

Exploring Non-Monogamy: A beginners guide

By
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Relationship Types

Relationships in General

Relationships can sometimes be hard to define, humans are complex and so our relationships with others can be complex too. There are many different types of relationships, which we'll go into more detail on in relation to non-monogamy, but there is also some detail to be explored in relation to relationships in general.

How would you define a relationship?

For me it's, "having a connection, in some form, with another individual. It's how we relate to others, and ourselves". It covers acquaintances, friends, family, partners etc. These connections can be through attraction, intellectualism, proximity, necessity, shared interests, love, etc. Relationships can change and adapt or come to an end for many reasons.

On a personal note, part of me loves the train of thought around how relationships are temporary but the lessons we learn from them can be permanent - similar to life is just a string of experiences; whereas the other part of me finds this terrifying!

When looking at relationships, I often refer to the different types of love we can experience too. We can have platonic love, familial love, romantic love, obsessive love (limerence) and a multitude of other loves too. In Western Society these are then categorised into family relationships, friend/platonic relationships, and romantic relationships, even though our feelings don't always fit into these categories. In my work, I often talk about finding the client's way of doing things, we don't have to be defined and limited by labels; that's not to say that people who prefer labels can't do that either, but they aren't the only option.

Sense of control

Having relationships defined in some way can give us a sense of control and routine. We know what is expected of us and that can give us a feeling of safety and security.

The idea that relationships can end or be temporary can then threaten this feeling of safety and bring up insecurities - safety is also a big part of

my work with clients. Monogamy, and the relationship escalator of cohabit, engaged, and marriage, give a somewhat false sense of security as it allows for stages of showing commitment towards each other to establish that the relationship is long-term. Non-monogamy then affirms the temporary message, due to stigma as you'll see, and so quite often when non-monogamy is brought into the life of someone who has only ever known monogamy, it can be seen as a threat to their safety and sense of security. This is why a big part of non-monogamy in any form involves continuous check-ins and communication with everyone involved to manage the expectations and needs as they change through life. Regaining a sense of control through looking at the client's internal locus of control, can help establish self safety and security. e.g. looking at creating the client's secure base in which to explore the world and other attachments from.

Boundaries VS. Rules

A boundary is an expectation or need that we put in place for ourselves. These can then be communicated to others where they can decide if they want to respect/follow them or not. A boundary might look like:

- Outlining what you are comfortable with in sexual intimacy, e.g. not wanting to give or receive oral would be a sexual boundary
- Asking for more space in the relationship, e.g. saying you would like Thursday nights for yourself each week.
- Stating your right to privacy, e.g. not wanting to share passwords for devices.

A rule is then something we impose for others to follow. Taking the examples from above to show the contrast:

- Stating sexual acts you want your partner to do, e.g. have to have sex every day
- Enforcing space in the relationship e.g. telling your partner to be out the house on Thursdays
- Enforcing privacy rules, e.g. having the same passwords for unshared devices so you can check your partner's device.

Types of Relationships

Monogamy - monogamy is a relationship between two people, which can be defined as a couple. A 'serial monogamist' is someone who goes from one monogamous relationship to another without being single for any extended period in between relationships. Monogamous dating might be fairly non-monogamous initially with dating multiple people at the same time, but then choosing one person to be exclusive with as a monogamous couple.

Non-monogamy is then any relationship outside of the exclusivity of this dyad. There can be non-consensual non-monogamy, such as cheating, but below we will talk about the consensual types of non-monogamy, often called ethical/consensual non-monogamy:

Polyamory - this is where someone is open to being in a relationship with multiple people at the same time. There are different types of polyamory and relationship structures which we will go into in more detail below.

- **Solo polyamory** - where someone is open to having multiple partners where there is no hierarchy or priority given to any partner. A solo polyamorist will tend to keep their individuality in terms of finances, housing, legality etc. though there is always nuance to this.
- **Hierarchical polyamory** - where someone will be open to multiple relationships but these relationships will be prioritised differently. e.g. someone may have 2 partners A & B. A is someone they are married to and have a child with and so A is their primary partner who will be prioritised in terms of time and energy. B is their secondary partner who will be seen less often.
 - This type of relationship can be seen as unethical in non-monogamous communities, however if all individuals are aware and have informed consent before entering a relationship then generally this is "ethical".
- **Parallel polyamory** - where someone is in multiple relationships but their partners do not communicate. e.g. Partner A has 2 partners B & C. B & C do not communicate.

