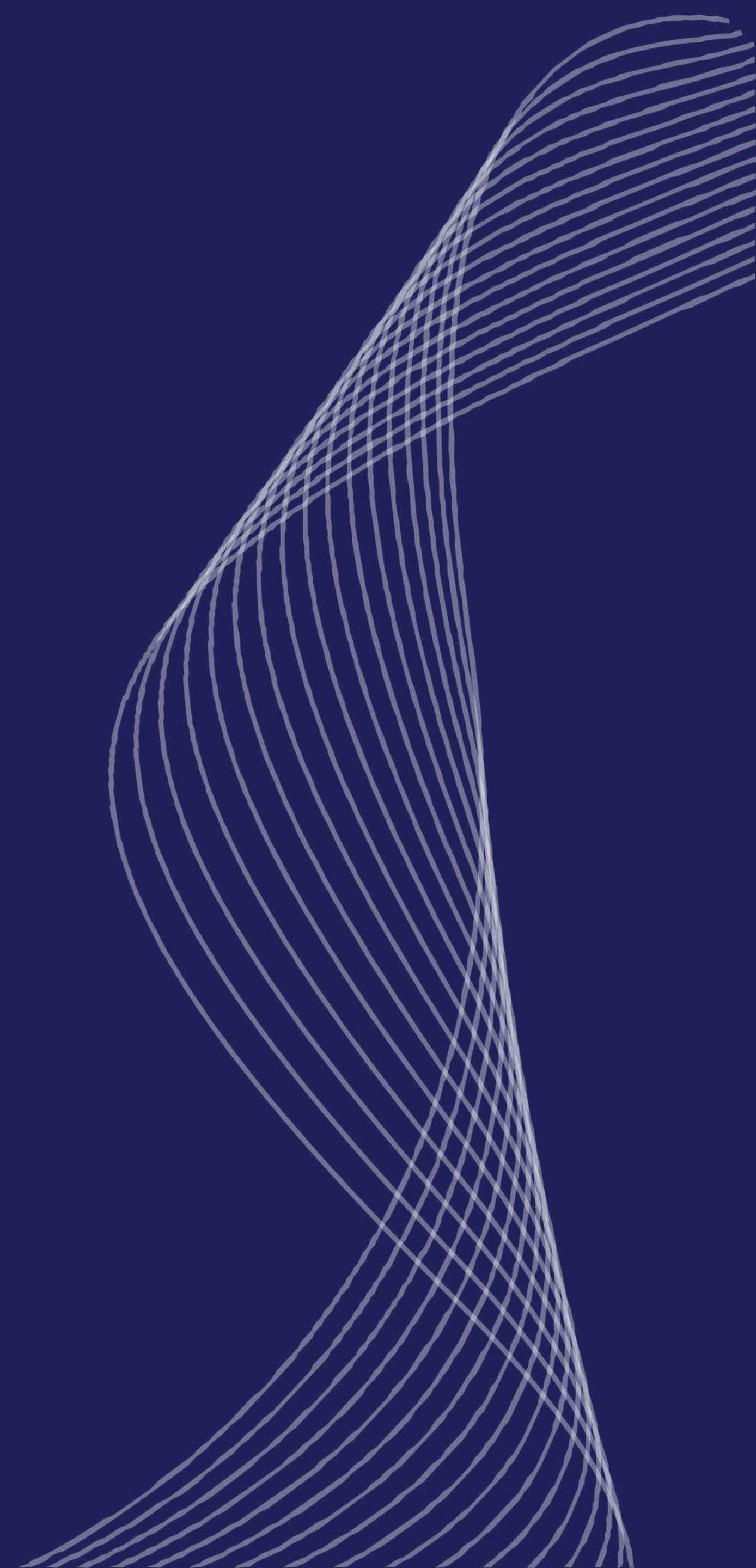


Naughty and Nice

How Male Couples Build and Sustain
Connection

Rick Miller, LICSW



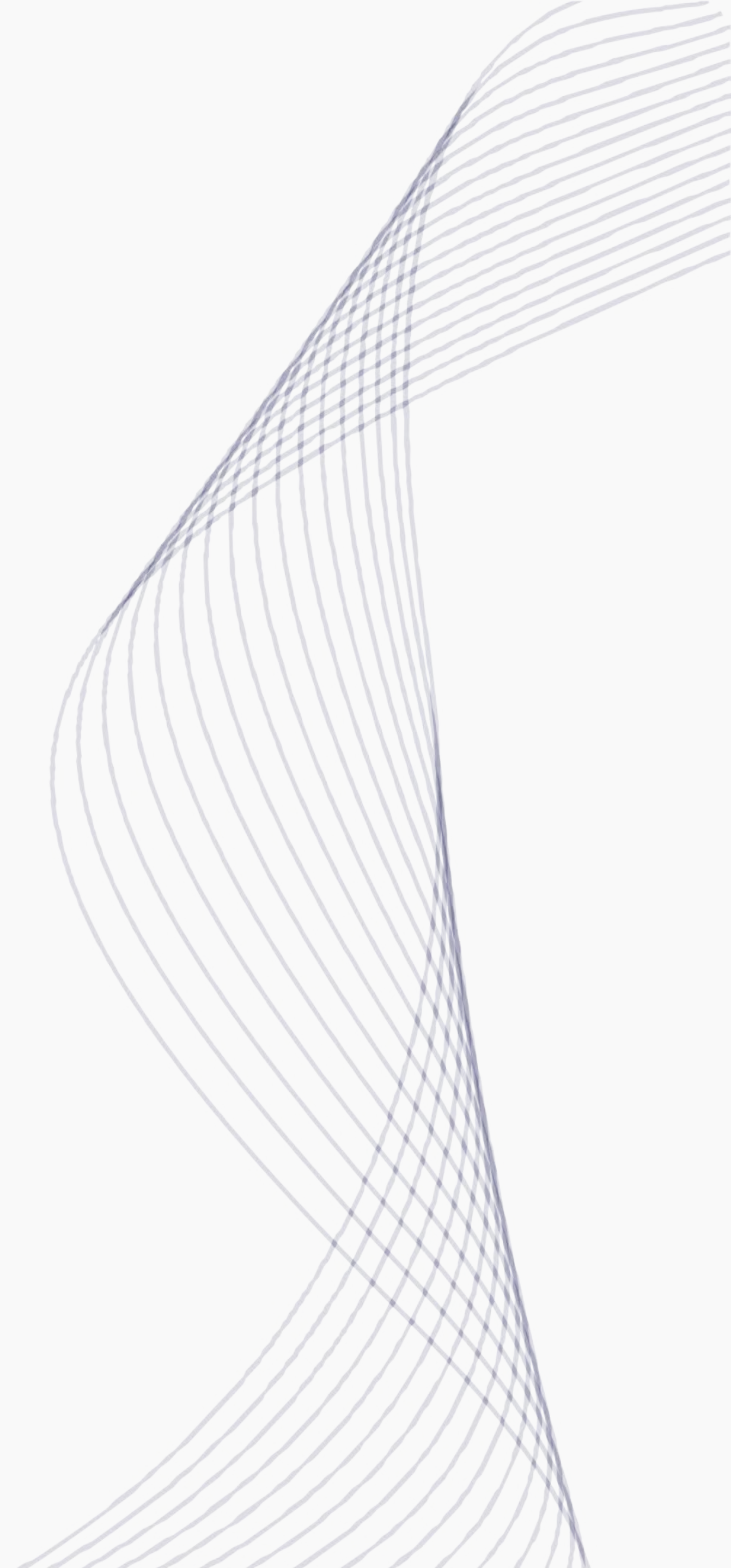


Objectives

1. Attendees will expand skills and comfort in identifying models of relationships beyond heteronormative.
2. Attendees will list developmental challenges unique to gay men.
3. Attendees will incorporate interventions for forgiveness and acceptance following betrayals.

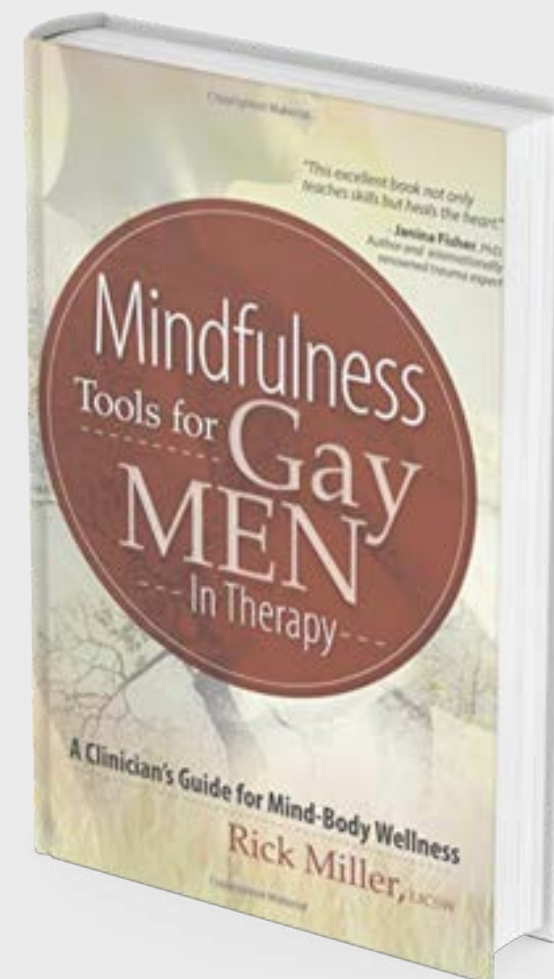
This workshop

provides a model for maintaining successful long-term relationships in the midst of dichotomies



Rick Miller

- Psychotherapist
- Author
- Founder of Gay Sons & Mothers
- Psychology Today Contributor
- Host of the Modern Couples Podcast






About Me

- 40 years' clinical experience
- Couples work prevalent
- Clinical vs research focus

The Task of Couple Work

- History in Family of origin.
- Attachment Capabilities.
- Gender norms.
- Gay Identity Development.
- Sexual and Intimacy History.
- Norms in gay community.
- Masculinity Issues.

The New Me

- Greater comfort discussing sexuality.
 - Increased flexibility with relationship constellations.
 - Increased sessions alone with members of couples to enhance couples work.
 - Less rigid rules about not keeping secrets.
- 

Gay Men Overlooked

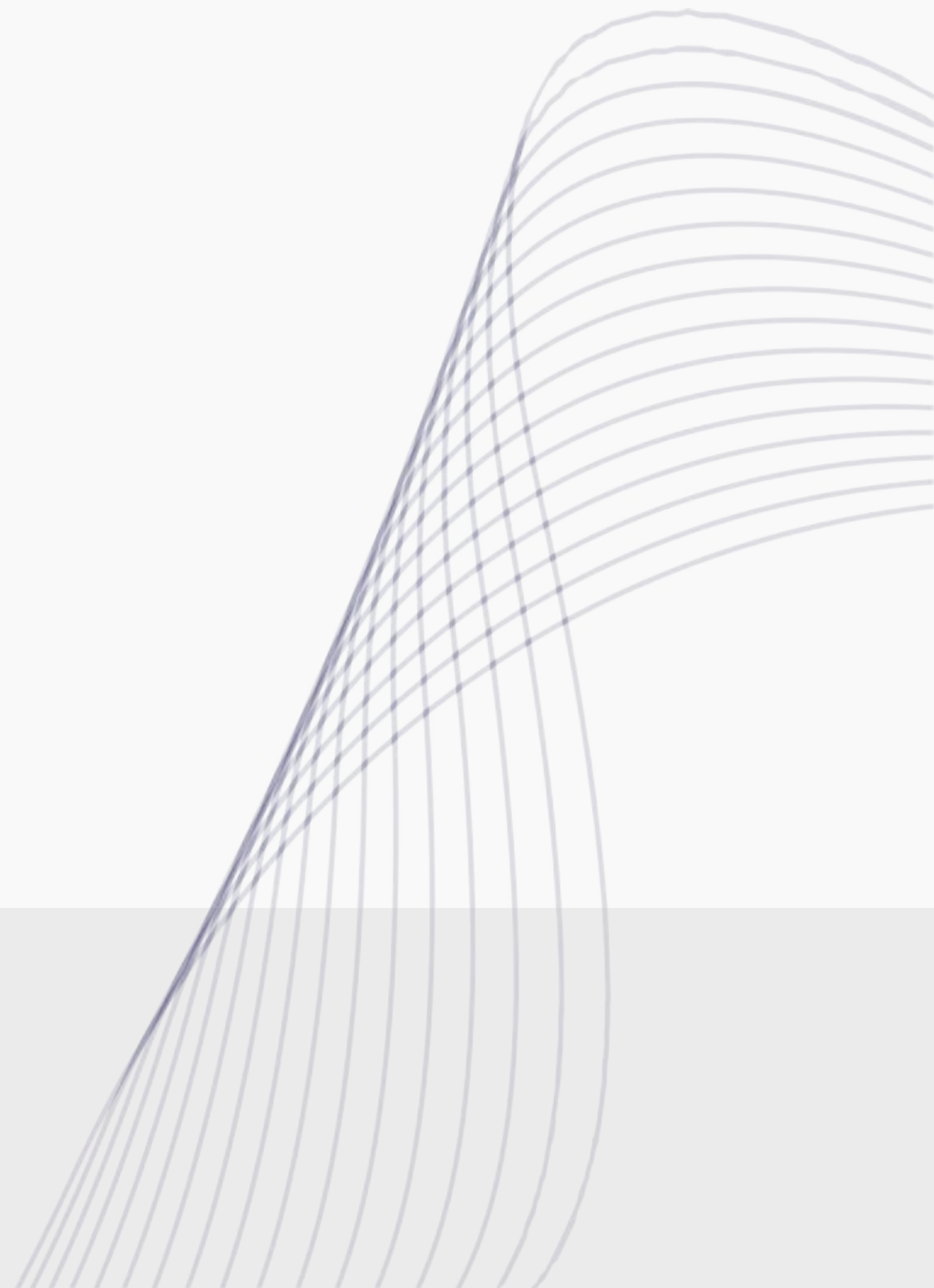
- Very little curriculum.
- Minimal focus in mental-health field (presentations, keynote speakers, or case references).
- Homophobia subtle, yet existent.



