

## WORKING IT OUT

*A new gay men's self-help book focuses on growth and intimacy*

by Gip Plaster

**T**here's more to being a gay man than AIDS and coming out.

But those issues are the primary focus of many gay men's self-help books. Regardless of how much time and emotional turmoil was involved in revealing our sexual orientation to others, and whether or not we carry the HIV virus, we face other situations daily that are uniquely gay and uniquely male.

### Books

Christopher Alexander's new book, *Growth and Intimacy for Gay Men: A Workbook*, is just what it says it is. It contains text accompanied by more than 40 exercises aimed at helping gay men deal with gay life. It has sections on lots of issues—growing up, childhood abuse, self-esteem and shame, addiction, relationships and friendships, aging—and of course a bit about coming out and AIDS.

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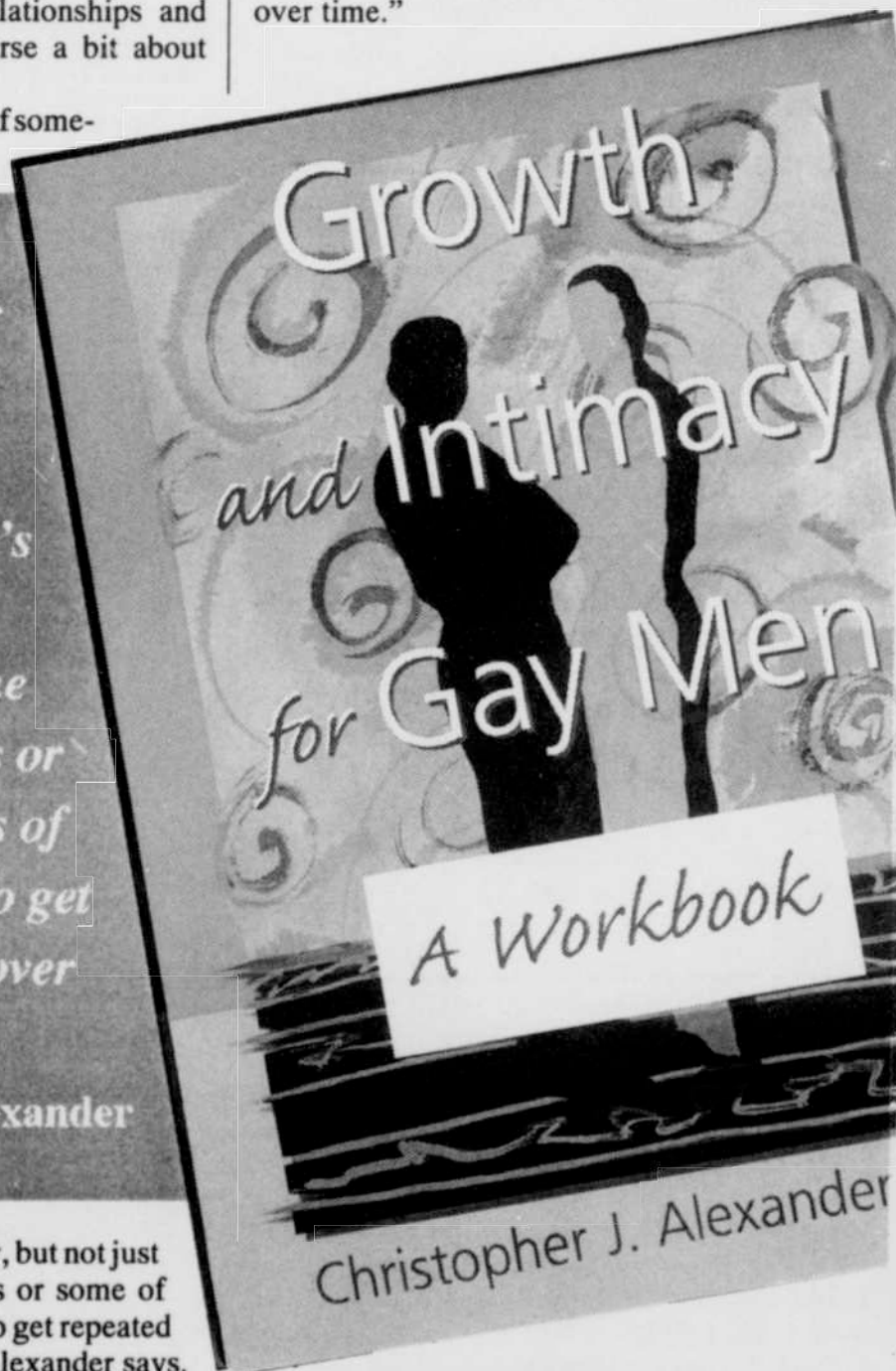
—Christopher J. Alexander