Relationship Anarchy (RA) - where someone is open to multiple relationships which do not follow the labels and structure outlined by society but rather the individuals to the relationship decide on their own

boundaries, definition, wants, needs, expectations etc. for their relationship. There is no hierarchy in RA across the board - this is where RA differs from polyamory as it is non-hierarchical for platonic and romantic (ALL) relationships, not just the romantic ones.

Monogamish - where a dyad - who may be monogamous - are open to occasional breaks in monogamy. Generally this tends to be for an external sexual situation like a threesome for example.

Swinging - where an individual, dyad, triad etc. are open to sexual experiences with other individuals. This is normally done through boundaried 'events' or 'parties' but can be done in a more intimate setting. Often people think of 'wife swapping' which can be the case but it is more varied than this.

Open Relationship - tends to be a dyad open to other relationships outside of their exclusivity. This will often be hierarchical and formed through some form of agreement. Though, again, with each definition there will be nuance to this.

Other terms useful to know:

Hinge or Vee - this is where 3 people are involved in a relationship but 2 of them aren't dating. e.g. Partner A + Partner B are dating and Partner A + Partner C are dating, but Partner B + Partner C aren't. Partner A is the 'hinge'. This dynamic can be KTP or parallel depending on those involved and their preference.

Meta - A Metamour (or Meta) is their partner's partner.

Nesting Partner/ Anchor Partner - This is where one of your partners is someone you live with and might share finances/investments together. The reason for the terms is to show you might live with them but that all your partners are still considered as equals to you.

Polycules in polyam relationships:

A polycule is a term to define the individuals involved with each other either dating or as partners of partners. It can be mapped out into a diagram to represent the relationships had between each individual. This can be useful when getting to know a client and their relationships.

Negative Perceptions in Society

Stigmas faced

Non-monogamous folx tend to face stigma in society due to their relationship type deviating from the “social norm” - even though all relationship types, where they are non-harmful and with consent, are valid. There is no “superior” or “right” way of being in a relationship other than what works for the individuals involved.

Yet, people still face discrimination, harassment, and harmful misconceptions in their daily life such as:

Non-monogamy is just a way to be able to cheat

- Cheating can happen in any relationship regardless of it being monogamous or non-monogamous.
- Cheating is where someone has broken the boundaries and trust in a relationship. Non-monogamous people still outline boundaries in relationships and so cheating can still happen.

Non-monogamous people must be riddled with STDs

- Not practising safe sex is what puts you at risk of STDs, so again this can happen in any relationship or dating situation.
- Research has shown that non-monogamous people have this negative perception in society but actually they are more likely to practise safe sex practices with partners as well as regular STD testing.
- The research also suggests that monogamous individuals who are cheating are less likely to practise safe sex and so are more likely to put themselves at risk of STDs

Non-monogamy is only for people addicted to sex

- Swingers are the most likely to be seen as promiscuous in society according to research. Additionally gay men are most seen to be promiscuous and non-monogamous however this isn’t always the case.

- This stigma also reduces relationships to sex, which is also then exclusive of many A sexual relationships where sex isn't a priority or even wanted.
- There may be a chance for people to explore their sexual desires through non-monogamy but this doesn't mean that they are addicted to sex, and it is healthier to be open and honest about it with your partners.

Every non-monogamous relationship is doomed to fail

- Again, this is reductionist and not based on any solid research. There is a stat floating around about 92% of open marriages ending in divorce but there was no source for this anywhere - if you find it tell me, please!
- Just like in monogamous relationships, non-monogamous relationships may break down, but this can be for a number of reasons and not "just because" they were non-monogamous.
- When talking to friends or family about non-monogamy they will likely hear remarks of "this isn't going to last", "it's just a phase", or "it's never going to work". These comments are seldom made with monogamous relationships unless someone feels the individuals themselves aren't right for each other compatibility wise, however for non-monogamous individuals this is said mostly because the relationship is non-monogamous rather than based on the individuals - it's dehumanising and discriminatory.

"You're having your cake and eating it too" or "You're greedy"

- This is said to non-monogamous folk and is also reminiscent of biphobic comments too.
- This one doesn't need to be 'disproved' because even if it were true, does it really matter?