LGBT COMPETENT PROVIDERS

- 16% of participants have reported having comprehensive LGBTQ- competency training.
- 52% reported having no training.

CONCLUSIONS: There exists both need and interest to develop procedures, policies, and programs to train physicians to become LGBTQ-competent.

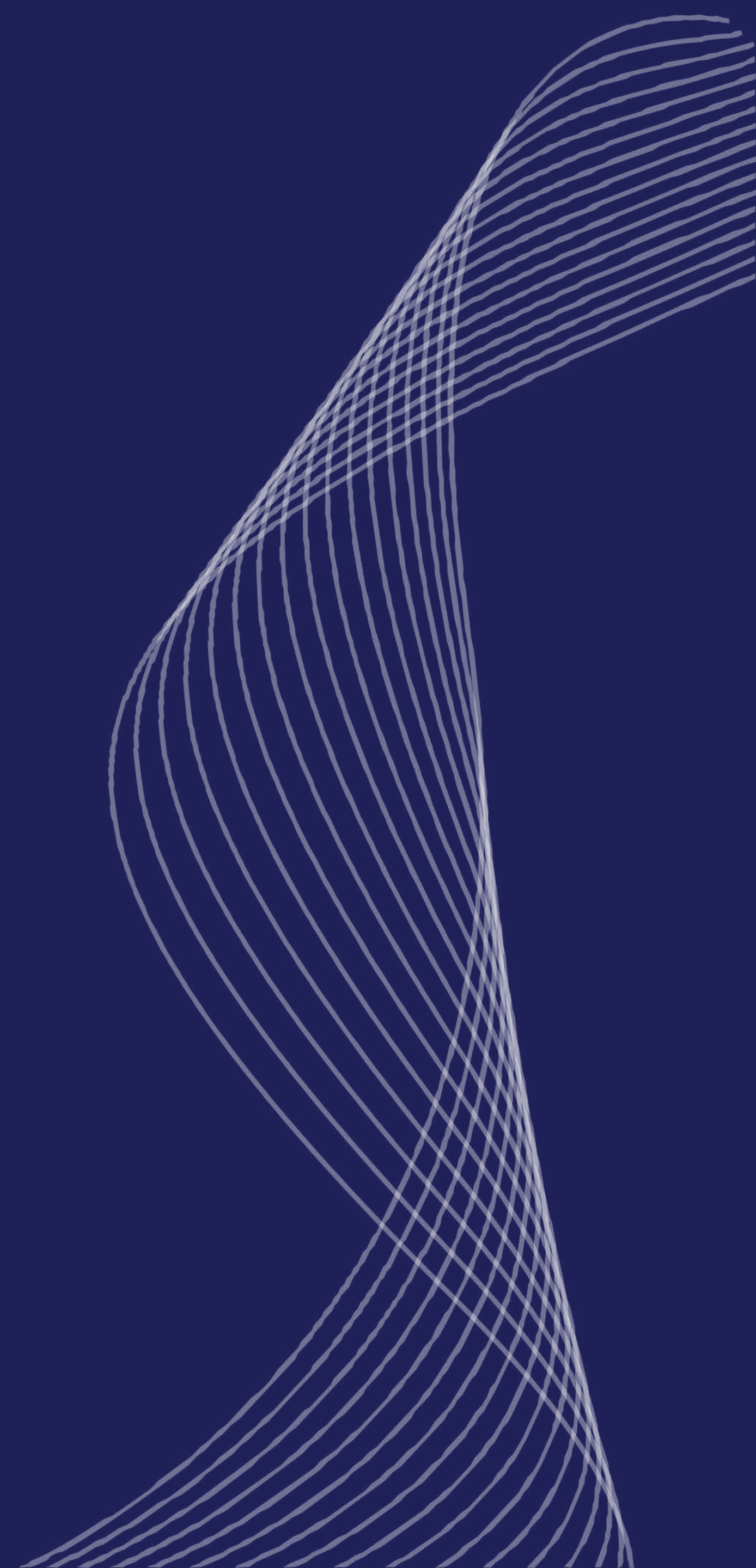


Let's start here:

- Couples come into your office, looking successful and well-adjusted.
- Avoidance of intimacy central for many male couples.

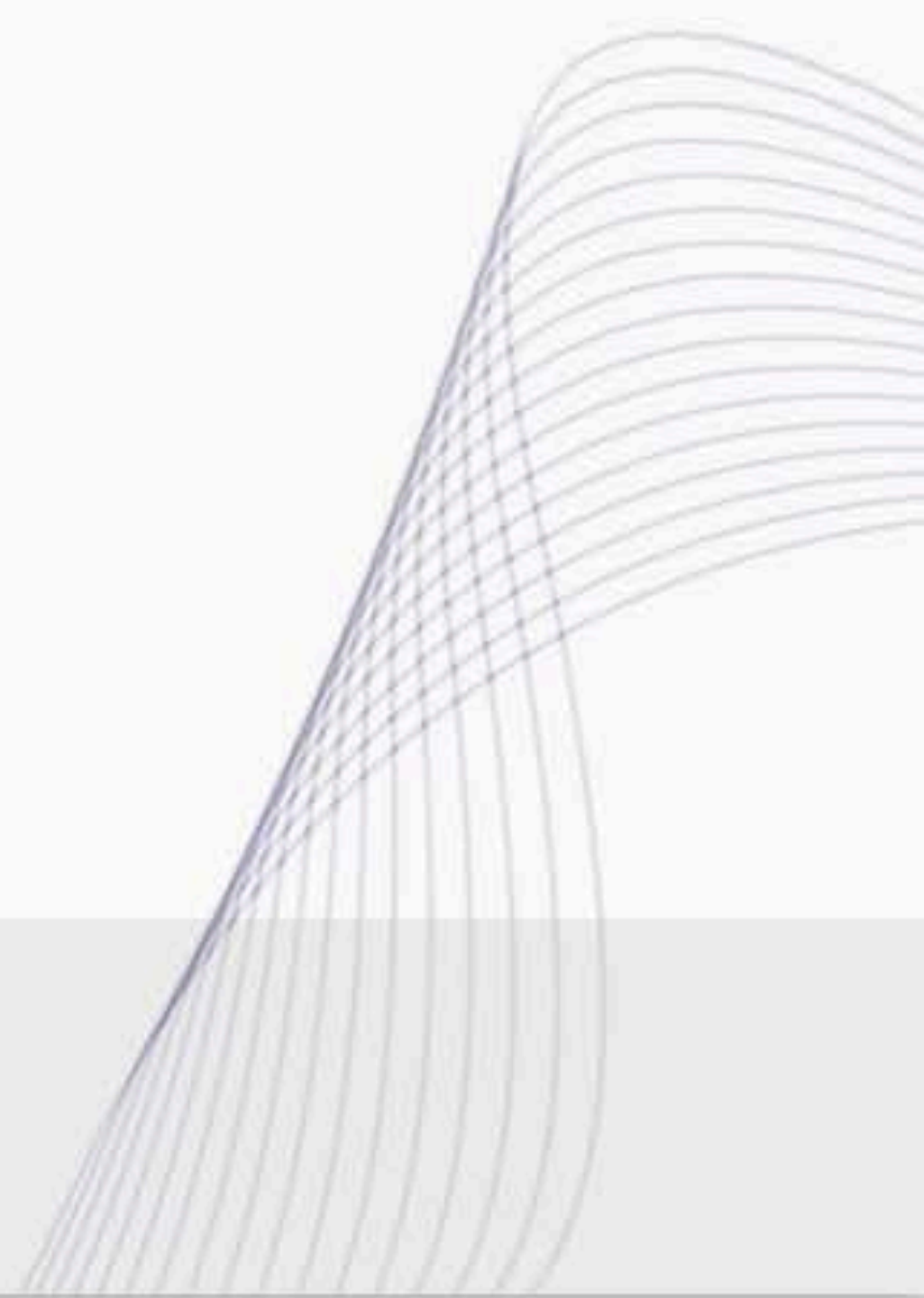


Dichotomy: Naughty / Nice



Dichotomy

So we're living the life / Maintaining and building connections is the challenge.




In an old fashioned world, heteronormative norms dictated relationship norms

- The world is changing now.
- Gay couples have been living with dichotomies beyond just naughty and nice.



Dichotomies

- Appreciation of relationship / Outside interests
 - External validation / Internal shame
 - Open and sharing / Secretive and protective
 - Candid with others / Selective with families
- 

Challenges for Male Couples

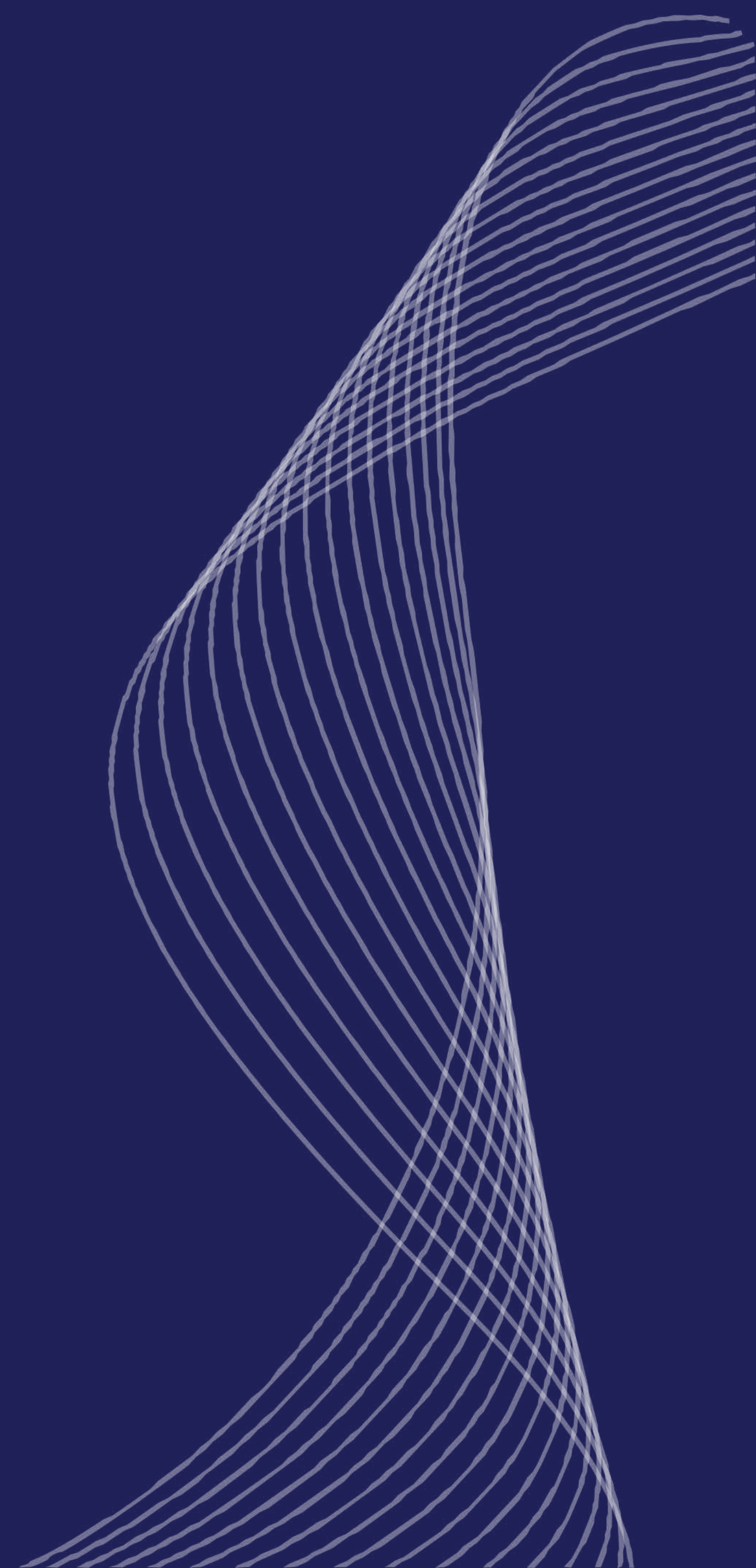
- Feeling disenfranchised not unusual.
- Men not taught how to connect with each other.
- Gay community generally not supportive of long-term couplehood.
- Few role models for long-term relationships.



- Negative experiences were twice as likely to be mentioned as positive ones (unmet needs for companionship and intimacy and break-up anxiety about whether the relationship had a future).
- Partners being at different levels of outness and problems with family support stressed the relationship.



Gay Development





Gay male development

Different from
heterosexual,
lesbian, non-binary
and transgender.



