

# ADVICE ON MAKING GAY RELATIONSHIPS LAST

BY DEB PRICE

**A**SSUME permanence. That's the voice of experience — both personal and professional — talking. That's Los Angeles psychotherapist Betty Berzon offering gay couples one secret to a successful relationship.

The words of advice spill out as Berzon describes what she's learned from her own 23-year relationship and from counseling more than 1,000 same-sex couples over the last 25 years:

"Assuming permanence — that this is a relationship that you are going to be in for the rest of your life, that no matter what happens you are going to be there with this person and this person is going to be there with you — I find makes an enormous difference."

Berzon, who turns 69 this month, had never been in a committed relationship before getting involved with Teresa DeCrescenzo at 45. Despite her new love's reassurances, it took Berzon a long while to have faith they were building something permanent.

"Once I crossed that line and accepted that this is the relationship I am always going to be in, it made everything so much easier," she recalls.

"I had always run away when there was conflict. And there was no running away. One just had to stick it out and work it out."

Straight married couples usually expect their relationships to last a lifetime, despite high divorce rates. The goal feels within reach. After all, they grew up — we all did — seeing marriages last 30, 40, 50 or more years.

But, as Berzon points out, gay couples often have had little or no contact with "our own models of longevity. And we still have no legal existence. So it's more difficult for us to endow a relationship with as much real trust as it needs. Unconsciously holding back — out of fear of failure, out of an instinctive sense of self-protection — makes it harder for the relationship to really blossom and last.

Berzon tries to help gay couples find the sense of strength and, yes, freedom that flows from forgetting that breaking up is an option. Her insights on successful stability found a national book audience in 1988 with *Permanent Partners* (Plume), now followed by *The Intimacy Dance* (Dutton).

When it comes to striking a good

balance between togetherness and individuality in a relationship, gay men and lesbians have a lot to learn from each other, Berzon thinks.

Male couples often jeopardize their relationships by pursuing too many outside interests, too much separateness. "Gay men, more than most lesbians, seem to have a great need to hang on to what is theirs and not pool resources," says Berzon, who thinks "intimate relationships work best when assets are pooled, because that is an act of faith in the future of the relationship."

We lesbians, of course, merge, merge, merge. And we risk smothering our passion with too much closeness. As Berzon wisely points out, "In order to feel love for someone, there has to be a separate person."

She sees an unfortunate tendency among all of us in same-sex relationships to expect one's partner to be, well, the same: having ideas, desires and traits that match one's own with clonelike simplicity. Within mixed couples, difference is accepted, exaggerated, celebrated as the natural consequence of mating two genders. But gay partners who are out of sync are

more likely to feel upset, even betrayed, than to shout, "Vive la difference!"

We gay folks actually don't need a phrase so foreign to us. We can instead adopt the generous outlook Berzon has reached while loving a woman very unlike herself: "She's not crazy, just different."

Every relationship requires flexibility and attention, as Berzon acknowledges with her chapter title "Does it have to be so much work?" But once permanence is assumed and truly felt, it's human to relax, kick back, get lazy. Couples slip away from expressing affection.

Berzon reports, "People say to me, 'Oh, well, she knows that I love her and I appreciate her. I'm here. Why do I have to keep saying it?' But I need to hear I'm still attractive and I'm still lovable, and I think that most people do."

So if your heart has found a permanent home, take the good doctor's advice: Express your love. Say it not just with flowers; say it with words. And don't ever assume your courting days are over.

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