commonly discussed in the psychodynamic literature on reparative therapy, pastors, rabbis, and other clergy – as well as therapists who concern themselves with the spiritual/religious well-being of their clients – may be heartened by Cohen's nondenominational, yet clear presentation of the spiritual tasks and techniques that he regards as fundamental to healing SSAD.

In the light of 80 years of outcome studies that testify to the difficulty in treating homosexuality, *Coming Out Straight* at times sounds overly optimistic about the prospects of healing and transitioning into heterosexuality. "Anyone can accomplish whatever he or she wants," Cohen says. "With a strong determination, the love of God, and the support of others, healing is possible. Anyone can do whatever he wants if he has a burning desire, makes a plan, gets support, and goes for it."

Along with the confidence Cohen places in his therapeutic techniques, he does voice a humility about their use. He lists some of the tools and techniques that he believes may prove useful in the four stages of recovery, describing in detail the more novel aspects of his approach, such as mentoring, touch/holding, and accessing the personal power of anger. He also recommends books that describe how therapists may learn to implement these interventions.

The "tools and techniques to be used in each stage of recovery may change," he says, "but the tasks will remain the same" in overcoming what he clearly sees as a "developmental disorder."

Over the past two years, I have heard Richard Cohen speak publicly on three occasions, talked with him informally on those occasions, and listened to a number of his audiotapes. It is easy for me to understand the confidence that Richard places in the ideas and techniques which he champions. He is a passionate evangelist for the truth that it *is* possible to heal homosexuality, and he is confident that others can accomplish what he has.

"I have been able to guide many men, women, and adolescents out of homosexuality," he says, "because I didn't listen when people told me, 'Be true to yourself, you were born this way, accept it.' I learned where my same-sex desires came from, how to heal those wounds, and how to fulfill the unmet needs of my past." And the stories of his clients suggest that those experiences have enabled him to help many others complete the same journey.

If Cohen's optimism about success sounds over-confident at times, he balances that optimism with cautious advice and prudent suggestions that provide a more realistic, sober sense of what awaits persons who decide to try to overcome their same-sex attractions. The healing process "takes time, patience, and diligent effort. The price is high to get one's life back, but the rewards are well worth the efforts."

How long this will take "all depends on the severity of the wounds and the amount of time and energy the individual is willing to invest in his healing. One to three years is the average time of treatment." As clients discover the source of their problems, he admits, "things get worse as they experience the pain." A key factor in change is personal motivation, for "without a deep-seated commitment to change, the process of healing is virtually impossible." And, he says, "Those who participate in their own recovery by doing homework and other assignments grow and heal much quicker."

Mentoring must not be given prematurely in order to avoid the client's becoming "excessively dependent, or codependent, on the mentor." He advises that partners or spouses of the client be fully aware of the mentoring relationship, expecting that a client may experience sexual feelings for the mentor, especially if the client was sexually abused in the past.

Cohen says that both mentor and therapist should be well-grounded in their gender identity and sexuality. He advises the administering of healing touch "in an appropriate manner, at the right time, and by the right person." Ideally, he says, mentoring and healing touch would be given by a client's own mother and father, but if that is not possible or practical, it should be given by happily married men or women.

In describing homosexuality, he says that **it's not gay** ("the homosexual lifestyle... is full of heartaches and most often an endless pursuit of love through codependent relationships"), **it's not bad** ("same-sex attractions... represent a drive to heal unmet love needs"), but it's **SSAD**—Same-Sex Attachment Disorder—a sad lifestyle, whereby the individual is disidentified with his own masculinity or her own femininity and tries desperately to fill the deficit by joining with someone of the same sex, which only, he says, leads to frustration and pain.

Overall, I heartily recommend *Coming Out Straight* to both struggler and therapist. Reading this book will enable the reader to have a better understanding of the meaning of homosexual feelings, thoughts and behaviors, whether they are his own, or those of friends or family members who are lesbian or gay.

Richard Cohen's story and those of his clients offer hope, encouragement and challenge to anyone who has same-sex attractions. The numerous references and recommended readings offer professionals who are newcomers a wealth of clinical theory, research and technique for more in-depth learning.

Therapists already knowledgeable in the more traditional approaches to reparative therapy will find a creative challenge in deciding how Cohen's theoretical concepts and more novel techniques could be integrated into their existing understanding and clinical practice.

Finally, I think who anyone who reads *Coming Out Straight* will be moved by the courageous struggle for psychological health and gender wholeness of Richard and his clients, who were generous enough to share their stories.

Coming Out Straight is published by Oakhill Press for a price of \$27.95 hardcover (telephone number: 1-800-322-6657). ■

The book's over-optimistic prognosis for success is balanced by a sober accounting of the required tasks.

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