Shame- The Hallmark of Gay Existence

Shame stems from internalizing the painful history of growing up gay and hiding oneself. Buying into cultural stereotypes within the gay male community, as well as expectations of the heterosexual community, only reinforces the feeling of not measuring up.

Rick Miller, LICSW

Long before being verbal, a gay male censors the truth to make sure he is loved and accepted

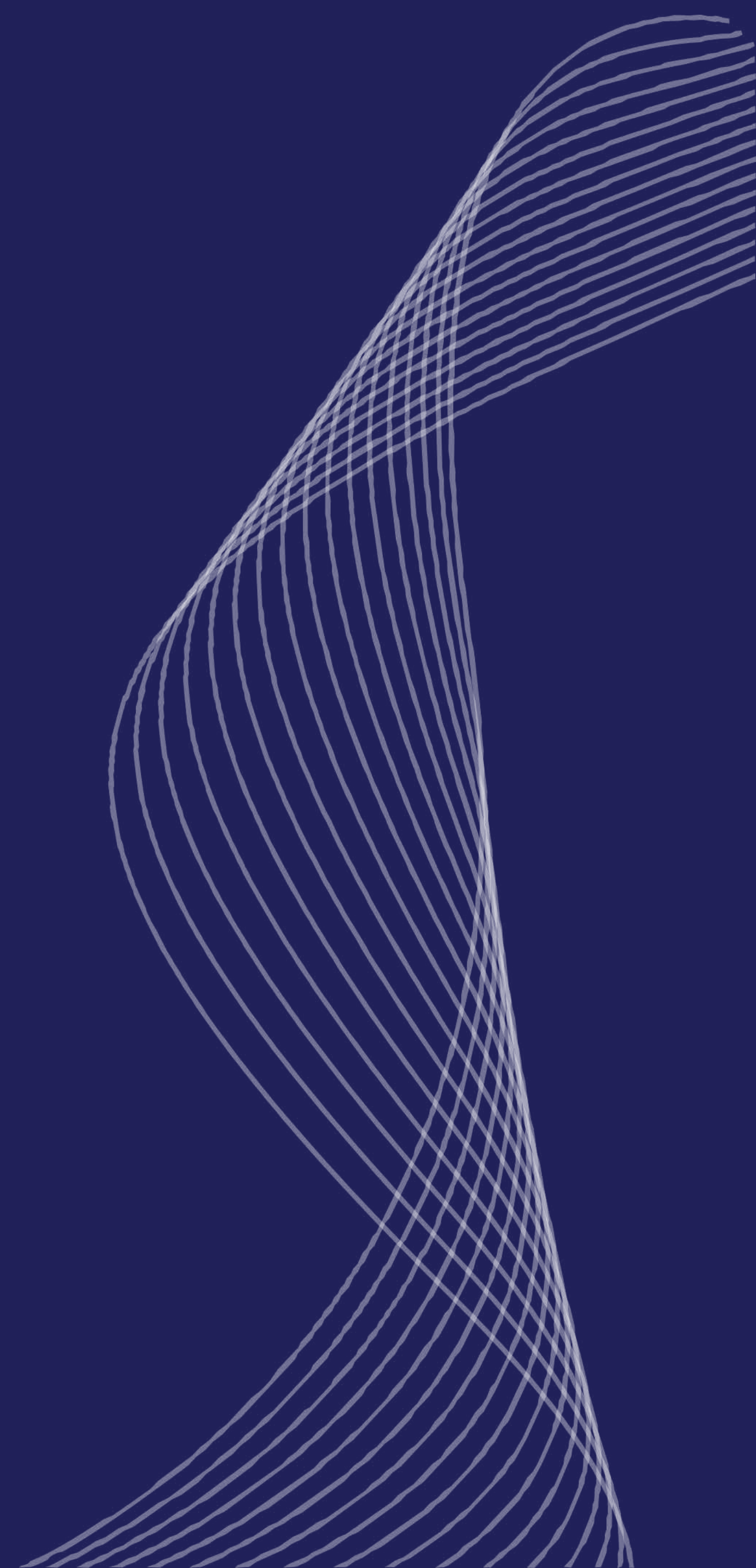
- He censors automatically and unconsciously.
- He implicitly knows the risks of being his true self, and purposefully chooses to conceal his identity in daily life.

Rick Miller, LICSW



Attachment Avoidance

The Mediating Role of Attachment Avoidance in the
Association between Sexual Orientation and Mental Health
August 2019, Journal of Homosexuality 68(3):1-15



Attachment Avoidance

- Results showed that gay men and lesbians reported poorer mental health.
- Attachment avoidance had a mediating effect on the association between being a sexual minority and depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and life satisfaction.
- These are the first to suggest empirical support for the role of attachment avoidance in accounting for the mental health vulnerability of gay men and lesbians.

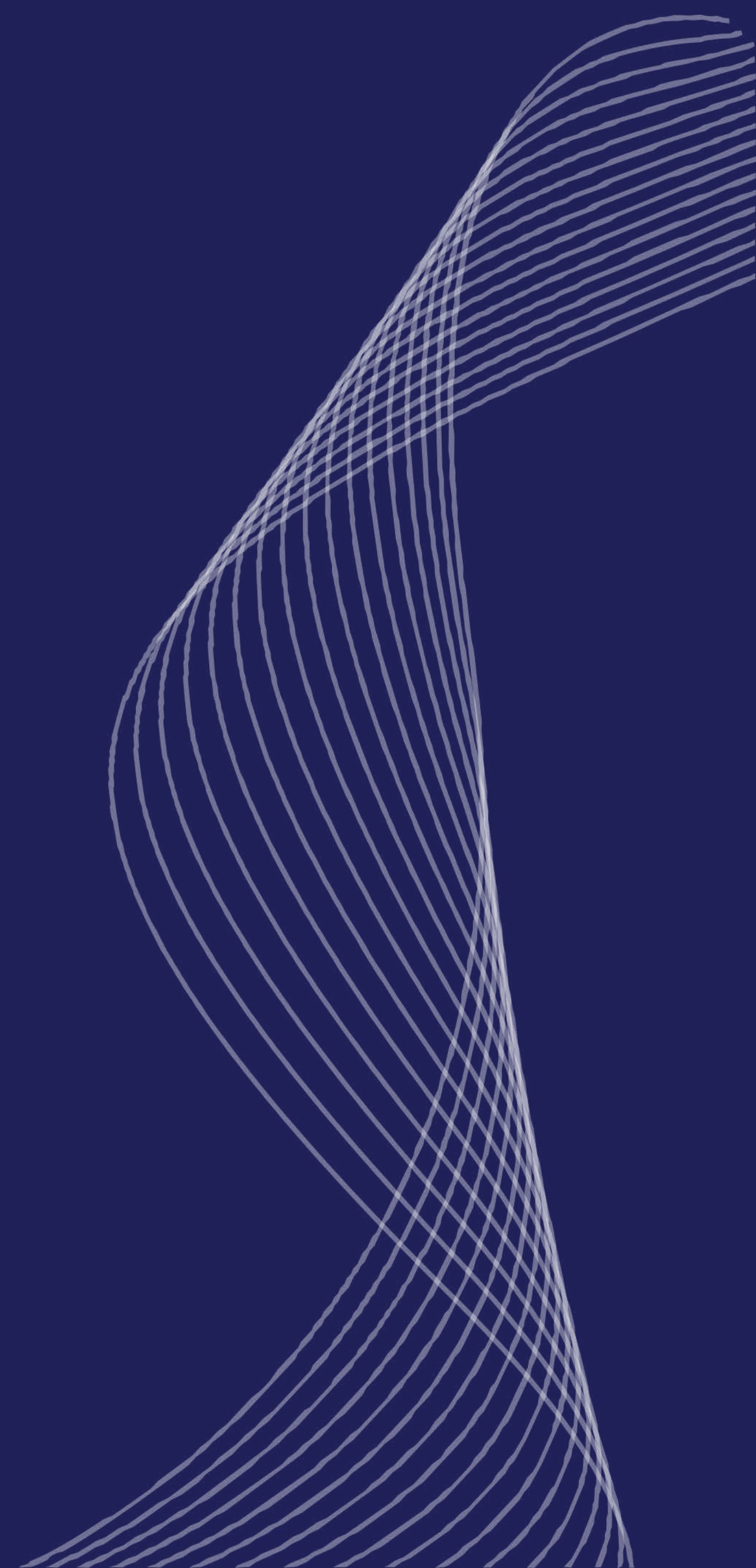
Double Minority

- LGBTQ individuals who are Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander or Native American are members of a “double minority”.
- Members of a double minority can have interpersonal and familial issues as well as intrapsychic conflicts, that affect the successful development of an affirmative identity and self-esteem.



The Fenway Institute, Boston, MA

Minority status



We look fine (well-adjusted) on the outside, but what is the toll that marginalization has taken from us?

Conscious/ Unconscious messages




Sexual Minority Stress

- They are attempting to identify themselves as “masculine”.
- Such performances can help to protect straight-acting men from stigma and discrimination aimed at men deemed to be effeminate.
- Concealment of one’s sexual orientation may initially protect one from stigma, but concealment itself carries a cognitive burden.

Lu, A., LeBlanc, A. J., & Frost, D. M. (2019). Masculinity and Minority Stress among Men in Same-sex Relationships. *Society and Mental Health*, 9(2), 259–275.



Men must present themselves as straight to be considered masculine

A couple is shown in a close embrace, with the woman resting her head on the man's shoulder. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter and a white wireframe graphic on the right side. The text is centered in white, bold font.

Lack of family and social support has been shown to negatively impact their relationships, which is another stigmatized amplification opposite-sex couples don't have to contend with.

- Men are vulnerable because their relationships increase visibility via others' masculinity.
- Being in a same-sex relationship influences partners' self-perceptions of masculinity and their relationship dynamics.
- To gain recognition as "men," individuals must convincingly perform manhood acts—a set of conventional, signifying practices through which people establish and uphold the "man" identity in social and interpersonal interactions.

Lu, A., LeBlanc, A. J., & Frost, D. M. (2019).
Masculinity and Minority Stress among Men in Same-sex Relationships.
Society and Mental Health, 9(2), 259–275.

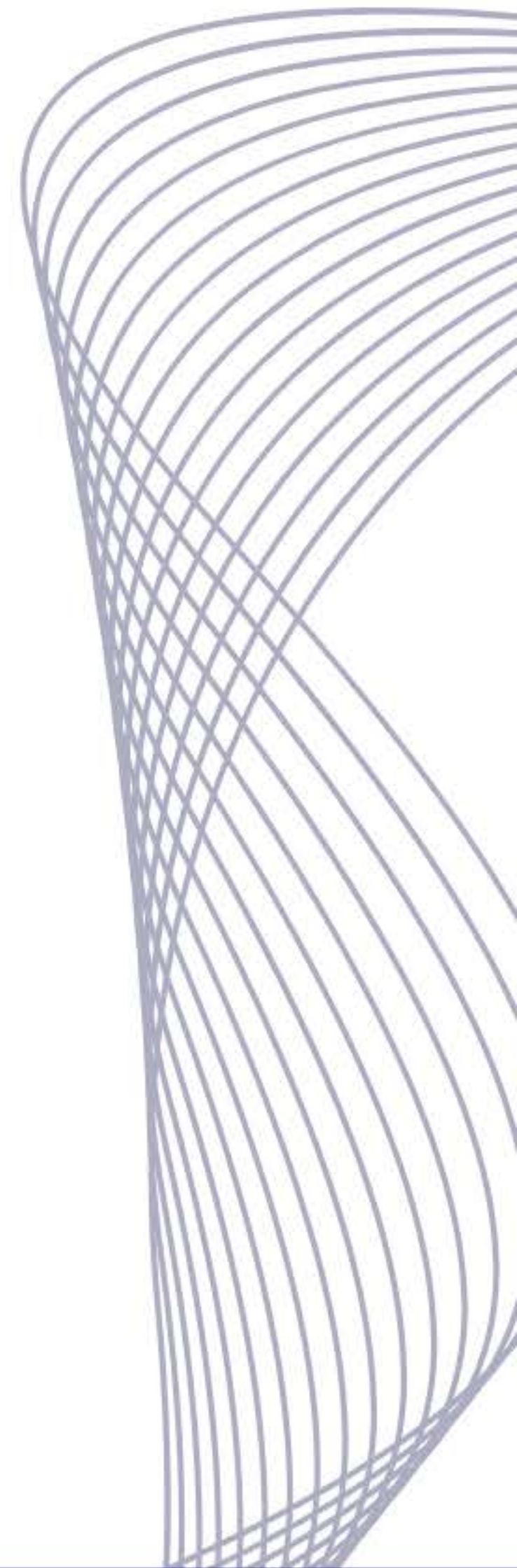
Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia occurs when a person is subject to society's negative perceptions or intolerance and they then turn those ideas inward, believing that they are true.



Homophobia, what it means

- Costs of internalizing homophobia.
- Internal / external manifestations.



Homophobia: when to share this with your couples

Is it better to make this known in the couples work or leave it on the back burner? (When is too much interpretation too much for your clients?)



- Sexual minority stress is moderately and negatively associated with same-sex relationship well-being.
- Internalized homophobia is significantly and negatively associated with same-sex relationship well-being.