Being non-monogamous devalues your other partners

- This comes from the notion that there is "one true love" for everyone out there and so if you're in a relationship with more than one person, are you really in love with either of them? Is it really fair on them? Are they only doing this to appease you?
- It's projecting the view that if you "give yourself" to more than one person they are not getting your full self and so you don't value them.

- But love isn't a finite resource; the love for one doesn't take away from another.
- This stigma can be true where non-monogamy is done in an unethical way, similar to cheating. If not everyone has informed consent and where boundaries are broken. But again this can be true for any relationship type.

You're only looking elsewhere because something is missing

- [Research has](#) found that not having needs met in one relationship can be a reason for people opening up or exploring non-monogamy, however it is not the *only* reason.
- As [Esther Perel](#) expands on in her video, modern relationships put so much pressure on the individuals involved. You are my one and my **only** one. Which means you have to be EVERYTHING for that one person and vice-versa. But this isn't always possible - as the saying goes "it takes a village". We used to have a full community to meet our needs and now we expect one person to do this for us.
- This is only a stigma because modern society views relationships as having to be with "the one" but this isn't necessarily the case. What works for some doesn't work for others, and that's okay.

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Feminism & Non-Monogamy

In short, feminism is a movement to fight for equal rights between genders. I have included this within the Intersectionality as this can be part of an undercurrent to the other intersections and as this is originally where intersectionality came from.

For many feminists, monogamy can be seen as patriarchal, a means of owning women and keeping a power imbalance between genders.

Robinson (1994) writes that monogamy 'privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance' (p.144).*Robinson, V. (1997). My baby just cares for me: feminism, heterosexuality and nonmonogamy. Journal of Gender Studies, 6 (2), 143-157.*

As [Carrie Jenkins suggests](#), there is an imbalance between the way men and women are treated when it comes to non-monogamy. It is presumed to be more acceptable for men to have multiple partners, sleep with more people, or have affairs with somewhat positive nicknames of "stud", "player", or "ladies man", whereas women who would show similar behaviour are named, "sluts", "whores", or "slags", which has a much more demeaning and shaming tone to them. This is explored more in the gender & age step of this section.

Feminism in non-monogamy aims to take the power back, to be able to feel empowered within relationships and not have to depend on a male partner or exclusive coupling. The movement has coined the term, "[compulsory monogamy](#)", in which it is an expectation for women to settle into marriage with kids as part of her femininity. The compulsory monogamy movement aims to highlight the oppression that many women face in relationships and also in sexual agency too, particularly for sex workers, queer, and non-white women.

[Wandrei explores](#) how there is a movement around challenging 'compulsory heterosexuality' too especially within lesbian feminist movements, where non-monogamy allows for exploration and expression of sexuality - though this does also highlight the discrimination and stigma faced within the LGBTQ+ community regarding women who sleep with men. Lesbian women tend to face hostility within the lesbian community if they reveal they have had sexual relationships with men,

where their identity of 'lesbian' is challenged and gate-kept, and in contrast, women who identify as bisexual will often be disregarded by lesbians when dating due to their involvement with men.

It is good to keep all of this in mind when looking at further steps within this section.

Further Reading:

- Ritchie, Ani & Barker, Meg-John. (2007). Hot bi babes and feminist families: Polyamorous women speak out. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*. 8. 10.53841/bpssex.2014.5.1.49. -
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42798719_Hot_bi_babes_and_feminist_families_Polyamorous_women_speak_out
- Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Women's Erotic Autonomy: Feminist and Queer Feminist Critiques of Monogamy -
<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/619303/1/Autonomy%2007%20Jul%202017%20Fin%20sub.pdf>



