

THIS THING CALLED LOVE

Your friend from the office finally agreed to come to one of your parties. Now you get to introduce her to the one you love. "Hi. I'd like you to meet my partner—no, that sounds like we own a business together. Really, this is my lover—but sex is only a small part of our relationship," you babble. "Meet my spouse. Oh, that just sounds silly."

By the time you finish the introduction, the party's over. As you pick a strawberry from the fruit tray off your white carpet, you decide there has to be a way to describe the one who means so much to you that is both appropriate and accurate.

Perhaps there is no one right answer to the question of what the person with whom you spend your life is called, but almost everyone has an opinion.

Author and syndicated columnist Lesléa Newman, who wrote the children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies* and edited the more recent collection of poetry entitled *My Lover Is a Woman*, said she seldom uses the term lover.

"It sounds like all we do is have sex, and while of course that's part of our relationship it's much more than that," Newman said.

She said she doesn't use partner because it sounds too businesslike, but she sometimes uses spouse when around straight people.

"I tend to say girlfriend around lesbians because I like the friendliness of the word and everyone knows what it means," she said. Newman, though, has chosen another term that better fits her situation.

"My word of choice is really 'butch,' as in 'This is my butch.' That just about sums it up," she said.

Merle Yost, an author and private practice psychotherapist in Oakland, Calif., said he calls the object of his affection his partner.

"In my practice, I am finding that partner is becoming a term that is used by couples of different orientations," he said. "I believe that partner is the term that is beginning to be used by people to describe all unmarried relationships."

He knows the term has problems, but he still prefers it.

"While partner has a business tone, it is more inclusive of all the parts of the relationship," Yost said.

San Francisco Chronicle reporter David Tuller said he used the term mate for his signif-

Lover, Partner, Friend?

Even if we win the right to legally marry, we still won't know what to call the one we spend our life with

by Gip Plaster



ILLUSTRATION BY ALBERT MYRICK

The phrase "longtime companion" and words like friend or roommate often don't fully explain the relationship.

icant other, who died last year. He said he believes the term lover is passing from the scene and that a companion sounds like something people have when they are old.

"There's not really a good word to use," Tuller said. "Spouse seems strange. Husband seems forced in some way. Life partner is sort of pretentious."

Some couples use the term co-husband or co-wife to stress the equality of their relationship, while some same-gender couples are comfortable with the straight role titles "husband" and "wife."

The phrase "longtime companion" and words like friend or roommate often don't fully explain the relationship. "Significant other" or "other half" are convenient terms, but again they often don't provide an accurate picture of the relationship to which they refer.

"Partner" or "life partner" is the choice of about a third of women and a slightly smaller percentage of men, according to one survey. Conducted in 1988 by Partners Task Force for Lesbian and Gay Couples, the survey found that 30 percent of women and 40 percent of men use

the term lover. Only 1 percent of the men and women who responded used the terms husband or wife. But that was in 1988.

"Our survey is the most extensive ever done specifically on same-sex couples, and it has been only six years since it was published," said Damian, task force co-director. "Cultures usually don't change that fast—fads perhaps, but cultures take more time."

The terms people use seem to vary by social setting, Damian said. He also said some things may have changed since the survey.

"I would be inclined to think, anecdotally, that these days there seem to be more men who call their partners husband—under certain circumstances," he said. "I have not heard lesbians use the term wife as much, perhaps because of the second-class position it has in our culture."

When lesbian or gay couples decide to hold a ceremony to publicly acknowledge their relationship, it creates a whole new set of language problems.

Ceremonies once called holy unions or commitment ceremonies are now often called marriages.

"I believe we are adopting the relationship language of our parents and society," Yost said.

Tuller said the term marriage is often used in quotation marks to perhaps show the incompleteness or inaccuracy of the term. He adds that the whole issue of terms for same-gender relationships is a "moving target" and something with which society is "struggling."

Margarethe Cammermeyer, the colonel who was discharged from the military for admitting she is a lesbian, is in a committed relationship, so she has an opinion on this issue too.

"Among gay and lesbian couples, the term marriage is often used to imply a committed relationship but it lacks legal and social legitimization," she said.

In referring to her partner, she said the language simply fails her.

"My partner and I have a committed, loving, caring and devoted relationship which surpasses any single word created by a society afraid to acknowledge difference."

Maybe that is the answer. The language's relationship words simply don't do a very good job of adapting to couples for whom they weren't designed. But that won't help much at your next party.

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