Cao, H., Zhou, N., Fine, M., Liang, Y., Li, J., & Mills-Koonce, W. R. (2017). Sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being: A meta-analysis of research prior to the U.S. Nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(5), 1258–1277

Advantages of minority status

- Able to create your own norms and find what works best for you.
- Sexual liberation enables couples to evaluate different modes that other couples might not allow themselves to consider.



- It is imperative to develop culturally-specific and intersectional approaches to BASSCs' health that capitalize on this group's resistance and resilience while also attending to their unique needs.



Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, Jagadīśa-devaśrī Dacus & Mallory O. Johnson (2022) A Systematic Review of Black American Same-Sex Couples Research: Laying the Groundwork for Culturally-Specific Research and Interventions, *The Journal of Sex Research*.

Gay Men Relationship Options

- Monogamous
- Open
- Various modalities of polyamory
- **Mental flexibility for providers needed**

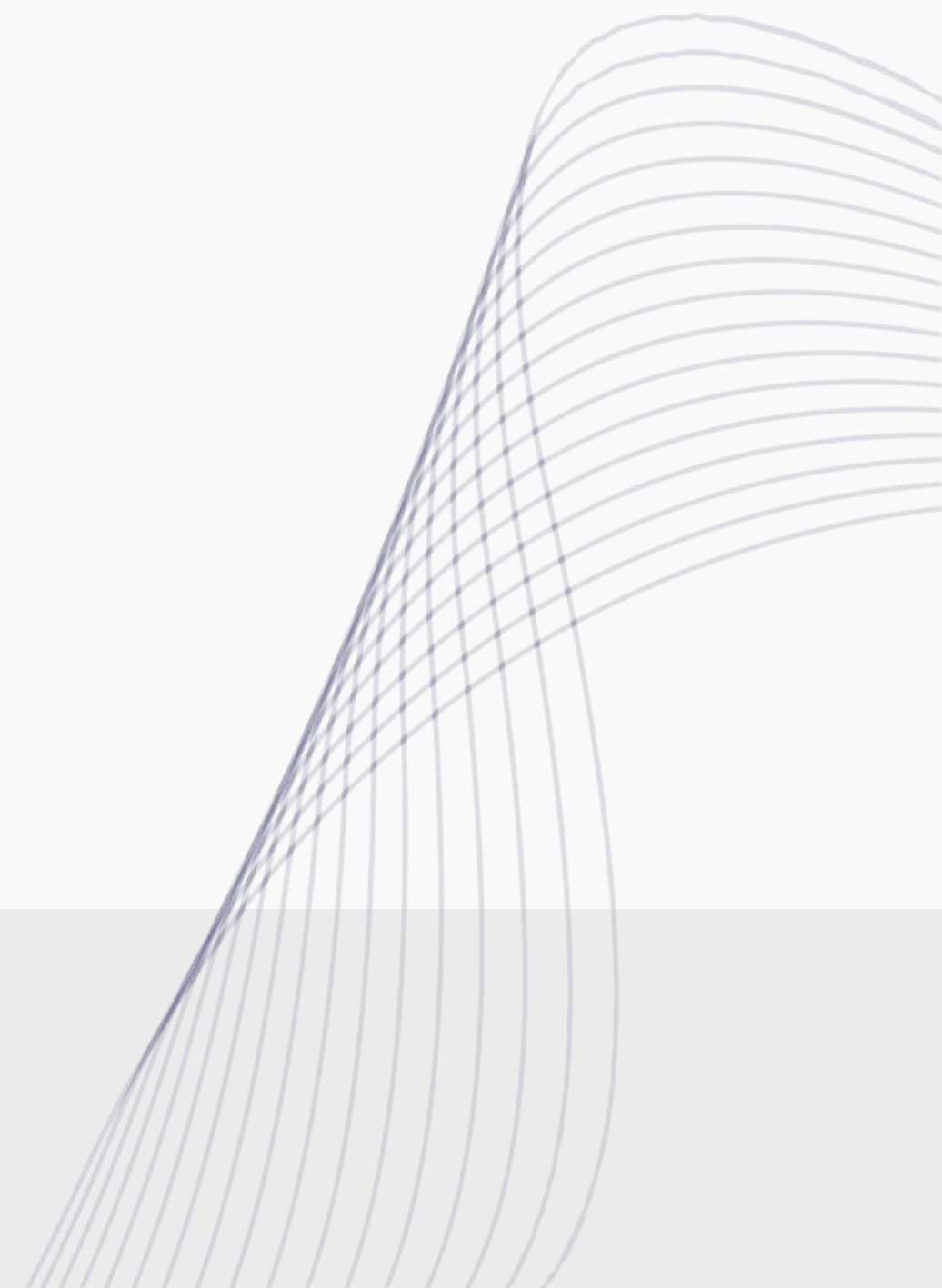


Relationship Models: Monogamous

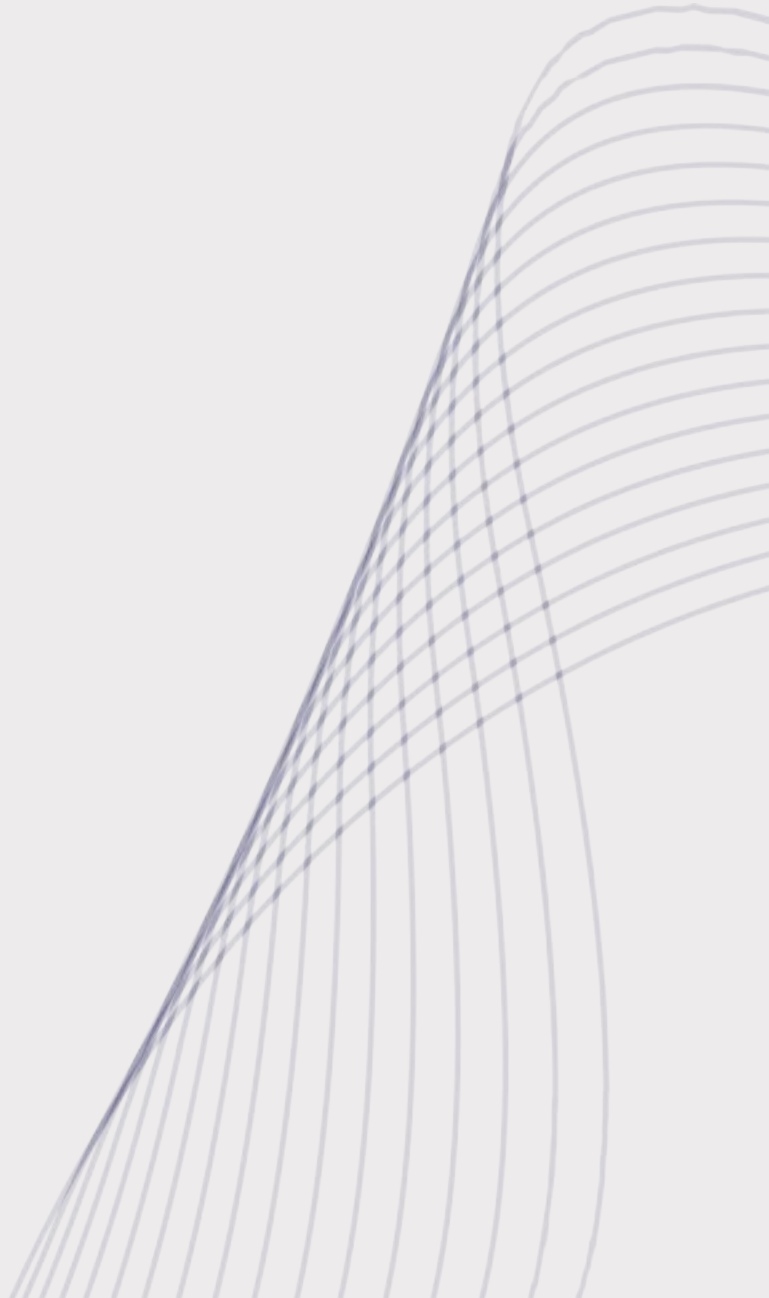
- Dichotomy: Secure vs. stale
- 

Monogamous relationships exist

- Younger folks may choose to live a more traditional life.
- Pornography / fantasy to the rescue.
- Monogamy not easy and it doesn't exist without fantasies of cheating.
- Frequently couples feel like they are the only ones ("All couples cheat or have open relationships").



Difficulties owning desires and speaking about sexuality

- Pressure to be the sexual gay man expected by others.
 - Feeling inadequate.
 - Body image issues.
 - Aging.
 - Substance use or misuse to enhance sexuality.
 - Medications for relaxation.
- 

Norms & Myths About Sexuality in Partnerships

Because we're gay, we shouldn't have any sexual struggles.

Pornography use is ample for our sex life

All gay men cheat on each other and have open relationships

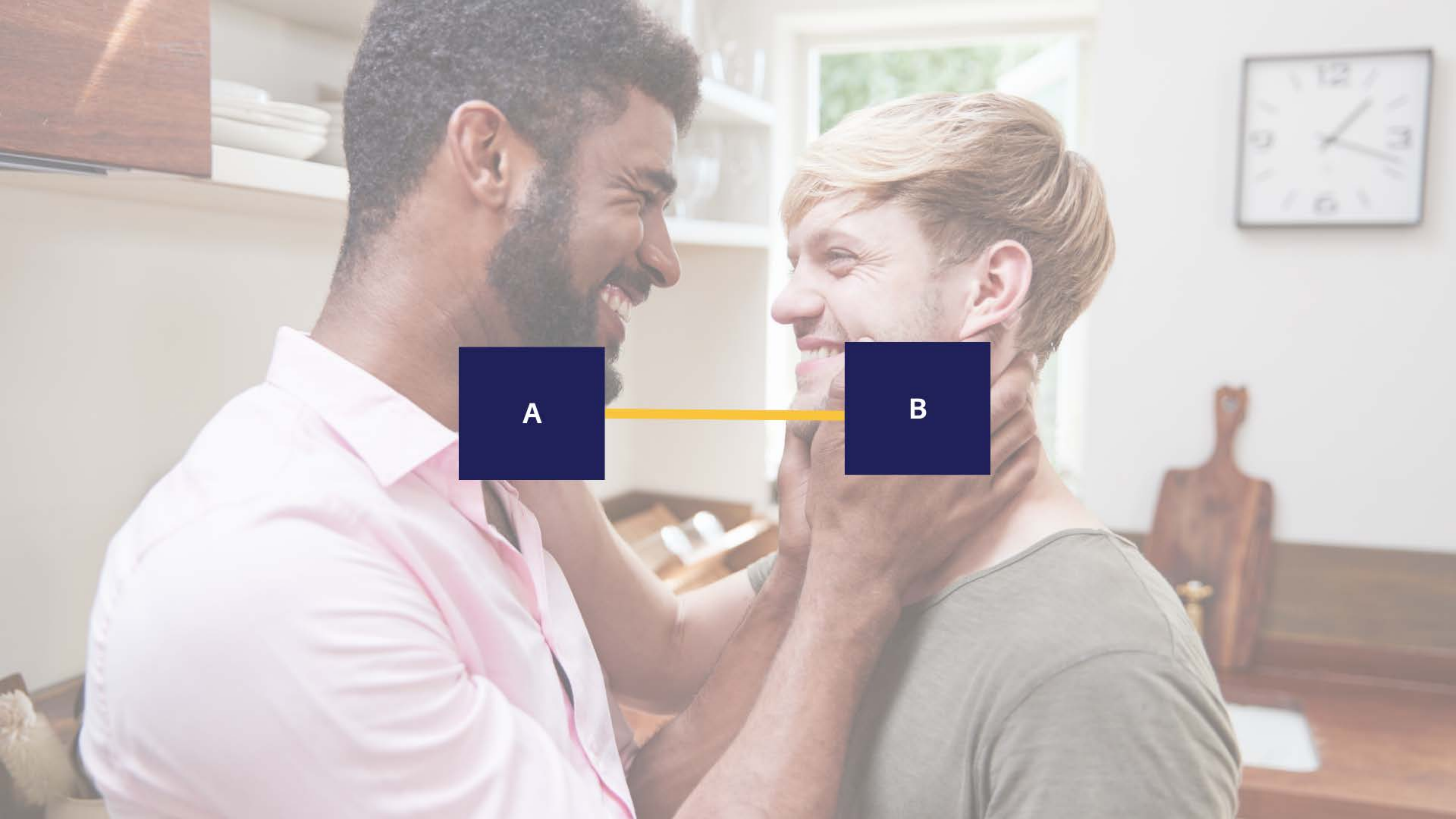
Norms & Myths About Sexuality in Partnerships

Because we're so good at open relationships, we shouldn't struggle with it.