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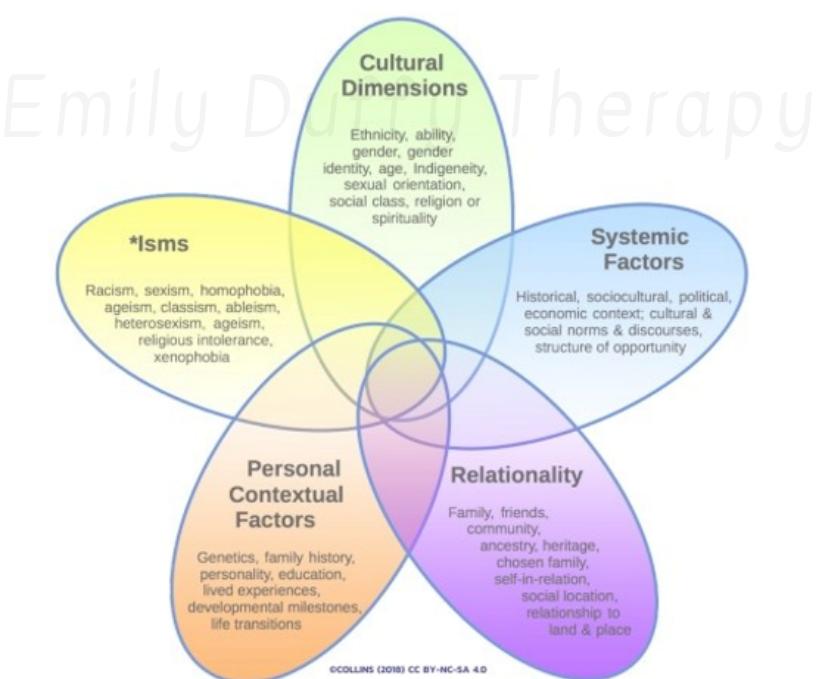
Our place in the world (Intersectionality)

What is intersectionality?

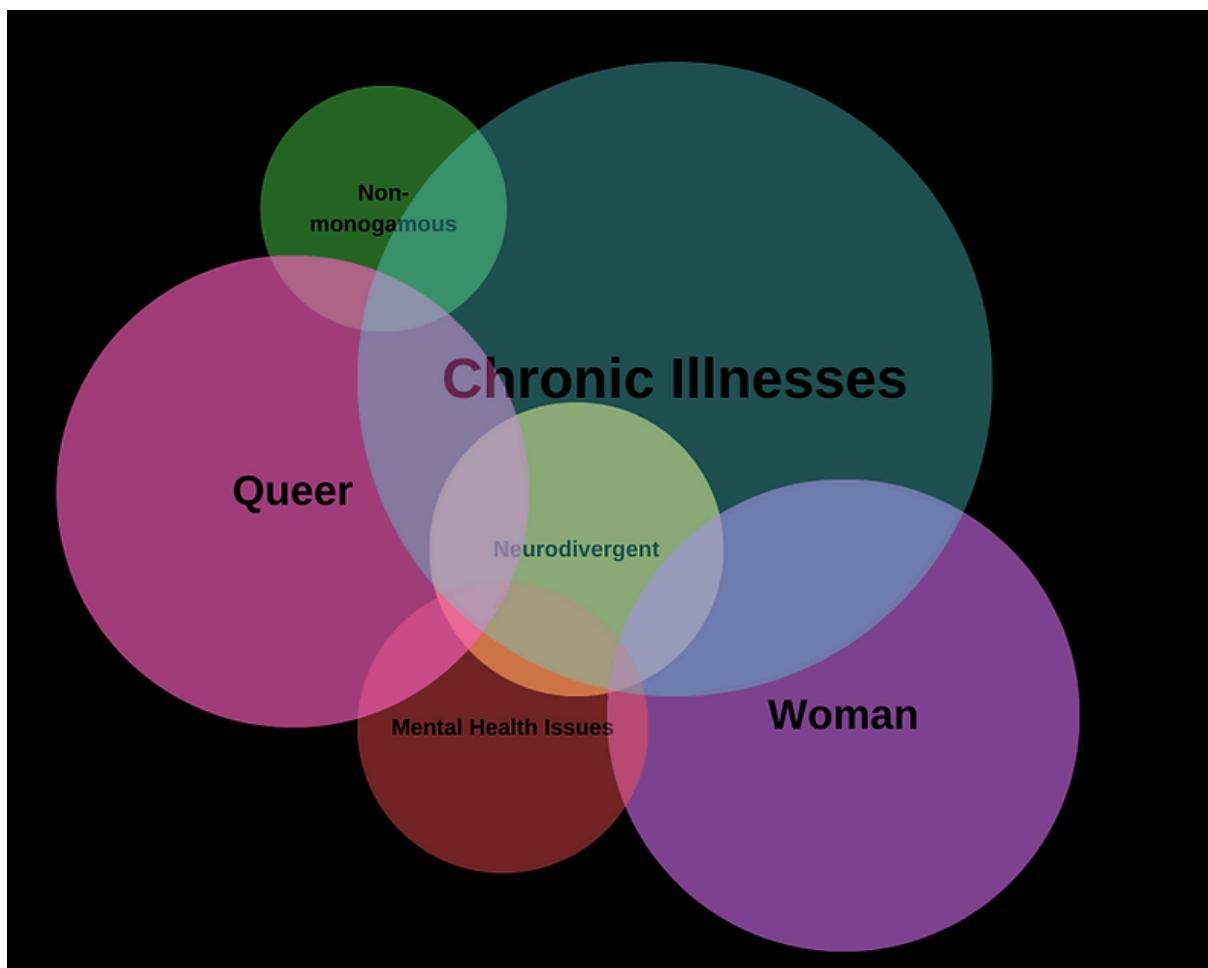
The Oxford Dictionary definition is, "the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage". It was originally applied to women's rights and the feminist movement to be able to acknowledge that whilst they were fighting for women's rights different intersections would be fighting from a different place which may be disadvantaged and how this then has an impact on their experience of being a woman from their intersections lens, e.g. a trans woman's experience fighting for women's rights and their experience of women's rights will be different to a cis woman's experience.

