

Non-Monogamous Relationships

... or two! Well, don't expect this text to be of much assistance—every relationship is different, and there is no system, no perfect procedure, guaranteed to make any one “work.” Besides—being non-monogamous, one might say, is about dispensing with protocol, not trying to make relationships “work” according to any standard: accepting them as they are and as they change. All the same, one can't deny that some approaches and behaviors tend to result in healthy dynamics, and some don't; and since most of us didn't grow up with many good examples of non-monogamous relationships to learn from, the more we discuss and compare our experiences the better-equipped we'll be to chart this unknown territory together. Shaking off conventional pair-bonding programming is nothing if not a first step toward being able to be good for others and help them be good for you.

AT LEAST THREE PEOPLE

The first thing to emphasize is that being non-monogamous is not a way to sidestep the need for honesty in a relationship. If anything, it's a way to promote honesty. Monogamy, not in individual instances but as a monolithic expectation in a constraining culture, discourages honesty by punishing any desires or truths that fall outside the traditional romantic model. Non-monogamy is intended to open a space in which honesty is possible, but it also *depends* on honesty to make such a space possible at all.

So You Want to Have a Non-Monogamous Relationship ...

Ingredients

Instructions

Being Honest in a Dishonest World

This is not to set a new rule, that all lovers must share everything with each other, detail by detail; but share whatever you agree to share, and be clear about what you need, too, including what you need to be sure you'll be able to be honest. The whole idea of being involved without attempting to impose a template upon your relations is to be able to be what you are without lies, guilt, or dissembling. All the same, many of us who grew up struggling in the monogamy model still retain all the bad habits we learned from it: dishonesty, shame, avoidance, fear. Even when we're in a relationship that provides room for our "dangerous desires," we tend to wreck that space by not trusting it and thus losing the trust that sustains it. Push yourself to be honest, always—with honesty, you can have everything you want in the world, or at least all of it that the world can actually offer. If you can't be honest, try to work on that before you're involved deeply with others. Nobody should be involved with anyone that can't be relied on to share important truths—especially frightening ones.

Establishing Expectations

Check in at the beginning of any relationship, or any interaction (like having sex for the first time) that puts the relationship on a new footing, about what your individual needs and expectations and comfort levels are, and make sure you've worked out a common understanding of them before you go any further. This will save a lot of headaches later! If your needs change, or it turns out you feel differently in a situation than you expected you would, it's nothing to feel guilty about—but you'd do well to let your lover know about it. In fact, you'd probably do well to check in with your lovers occasionally regardless, just to make sure their feelings haven't changed without them recognizing or articulating it.

It's probably just as common for lovers in a non-monogamous relationship to feel insecure about their longing for monogamy, or at least some of the reassurances it professes to offer, as it is for them to feel ashamed of their desires for others. It is important

that we avoid developing a competitive culture of non-monogamy, in which people must feel shame for wanting anything "bourgeois" or "traditional." *Everything*, every desire and need, has to be respected, or else this is no revolution after all, just the establishing of a different norm. If it's important to you that you're non-monogamous, you may well have developed a insistent or even confrontational attitude about it, in the face of this unwelcoming society; make sure that this doesn't translate to you making others feel they must live up to some standard around you. Accept whatever others tell you about their needs supportively—they are doing you a favor by being up front with you. Maybe the differences in what you want mean you can't be involved in certain ways, at least for the time being. That's still better than making each other miserable, struggling to get each other to change or denying your needs for one another.

The terms your relationship starts on will probably set the tone for it for a long time to come. Lovers who begin on shared terms of non-monogamy and successfully establish trust with each other will probably have little trouble maintaining a healthy non-monogamous relationship for as long as both desire to. Lovers who start out in a monogamous relationship and decide to change the terms to non-monogamous, however, may well encounter difficulties, as their expectations and ways of feeling safe and loved may already be tied to the question of the other partner's "faithfulness." Now, if you *really* want to wreck a relationship, start it out on monogamous terms (or simply leave the issue unaddressed, so assumptions can develop unchecked by reality), then sleep with someone else, and afterwards tell your partner you want to be non-monogamous; for maximum destruction, don't even confide that you've slept with or are sleeping with someone else—let your partner discover it as a surprise. Obviously, this is not the way to go about having a healthy love affair.