Getting even by hooking up with someone else to punish my partner is okay

If I was drunk or high, I get a "free pass"

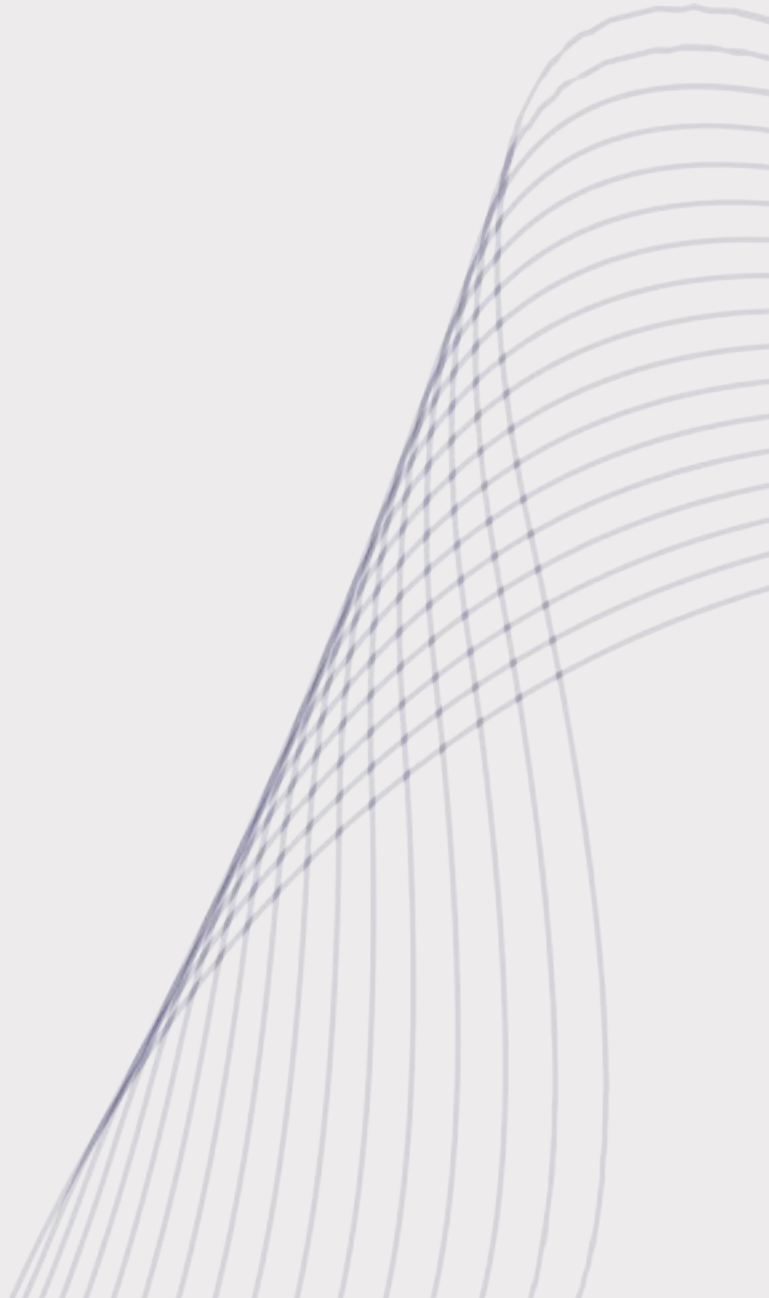
Because we have relationship struggles (non-sexual), we should open up our relationship.



A

B

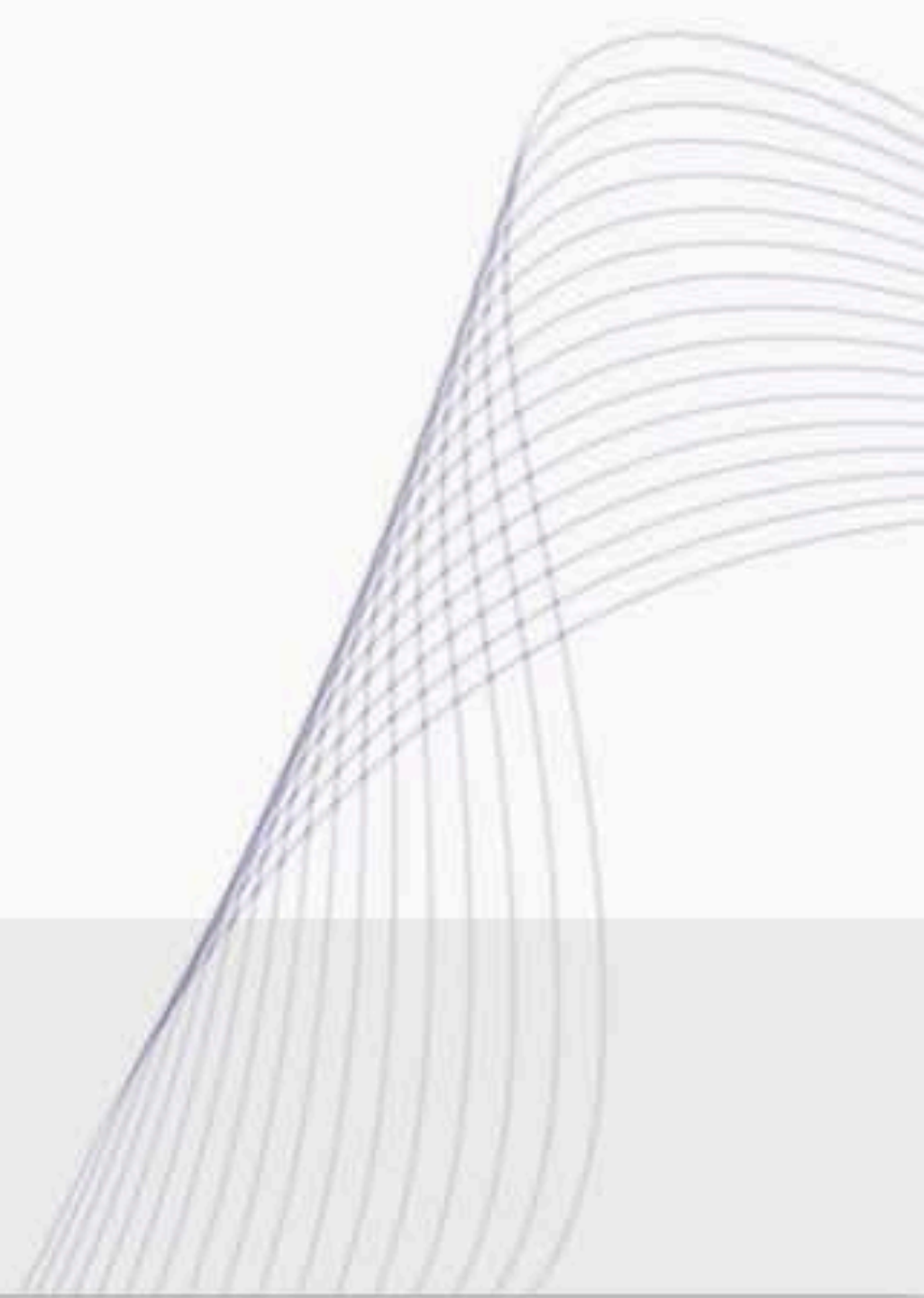
Open Relationship Model Dichotomies

- Emotional vs erotic.
 - Excitement vs fear.
 - Relief vs stagnation.
 - Jealousy or envy vs secure.
- 

Open Relationships

“Open relationships are not the solution for interpersonal difficulties.”

Rick Miller, LICSW



- The idea that relationships can survive—and sometimes thrive— when partners do not maintain sexual exclusivity is a difficult concept for many outside of this community to comprehend.
- Surprisingly little is known about the prevalence of infidelity in non-heterosexual relationships. Most studies of infidelity appear to have excluded non-heterosexual participants from investigation for various reasons.



- GL individuals responded with less intense jealousy to scenarios describing a partner having sex with someone else, in comparison to non-GL individuals.

Șerban, I., Salvati, M., & Enea, V. (2022). Sexual Orientation and Infidelity-Related Behaviors on Social Media Sites. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), 15659.

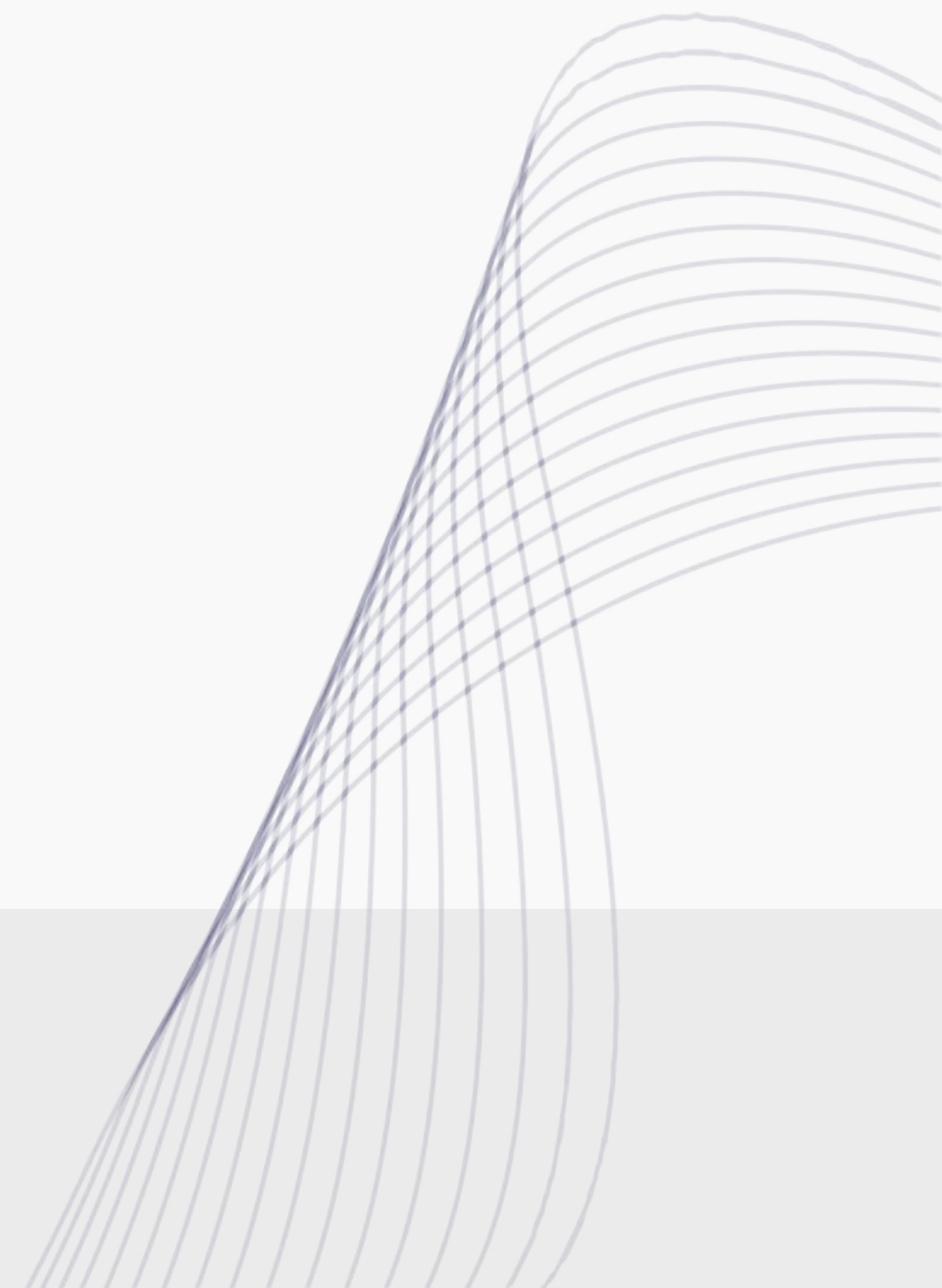


**Two individuals means
different needs**



Open Relationship Model

- Differs from polyamorous.
- One or both partners able to have sex outside primary relationship.
- Individual versus together.



Open Relationships

Ten tips for Navigating an Open Relationship

1. Your relationship comes first.

Agree to make your intimate and sexual relationship the priority.

2. Communication is essential.

Talk to each other to negotiate your terms and to ascertain if your relationship is solid enough to be opened up. Periodically revisit how this is working and be honest with yourself, as well as each other, about this.



Open Relationships

3. Remember the truths about long-term intimacy.

Expect that sexual experiences in a long-term relationship are different in nature from a hookup. Keep in mind comparisons are dangerous.

4. Decide how much to share.

Agree whether outside activities will be discussed with each other, or kept quiet. Sharing these details with your partner can be hot if you're both secure enough to handle this.



Open Relationships

5. Your bed is sacred.

Maintain your intimate space as a couple and decide with clarity about where it is okay to be sexual with others, such as away from home, out of town, or going out alone. Respecting these agreements will make this challenge easier.



Open Relationships

6. How many times are allowed?

7. Strangers or friends? Is it acceptable to hook up with friends who either partner may know, or strangers only? Set a boundary and stick to it.

8. Trial period. Nothing is written in stone. Try this out for an agreed upon period of time and see how it goes. Many couples often decide to discontinue this. If you need help, don't forget to consult with your friends or a therapist.



Open Relationships

9. Adhere to safe sex guidelines outside of your relationship, and get test for STDs and HIV on a regular basis. If you slip, get tested out of respect to your partner and yourself.