Recognising where we come from in society as well as being non-monogamous is important, as everyone's experience of it will be different.

Our intersections add layers on to who we are and how we are treated in the world. They are the makeup of our experiences; they could be drawn out as a Venn Diagram:



But everyone's Venn Diagram of their own intersections and how they relate to them will look different. For example, this is how I picture a brief overview of mine to look -



My experience as a woman will be different to a trans woman's experience, or to a woman who has no illnesses, or who is a person of colour, but being a woman will have an impact for each of us in different ways in making up our experience of the world.

Intersections

This is a huge important topic to bear in mind when talking to others about their experiences. In my therapist course I go into more detail as it's important to acknowledge our limitations & differences in experience and competence when working with groups of people, but in this course I want to give more of an overview for awareness of others and your "self".

Non-monogamy tends to have a big overlap with individuals who are neurodivergent, the LGBTQ+ community, and the kink community too. So let's break the intersections down:

Neurodiversity (ND):

- Neurodivergence: Neuro comes from neurology, "the nervous system, including the brain" and divergence, "a difference or variety". Neurodivergence is therefore the term that there is variety in how we process, think, function as a species.
- Being Neurodivergent follows the medical model which suggests that there is a 'right' way to think in accordance with our society. This is where you may hear people talk about pathology - being neurodivergent means you have a "condition" or "disorder", but some people don't follow this model: anti-pathologisation.
- There are different 'types' of neurodivergence in society such as ADHD, ADD, Autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette's etc. It is estimated 1 in 7 people in society are neurodivergent.

Chronic Illness & Disability:

- **Chronic Illness** - A health condition or disease which has long-term implications on an individual's health e.g. asthma, fibromyalgia, endometriosis, diabetes, cancer etc.
- **Disability** - A physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions.
- Both definitions taken from Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Age:

- We can be discriminated against because of our age in both ways; being viewed as immature & inexperienced when younger compared to being wiser and more experienced when older. On the other side we can be viewed as more fertile and attractive when younger but then past our best when older.

Gender:

- We are assigned gender at birth depending on our sexual organs, however gender is a social construct and our understanding of our own gender is a complex thing - this post explains it far better than I can! - <https://cadehildreth.com/gender-spectrum/>
- Some people have a strong affiliation with their assigned gender, others are trans where their gender is not tied to their gender assigned at birth, and others may have more of a fluid attachment to their gender. Cis is being aligned with the gender you were assigned at birth, and trans is being a gender not aligned to the gender assigned at birth.

LGBTQ+:

- Our sexuality tends to be based on our attraction to others. There are many ways of defining our sexuality and this can differ from sexual attraction to romantic attraction or intelligence attraction etc.
- Being straight (attracted to the "opposite" gender) and allosexual (being sexually attracted to others) are generally seen as the "norm" in society.

Kink & BDSM:

- **BDSM** is "bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism (sexual gratification from inflicting pain), and masochism (sexual gratification from having pain inflicted on you), as a type of sexual practice." - from the Oxford Dictionary.
- **Kink** is described as unconventional sexual behaviour, i.e. a kink in the 'norm'.
- **BDSM is a subset of Kink.**
- "Vanilla" is a term used for people who prefer sexual intercourse to be without kink involvement.

Race & Culture:

- Our race and culture can conflict or align, but they also give us some form of moral boundaries/structure to follow as well as traditions.