You can spice up a first date by resolving to get in trouble with the authorities for something dreadfully embarrassing by the end of the night; don't tell your date of your plan, of course.

Handling Jealousy

Never give one lover cause to feel threatened by another's place in your life or heart. In this society, we are constantly being made to feel that we are in competition with one another, so we feel threatened by others. Healthy non-monogamy should disprove this conditioning, not reinforce it. Make it clear, in actions as well as words, that your relationship with each person (lover or not!) depends only on itself, not on the way it compares with other relationships. Hopefully, you're not cruising for the perfect wife or husband or trophy lover, picking up and discarding people as you hunt down the ultimate commodity on the partner market; instead, you're cultivating life-long, adaptable relationships with individuals you love and treat with respect, in which you enjoy yourselves consensually and maybe even support one another's life projects.* Lovers, in such a scenario, should have no more cause to fear or be jealous of one another than friends do—indeed, one good reason to be non-monogamous is to foster in your love affairs the qualities that make your friendships work, or, better, to blur the lines between the two.

All the same, since you grew up in this society, there are going to be situations in which one or both of you feel jealous. There are many things you can do to address this when you feel it yourself. First, try to separate and identify your different feelings, so you know what you're reacting to or acting on. The most prevalent cause of jealousy is insecurity: to be in any successful relationship, non-monogamous or not, you need to be grounded, you need to feel good about yourself and have a sense of your own worth and attractiveness. In this sense, leading a life that helps you respect yourself is practically a prerequisite for any intimacy with others. At the same time, you should be able to ask your lover for reassurance whenever you need it—don't be timid about this: if your lover loves you, he or she will want to let you know, and it's a lot better to speak up when you need it than to restrain yourself from "putting pressure" on him or her, only to explode or implode later on. To return to the subject of self-confidence, loving yourself will make it a lot easier to believe other people's reassurances.

**This is not an attempt to legislate for those who prefer anonymous, promiscuous encounters in bathrooms and cruising parks—do what you want, provided you look out for each other!*

Insecurity can manifest itself in projection: it may be easy to imagine that your lover's other lover, or crush, or potential crush, is absolutely perfect. Try to get some perspective; it may well be that you spend more time thinking about the other lover than your lover does. No one's perfect, anyway, not even the Other Woman; and, being in a non-monogamous relationship, you have less to fear than you would in a monogamous couple: your lover can experiment with others and enjoy being with them without having to feel that he or she should leave you. Outside the couple paradigm, no one can steal a lover from you—the extent to which you're good for a person determines how much he or she will stay with you. If you have a longstanding or strong love, no fling or flirtation can endanger it.

Insecurity may not be the only thing you're feeling, either. You might also feel judgmental of your lover—you might be disappointed in her or him for being attracted to someone you deem unworthy, or you might feel protective for similar reasons. Either way, you have to trust your lover to know what's good for himself or herself—there's no way around that. Your partner probably can sense what he or she needs much better than you can, and the decision is not yours to make, anyway.

Jealousy can also proceed from feelings of competitiveness with other lovers, especially members of the same sex—these are fostered in this society, and often serve to isolate us from potential comrades. Again, hopefully you trust that whomever your lover trusts is worthy of respect; remember, whatever really is good for your lover is, in some sense at least, good for you. Being able to see your lover's lovers as friends or at least allies can be revolutionary, in a society that would have us turn against each other over romance.

It might also be that your jealousy is caused by instabilities or incongruences in the relationship itself, which may need to be addressed. Jealousy isn't always a merely irrational, destructive feeling; often, it can be a useful barometer with which to gauge what is going on within and between people.