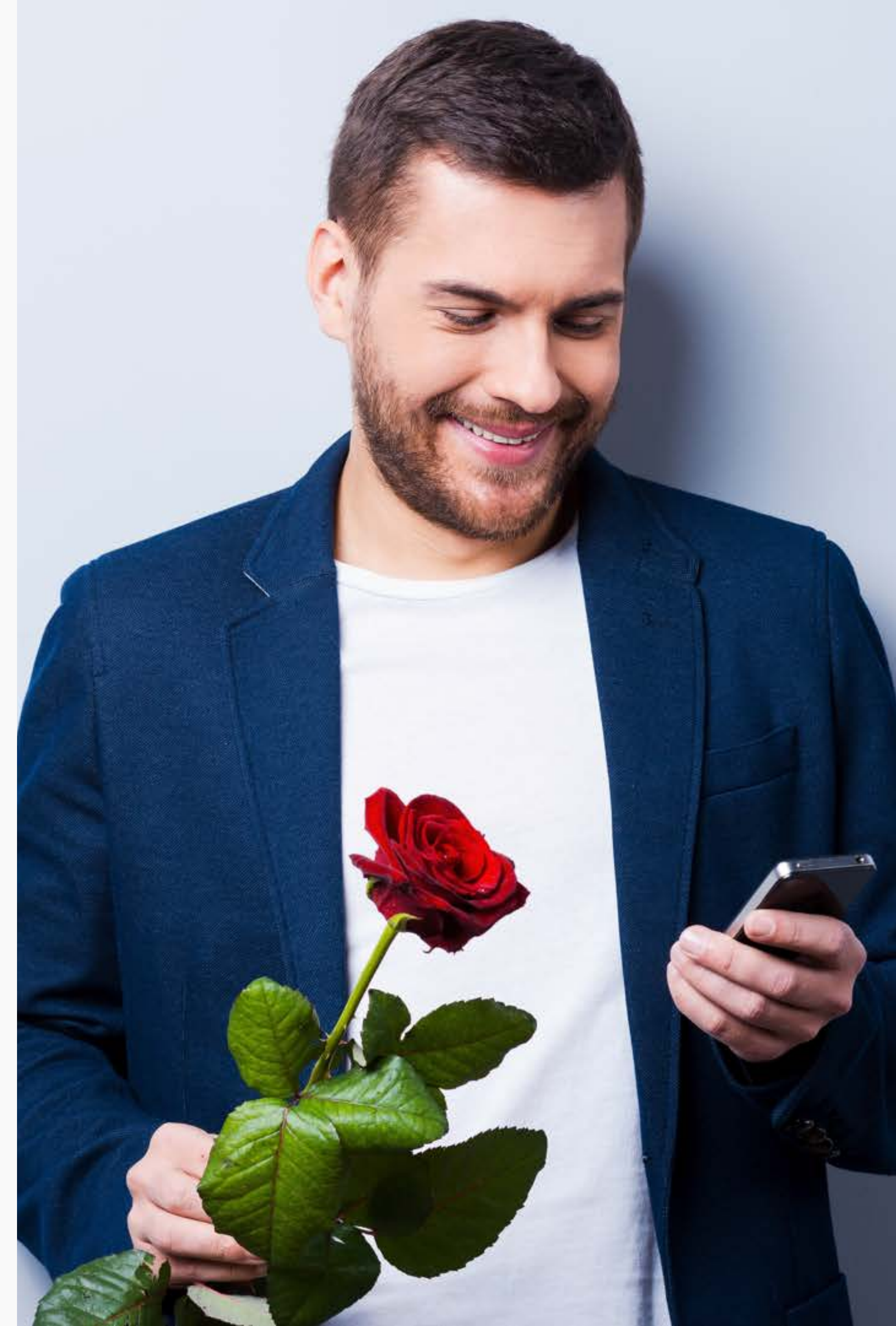
10. The bumpy road.

Having an open relationship is difficult. Partners who can tolerate some confusion or jealousy are more apt to hand this, but it is still challenging.



- GL people who engaged in love affairs outside the couple, gay men reported the highest number of sexual partners. Researchers reported that gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to use technology in order to meet potential partners and, from the total amount of same-sex couples participating in a study, nearly 70% of them reported meeting each other online.

Șerban, I., Salvati, M., & Enea, V. (2022). Sexual Orientation and Infidelity-Related Behaviors on Social Media Sites. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), 15659.



How it works-Why it may not
work



Deception

Being deceptive is normal

- With ourselves.
- With partners.
- With sexual partners.





A

B

Infidelity

- Consensual non-monogamy is sometimes used as an infidelity avoidance strategy.
- Because same-sex relationships already violate traditional notions of what a relationship “should” be, those who enter such relationships may feel less bound to follow other relationship “rules.”

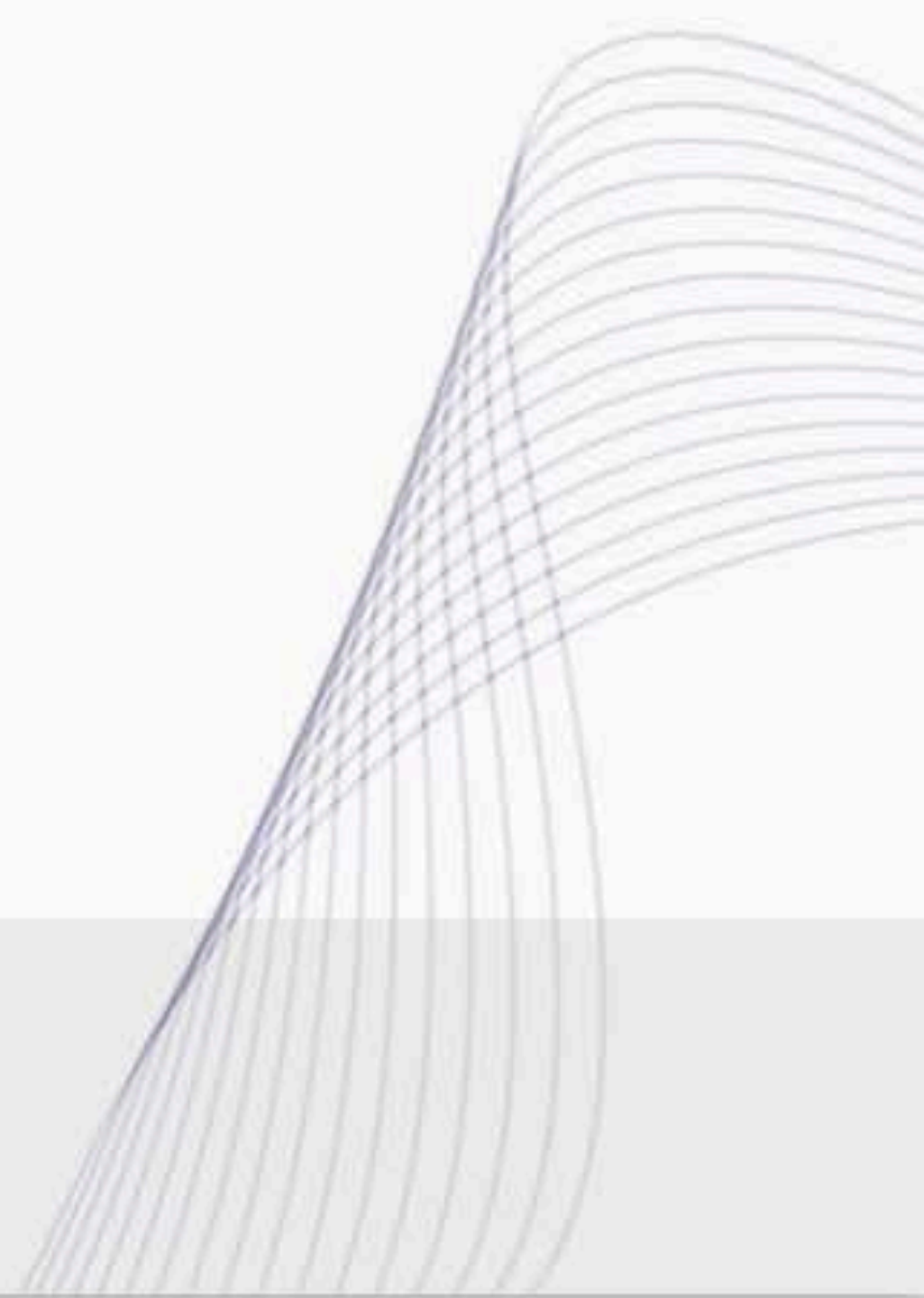
Infidelity

- Infidelity can and does sometimes occur in sexually open relationships, although it may look quite different than it does in monogamous relationships. It can still occur in consensually non-monogamous relationships, and this type of infidelity can look very different compared to infidelity that occurs within a monogamous arrangement.



Polyamorous relationships

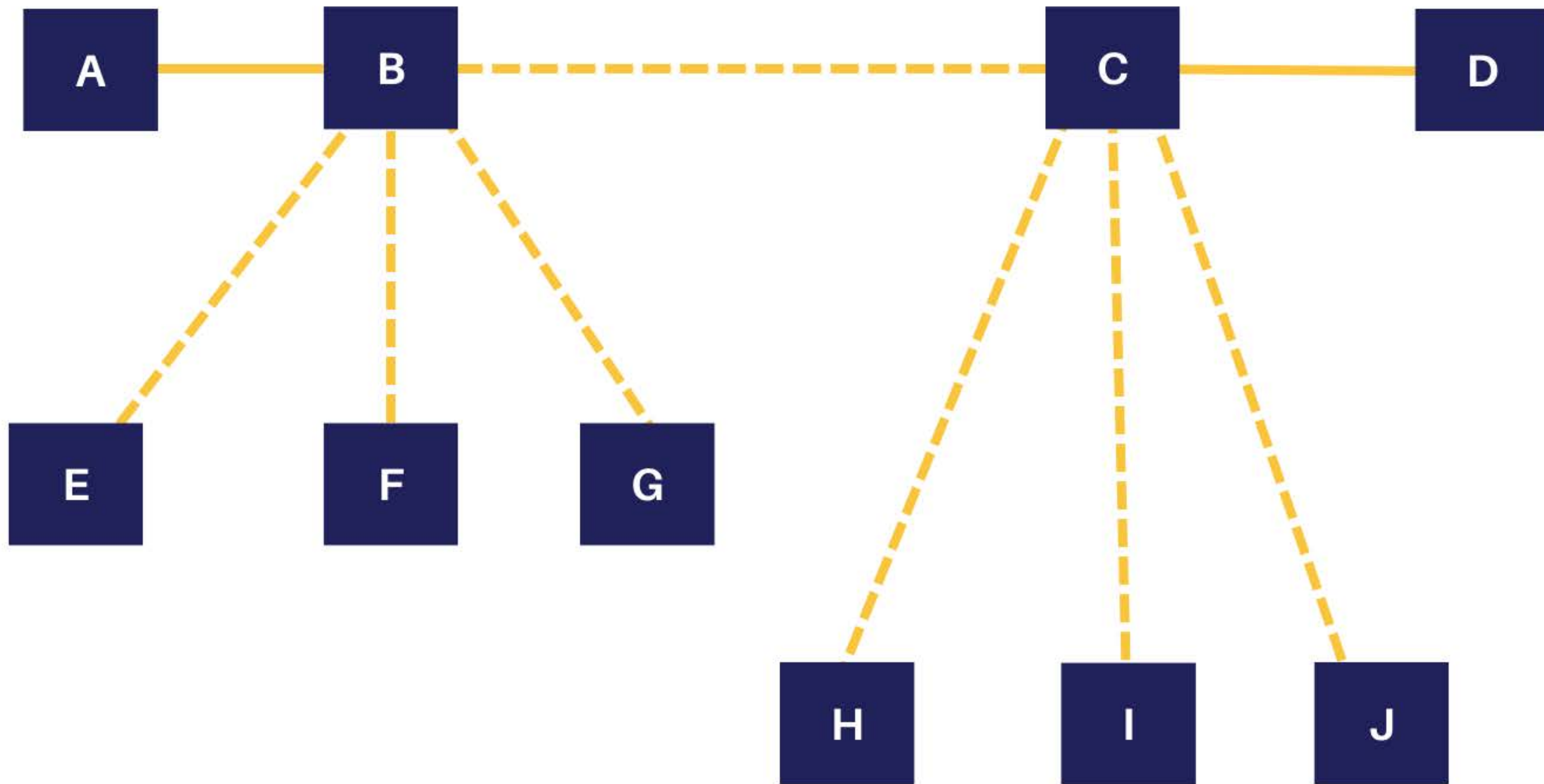
- One partner has a lover/ boyfriend.
- Both partners have lovers.
- Primary relationship may or may not be sexual with each other.
- Primary relationship may or may not share lovers with each other.
- Secondary relationship may agree to be monogamous.
- Both share a boyfriend (throuple).



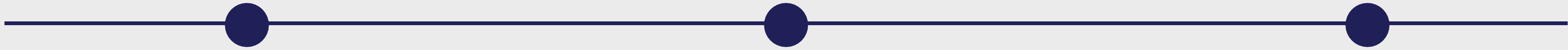
From Couple to Throuple

- Coming-out process all over again.
- How to inform family of origin.
- How to inform friends.

"It's Complicated"



- Married
- - - Boyfriend



**DON' T ASK DON'T
TELL**

**DON'T
TELL**

**ASEXUAL WITH
PARTNER**



Other models

An abstract graphic on the left side of the slide, consisting of numerous thin, white, curved lines that overlap and create a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized, flowing shape.

Role of the clinician

Support of a therapist means...

A supportive therapist

- How to be supportive and respectful without being challenging.
- Accepting and open to different models.
- What is the message you want to share?
- When to refer out (even if it is for certain topics?)