Religion:

- We may or may not have a religion, but this is essentially whether you believe there is more to this world and how things come about.

Class:

- Whether you're financially stable and wealthy

All of these intersections influence how we view the world, but also how others perceive and treat us too. Generally speaking if you steer away from the cis, white, male, middle class, straight norms of society you will face more discrimination and hardship in this world.

Reflections:

- Where did you learn about romantic relationships?
- What does your ideal relationship situation look like?
 - Has this changed over time?
- Imagine your friendships -
 - Do you view all your friends the same?
 - Do you feel about them all in the same way?
 - What draws you to each of your friends?

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Polyamory_Breakup_Book/-i2-DwAAQBAJ - The Polyamory Break-Up Book. This is all anecdotal so not based on scientific studies but rather the author's experience being a therapist working with non-monogamous clients, but it gives a different perspective on this stigma.

Things to Consider

Coming Out

There can be a feeling of "coming out" when being in a non-monogamous relationship, more so for polyamory and RA where relationships tend to be emotional as well as sexual, which can be a vulnerable step when there is a chance you will be faced with the stigma we have looked at.

Quite often friends and family will reply with hurtful comments guised with them being well meaning or lots of questioning - have you thought this through? Are you sure it's the right thing? Are you sure they want this and aren't just doing this for you?

This can be a really painful experience for many people, especially when as we've seen, there is a big crossover with non-monogamy, ND, and the LGBTQ+ community where people will have already gone through a process of coming out for different parts of their identity beforehand.

The main reasons for letting people into your life in this way is to be able for them to share in your experience without having to hide parts of yourself away, but also to allow your partners to share in that too.

However, it is not always safe to do so with the risk of rejection, harassment, or harm being a possibility, but also it's your life and you only need to invite people into it if you feel you want to.

How to look after yourself in this:

- Think about what you want from sharing your relationship status with others.
- Talk to your partners about what their wants and expectations are with being open in this way - for work, friendship circles, family, schools etc.
 - If there's a clash in expectations try to think of where a compromise might be.
 - If there's no compromise then this will be difficult conversations around your boundaries and how your relationship will look going forward.
 - e.g. if your partner wants to tell everyone but you don't, where does this leave you if you're not willing to compromise on this boundary?

- Maybe there are parts of your life you're happy to be fully out in but others don't feel as safe - think about how you might navigate this going forward.
- Think about what you might say to people and how much you are willing to share - some people may ask quite personal questions if they don't know anything about non-monogamy, so be prepared for this and how you might handle it.
- Put in some after care for yourself - we might have an idea of how we think people will respond but we can never predict for certain, so it is always useful to book some time in for yourself afterwards to decompress, process, and recharge.



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Opening Up

Opening up refers to being in a previously exclusive dyad dynamic and choosing for one or both of you to be open to other types of relationships with others, whilst still remaining in a relationship together.

This is probably one of the most common ways of non-monogamy playing out, because most people just assume that monogamy is the way we are and there's no other option. I always felt like there was something wrong with me because I would be with one person but still have feelings for others, and society told me this was wrong and I had to choose!

But this isn't the case, non-monogamy is valid and human. Studies have found that 1 in 5 people (in America) have experienced non-monogamy in some form. This video explains it all really well and gives a broad overview of ENM in history -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgOZ4eNFWnQ>

How to look after yourself:

- Think about what it is that you want - write this down.
- Think about how you are going to talk to your partner about this - a lot of people will react with a feeling of rejection or like they're not enough because of how our society tells us there is "one person" out there for us. So try to phrase it in a non-blaming way.
- Make sure to create a space where you listen to their side too. It is never going to be an easy conversation but as mentioned before we can't predict or control someone else's reactions.
- It will often be the case that this conversation is something you come back to a few times (and frequently after that) to allow for internal processing once you have an idea of how your partner has reacted and what it means to them.
- Try not to give ultimatums - "if we don't do this I'm leaving you" - instead look to set your boundaries - "I would like to explore my sexuality and I feel this would be helpful through relationships with others. I want to keep our relationship too, but I understand if this is something you're uncomfortable with".