In its almost 300 pages, the book addresses many topics with which gay men struggle. Each section is followed by exercises intended to help men arrange their feelings by helping get those feelings in writing. For example, one exercise asks men to list memories of times they felt different.

"Did this feeling of being different feel like a secret?" the exercise asks. "Do you remember being fearful that anyone would find out about you being different? What were your fears and feelings?"

Other exercises do things like help assess self-esteem and coping styles, and one helps establish dating rules.

"It's a worthwhile book for gay men who are either starting out or are in the process of learning more about their personal growth and mental health," Alexander says. "One person may not be dealing with all the topic areas, so then the book becomes a reference that a person can go back to over time."



insight into what it's like to be gay, but not just focus on the coming out process or some of these kinds of topics which tend to get repeated over and over and over again," Alexander says.

*Growth and Intimacy* doesn't just provide insight on being gay, it offers tools to help you gain your own insight.

Alexander is a private practice psychologist in Santa Fe. He is the publisher of the *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, a summary of pertinent social science research, and editor of the 1996 book *Gay and Lesbian Mental Health: A Sourcebook for Practitioners*.

Obviously he is no stranger to mental health issues, but this is his first book aimed directly at gay men. The book was originally conceived as a tool for therapists to use with their gay male patients, but at the request of the publisher, Alexander says he expanded the work to make it a self-help workbook.

If he were to pick the most important part of the book, Alexander says it would be the section on families of origin—the people who raised us.

"I put a great deal of emphasis in the book on the family of origin stuff because I think that permeates most of our life as gay or non-gay people," he says.

It is still a good supplement for therapists to use with their gay clients too.

"It's a good book for therapists who are looking for a tool to bridge some gaps in the work they're doing with clients in therapy," he says.

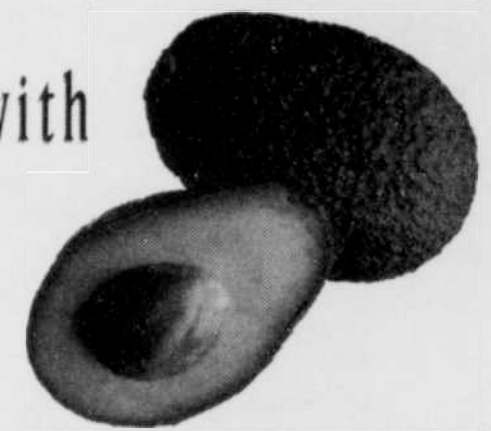
He says for many therapy is a place to "get a reality check" and to be reminded that being gay is OK. However, the book is useful for men who want to deal with some issues but who for whatever reason aren't involved with a therapist.

And, Alexander says, not everyone needs therapy. Men from accepting families with strong networks of friends may not need professional intervention.

Whatever your situation, Alexander's exercises can help you organize the emotions involved in being a gay man. In other words, the book helps you clean your closet—whether you're in it or not.

*Growth and Intimacy for Gay Men: A Workbook* by Christopher J. Alexander, Ph.D. Harrington Park Press, 1997; \$22.95 paper.

As Linda agonized over whether to have a BBQ pork quesadilla or the Mexican torta, Jan settled on the Santa Fe chicken, which reminded her that living with a wannabe vegetarian was indeed a delicate balance between feeling total admiration and complete pity.



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