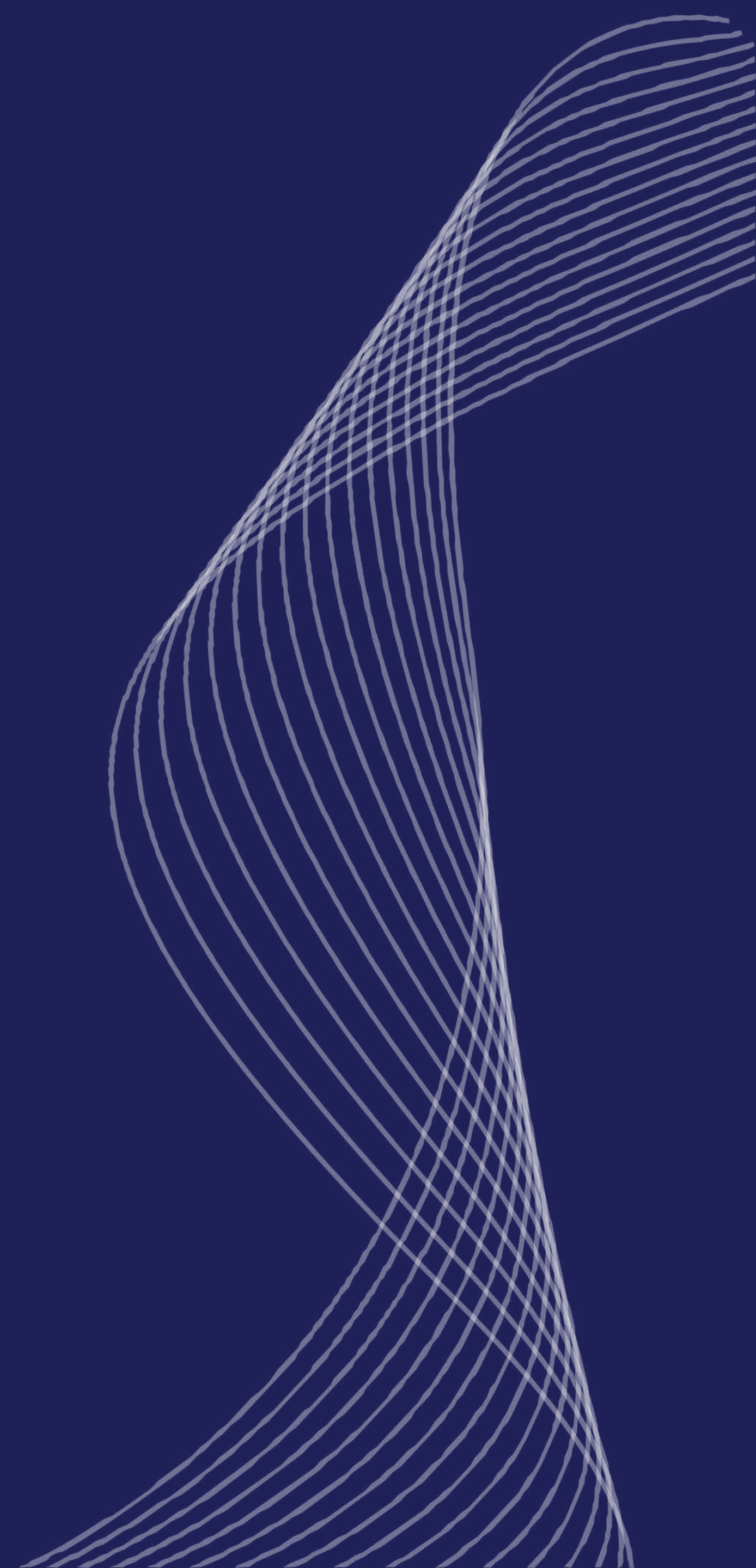


Tips for clinicians



- Heteronormative models can be limiting for male couples.
- Seeking out advice and supervision is warranted!
- Take cues from your couple to evaluate what is important.
- Consider seeing members individually for part of the couples work, take turns if you do this.

Betrayal



Betrayal: Various Forms

- Monogamous relationships.
- Open relationships.
- Polyamorous relationships.

Beyond the Straight and Narrow: Assisting Same-Sex Couples Recovering from Infidelity

Chris Shea Dissertation, MSTI

- This therapist entered the search term infidelity help into the Google search engine, It is clear that heterocentrism eclipses sexual minorities when it comes to accessing informational and therapeutic resources.
- Out of fifty of those search outcomes, none even mentions sexual minorities.

In a blog post sharing his process of researching rates of consensual vs. nonconsensual nonmonogamy, researcher at the Kinsey Institute, Justin Lehmler (2020), reported having a difficult time finding data on sexual minorities and infidelity.

Tips for Helping your Clients Heal from Intimate Betrayal

- Encourage honesty.
- Use accepting language with clients (intimate betrayal, involved partner/injured partner.)
- Normalize these betrayals and list reasons why they may happen.



Tips for Helping your Clients Heal from Intimate Betrayal

- Encourage each member of the couple to take ample time to hear and absorb the experience of each partner. (This is done in your office and eventually out of the office as their relationships becomes stronger.)



Tips for Helping your Clients Heal from Intimate Betrayal

- Provide examples of couples who have survived following betrayals including those that have gotten to a better place as a result.
- Remind gay couple about how adversity has been a factor throughout their lives and resiliency is possible.



Tips for Helping your Clients Heal from Intimate Betrayal

- Emphasize that rebuilding is slow.
- Build in more check in and process time than before the betrayal.
- Suggest additional support for each partner (therapy, friends, support group.)



QUESTIONS FOR PROVIDERS



Are you comfortable while discussing sex with your client?



Are you able to adapt your language to use his words ?



How do you appear modern in your thinking and accepting?



How do you react when clients are diagnosed with an STI?



Rate your attitudes about anonymous or casual sex, open relationships or cheating on partners.

Micro-Agressions

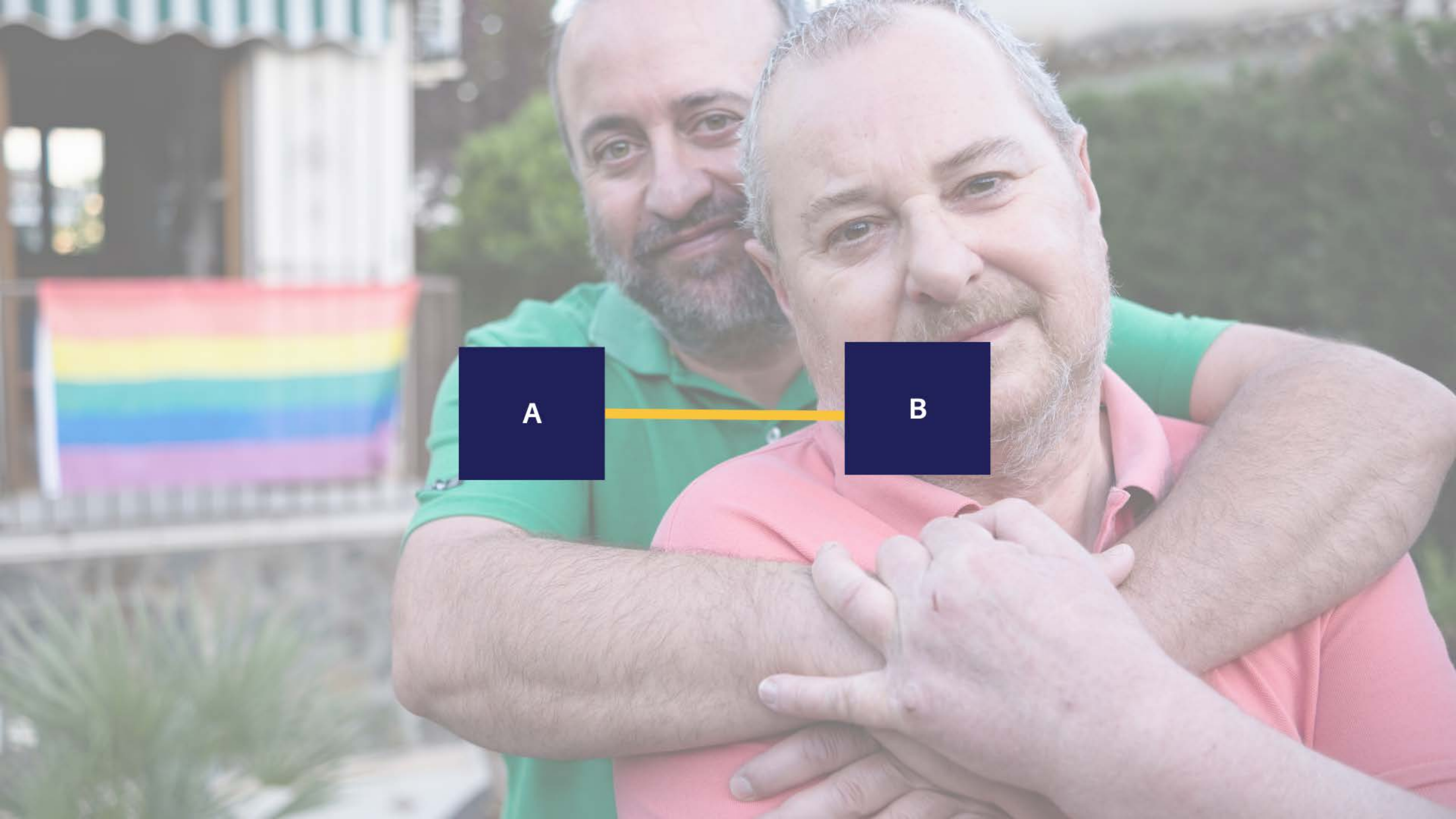
A question or comment that one presumes is supportive or understanding, but can be condescending and cutting.

Rick Miller LICSW



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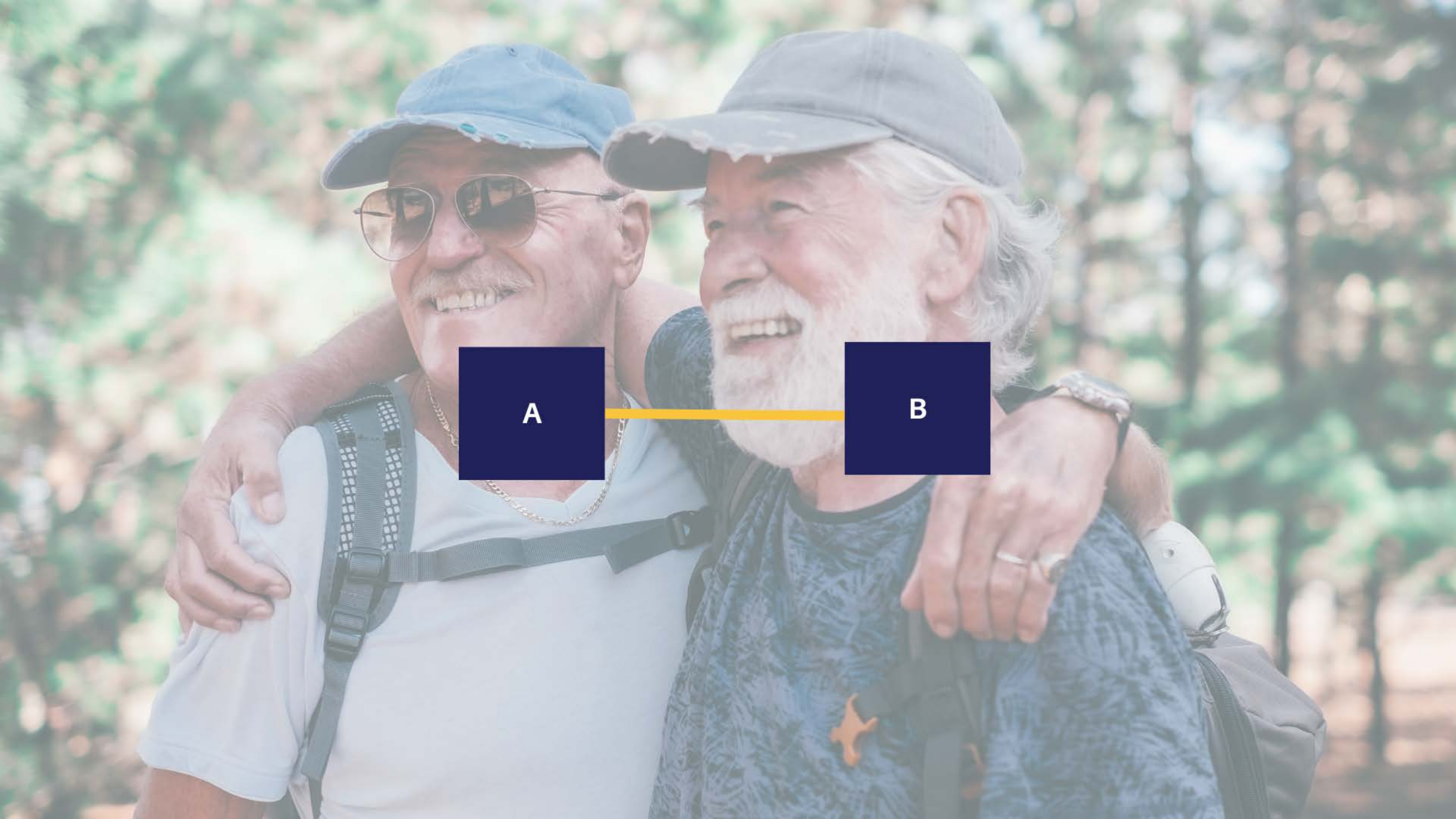
B