When you are feeling jealous and insecure, it may help to remember that the degree of freedom your lover has is extended to you, too. If you wouldn't want to be constrained, be glad the two of you are not constraining each other. If you've had relationships with or been attracted to others besides your lover, ponder those experiences for perspective on what your lover is feeling; if those dalliances didn't decrease your lover's importance to you, these probably won't come between you, either.

When your lover is jealous, try not to feel accused or attacked. Try not to fall into the default setting of accusations, denials, attacks, defenses, suspicions, recriminations and self-recriminations. Step back and make sure it is clear how important your lover is to you; emphasize that no other attraction or relationship can threaten the one you share. (On the other hand, of course, don't ever say this if it's not true!) If the terms of the relationship or your mutual expectations have to be re-negotiated, don't put it off or skirt around the issue.

Here's another worst-case scenario: you're involved with two people, and they take an intense disliking to each other. This can be really unpleasant for everybody. There are still a few things you can do to keep things as smooth as possible, though. Don't take sides—refuse to sit as a judge while one tries to convince you of the other's wrongdoing. Have your own opinions of how they are conducting themselves, of course, but emphasize that you're not interested in being persuaded to be partisan. Emphasize to each that both are important to you—make it clear there'll be no choosing of one over the other, and that if either relationship ends it will be on account of factors internal to it, not external. Encourage the two of them to work things out like adults, if possible. Don't ferry messages back and forth between them. Definitely don't let yourself make decisions to appease either of them, even unconsciously—this will only make you resent them, and disappoint yourself, in the long run.

You may have heard about the “primary partner” model, one of the most widely discussed schematics for non-monogamy. Some feel such schematics suggest hierarchy or protocol: they hold that each person should be his or her *own* primary partner, and endeavor to be committed to all the partners with whom he or she shares life, whatever roles they play. Indeed, we risk a lot by not letting those roles be fluid enough to accommodate all the changes that relationships, needs, and expectations are always going through. It’s important that people in a relationship know what to expect from one another, but formal titles should not be necessary for this.

Speaking of a hierarchy of partners—in addition to atavistic dishonesty and shame, another leftover behavior you may have carried with you from the monogamy ghetto is a tendency to treat lovers besides your “primary partner” with less respect or sensitivity. This is something people, especially men, do when cheating in monogamous relationships: motivated by guilt, they mistreat their fellow adulterer, as if to show that, though they are cheating on their partner, they still value him or her above all others. Non-monogamy is supposed to mean everyone in every relationship gets treated with respect: every plant and animal in an ecosystem is equally important, regardless of how great or small a role it plays.

No one should pressure others into a relationship model with which they don’t feel comfortable. That can only make both parties unhappy. At the same time, you’re not forcing others into anything by making your own decisions about what is right for you. You make your decisions, let others make theirs; where there is common ground, you can meet. Ideally, every couple should have the same idea of what they want their relationship to be; realistically, people have to make compromises—just try to make sure they’re mutually beneficial compromises. Again, there’s no perfect model: each couple, threesome, and community must work out for itself how to get along and be happy to-

Resisting Hierarchy

Working Things Out

gether. What works for one may not work for another—it might not even look healthy or sensible to another, but that's the way it goes.

"I have one last question. If I have more than one lover at a time, won't I end up calling them by the wrong names in bed and getting in trouble with everybody?"

Actually, my experience is the opposite: when you're used to being sexually involved with more than one person, lovers' names cease to be noises you make out of habit whenever you're aroused and come to refer to the actual individuals in question. Being non-monogamous, you may discover that when you're in bed with someone, you're present with that person as an individual, rather than as a role in your life, more so than you would be with a girlfriend or boyfriend. If that doesn't prove to be the case for you, there's nothing that says you have to go to bed with more than one person at a time to be non-monogamous—or even with anyone, for that matter. Non-monogamous and celibate, that's a legitimate option, too, with a lot to recommend it.