

Coming out is no easy journey

By JESS LEE

She told everyone she was at yoga, but instead she was taking a class that changed her life.

Attending "Questioning?", a programme for women who are questioning their sexuality or struggling to come out as a lesbian, is the hardest thing many participants have ever done, co-facilitator Cissy Rock says.

The six-week programme is now in its fourth year and will run at the Auckland Women's Centre in Grey Lynn from next Tuesday.

Sitting down with the group for the first time two years ago was a life-changing moment for one North Shore woman.

"I was terrified and the funny thing was we were all lying to our family about where we went," she says.

"It's not easy. You have to have a lot of courage but being true to yourself is an amazing release."

She is a teacher in her late 30s and does not want to be named in this story. She came out to friends and family two years ago, but has not revealed this to her students or their parents.

"There is still a negative attitude towards being a teacher and being gay. I actually thought if I came out I would have to leave teaching," she says.



Helping others: Cissy Rock, left, and Ellie Lim run a six-week programme at the Auckland Women's Centre for women who are questioning their sexuality. Photo: JESS LEE

But the principal of her school, colleagues and her family have been really supportive.

"If the course hadn't given me the strategies I would never have done it - I would still be here not knowing who or where I was."

Women of all ages and backgrounds travel from across Auckland to attend the programme.

Rock says it can be hard for women in suburbs outside of central Auckland to find support.

"Living in the heart of West Auckland as a lesbian

is quite different from Grey Lynn for example."

The New Lynn mother-of-three came out in her early 30s.

"I was in this relationship with this man and then it came to the point where I wasn't comfortable in my own skin.

"Now I'm really happy and I understand who I am but it was really hard making that transition from living this life where all your friends have husbands."

Rock and co-facilitator Ellie Lim share their own stories as part of the group.

lesbians on Shortland St but there is still so much pressure from society in being something other than heterosexual - it's still an identifier."

The Pt Chevalier resident came out when she was 25 after her father died. She says she had not felt able to tell her family before that because of her Chinese Catholic upbringing - and because her father was battling leukaemia.

"I just knew that my dad wouldn't cope with it - it just wasn't a conversation topic plus in Chinese culture we don't tend to talk about touchy-feely stuff."

Rock says they are not out to convert people.

"A lot of the women stay in their relationships with their husbands because they've had an opportunity to explore and say this isn't right, that the questions are answered," she says.

"Probably about a third of women stay in their relationships with their male partners and that's OK with us."

The programme will run each Tuesday from September 16 till October 21 from 7pm to 9pm. It is free to attend. Bookings essential.

■ Call Ellie Lim on 376 3227 ext 202, email womensservices@womens.org.nz or go to awc.org.nz for details.

Women can share their experiences and ask questions or they are free to sit back and listen.

Discussions range from learning how to tell your children, colleagues and friends to religion and what to wear on a first date.

"It's fun, we want people to laugh, to feel comfortable, to find out more about themselves," Lim says.

Some people question why there is still a need for this group, she says.

"We have so much stuff happening in the media, we've got gay marriage,