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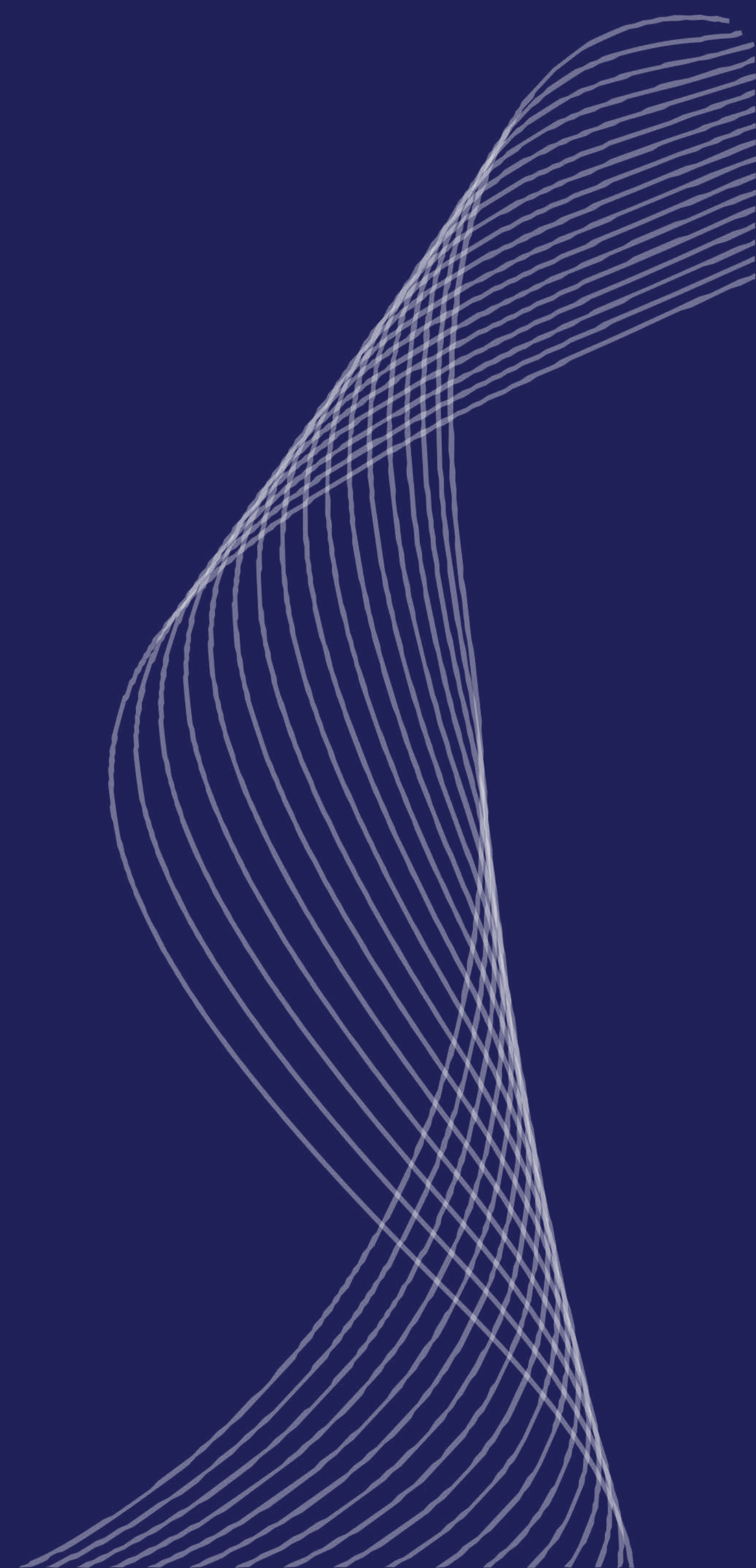


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Beyond the Straight and Narrow

Chris Shea Dissertation, MSTI

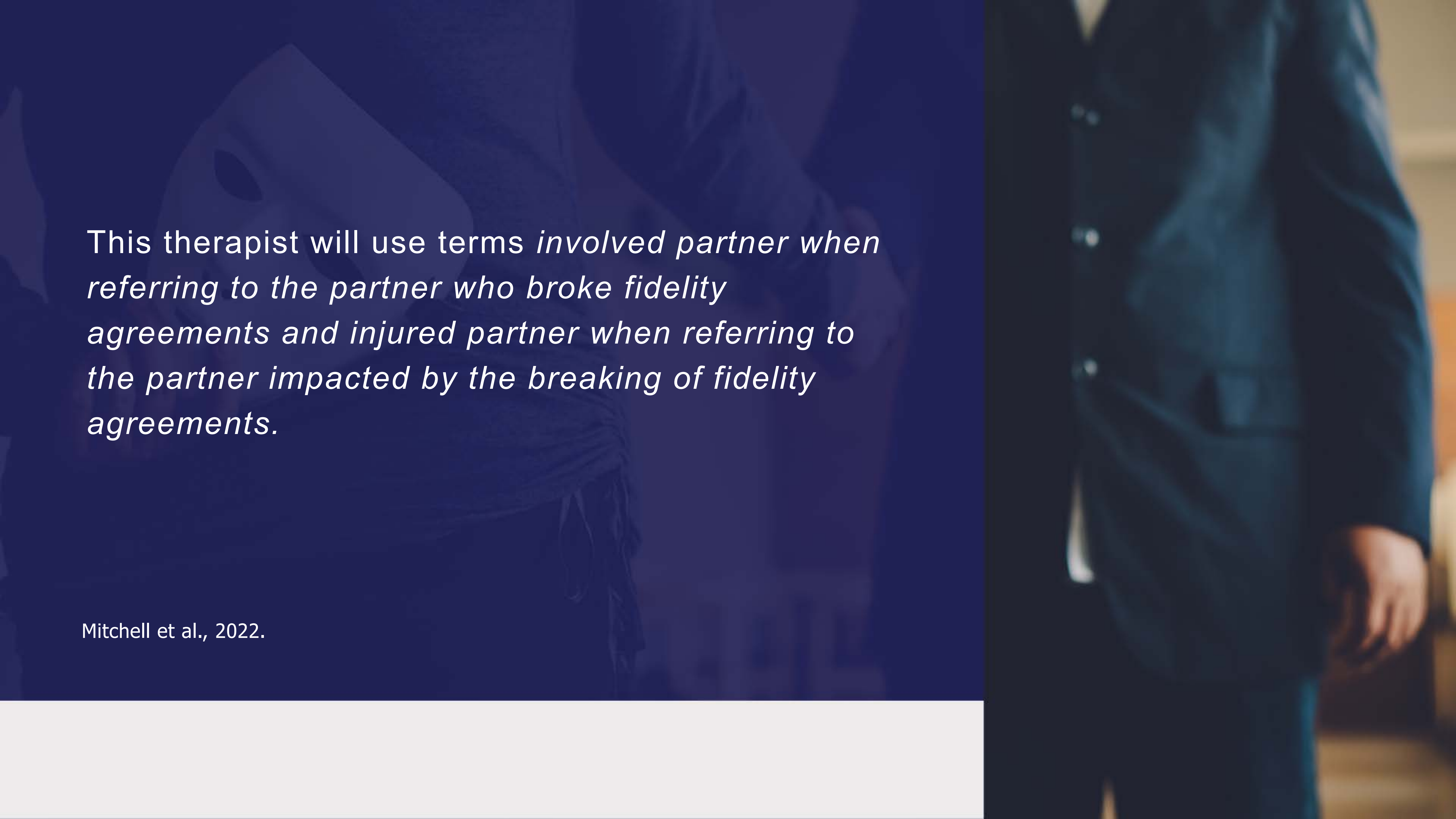


Negative self-regard can also contribute to viewing relationships with other same-sex attracted individuals as not being worth investing in due to mistrust in their stability and capacity for true commitment.

Shea:

The terms infidelity and intimate betrayal, for the use in this work, is defined as any violation of relationship agreements made within the relational context regarding emotional and sexual fidelity.





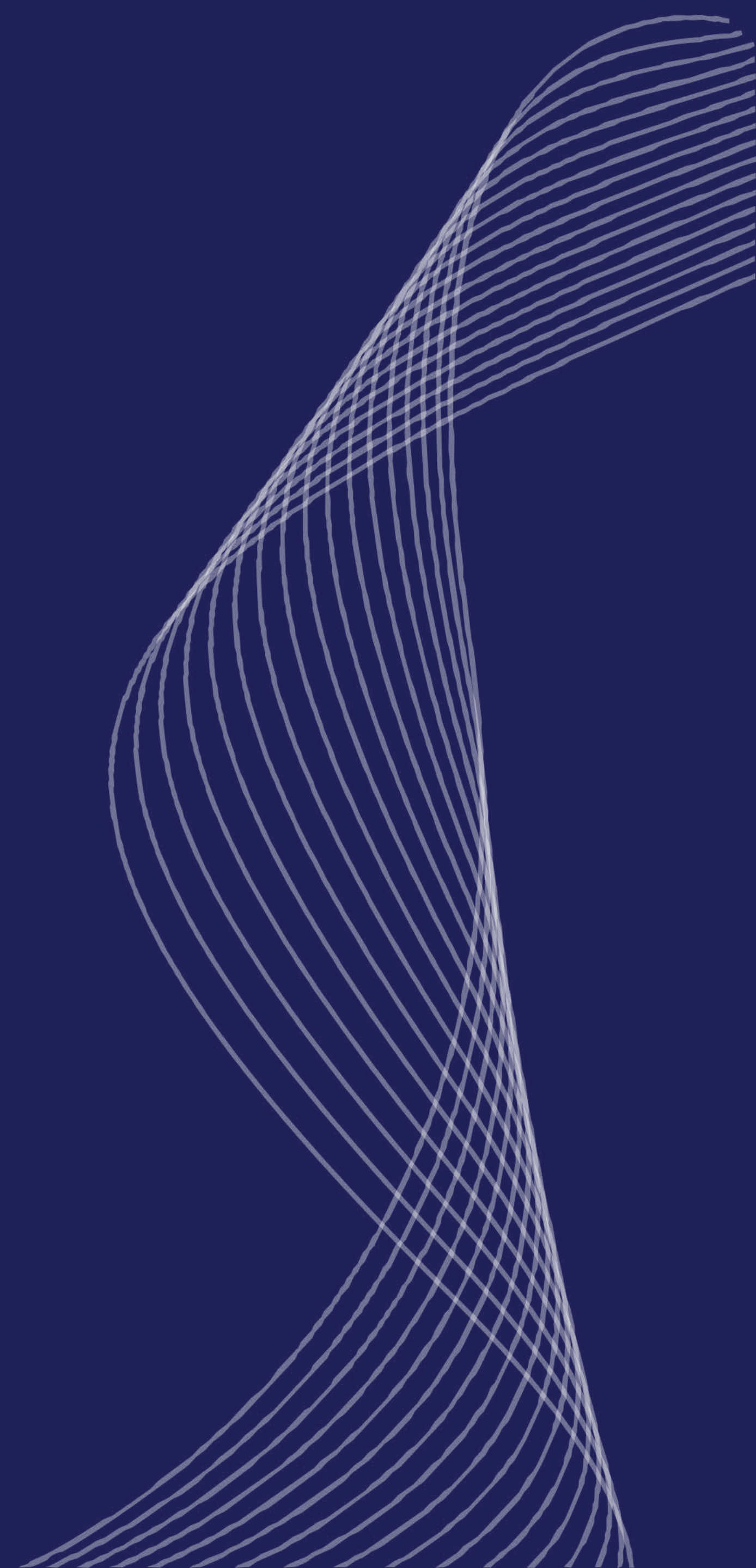
This therapist will use terms *involved partner* when referring to the partner who broke fidelity agreements and *injured partner* when referring to the partner impacted by the breaking of fidelity agreements.

Mitchell et al., 2022.



The terms infidelity and intimate betrayal, for the use in this work, is defined as any violation of relationship agreements made within the relational context regarding emotional and sexual fidelity

Needs of LGBTQ couples



-
- The general lack of representation of diverse couples in the empirical literature has contributed to an incomplete understanding of the interplay of health and romantic relationships among Black and same-sex couples, and those couples at the intersections of those identities like Black American same-sex couples (BASCs).





Black American same sex couples

are often left out of conversations about Black romantic love, LGBTQ+ love, relationship health, and the pathways between relationship health and personal health across multiple domains (e.g., mental, physical, financial, sociopolitical, and spiritual health.)



- Due to heteronormative society, discrimination, minority stress, intersectionality, lack of family, social, and institutional support, and potential agreements around extradyadic sex. All these characteristics contribute to making them a high-risk group to experience increased vulnerability in terms of their relationship and social wellbeing.

Șerban, I., Salvati, M., & Enea, V. (2022). Sexual Orientation and Infidelity-Related Behaviors on Social Media Sites. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), 15659.



Tips for successful couples

- Prioritize communication.
- Decide on what you value as a couple (rather than societal, family or gay community norms.)
- Chosen family is important (non biological bonds consisting of support and love.)
- Integrate biological and chosen family.



Tips for successful couples

- Establish roles and responsibilities.
- Embrace multi-cultural issues within your relationship.
- Melding of lives is important (career, money, family of origin and community.)
- Find suitable role models (need not be gay.)
- Boundaries and privacy essential.



Modern Couples Therapy

- Zoom
- Cars
- Work



**Increased communication is
the goal, period.**

Thank You!

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Facebook: Rick Miller, LICSW

Instagram: @rickmillerlicsw