If you're the partner on the receiving end of an opening up suggestion:

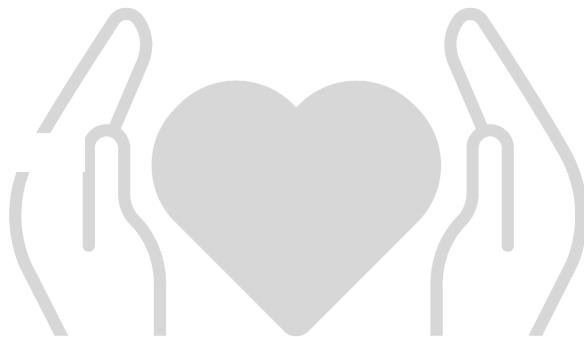
- Ask what it is they're looking for, explore how they want your relationship to be going forward and what it is they're wanting from opening up the relationship

- Try to hear your partner, it is often not an easy conversation on either side of the coin and when we get hit with news we may not have seen coming we can go into our own head and feelings without being able to hear the other person. If you find you're getting defensive, it might be worth telling your partner you need a few minutes to process and come back to the conversation when you feel a bit more grounded and ready to hear them out.
- Try to find reassurance in that they are comfortable enough and feel safe to come to you with this information and express their feelings in this way.
- As above, take some time to reflect on it all, how you feel with it, if it's something you would want for yourself, would you want to open the relationship up fully, would you be comfortable staying a monogamous partner whilst they open up their side, maybe this relationship isn't something you can continue and you would only feel comfortable in an exclusively monogamous relationship.
- Try not to write your partner off straight away, take some time to talk it through again and get mutual understanding on what you both feel is doable within your boundaries/wants/expectations and take it from there.

If you're looking at opening up the relationship following an affair, please take some time to do this and don't jump into it. Make sure you talk it through, explore your reasons for doing it, and commit to doing the work on your current relationship as there will still be broken trust there that needs to be looked at. I would generally caution people opening up following an affair as it doesn't fix anything - an affair tends to come from a place of communication breakdown and non-monogamy really needs communication to be strong, so you're working against yourself if you open up without taking the time to do the work first. **Non-monogamy is never a "fix" for anything.** If you go into non-monogamy with that mindset and expectation, you are already putting that expectation onto the partners you haven't even met yet.

here may be a challenge where one person in the dyad wants to open up and the other doesn't. this is tricky as the wants, needs, and expectations might vary too much for either party to feel comfortable in the relationship, however mono polyam relationships can work this is where one person stays monogamous with their partner, and the other is open to polyamorous relationships outside of the dyad. Again this will mean a conversation around how this might look, what the boundaries and expectations might be.

It might be an idea to look into relationship counselling if you're both unsure of how to navigate the conversation but want to make the relationship work for you both, where possible (do check if your counsellor is ENM inclusive). A relationship counsellor will be able to be an impartial voice, a safe space to talk your thoughts and feelings through, and may be able to offer some light guidance through reflection.



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Communication

As I've already said, communication in non-monogamy is a big topic, so I will try to keep this as succinct as possible!

Being able to work together with your partners is the ideal in non-monogamy. Communication is a way to build trust, outline our own boundaries and establish the boundaries of the relationships, and to manage our expectations too. Just like in monogamous relationships, when communication breaks down, it can cause problems in the relationship.

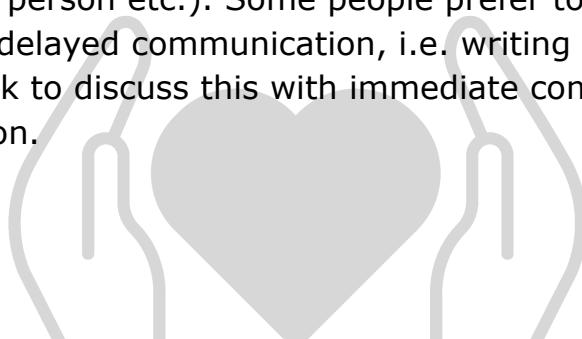
This is particularly important in non-monogamous relationships as you are managing different dynamics whilst also trying to respect different personal boundaries too. e.g. If you are a monogamish couple looking to have a threesome you will need to communicate as a dyad what it is you are both expecting, wanting, and needing from this, how to feel safe, what this means for your relationship etc. whilst also being able to communicate these needs, wants, and boundaries with the person you're wanting to bring in for the threesome and consider their wants, boundaries, and needs too. When first establishing this, there can be ruptures where boundaries weren't fully discussed and so they were crossed, or the threesome didn't feel as safe as first predicted etc. Similarly other non-monogamous relationships can experience ruptures through communication not being thorough enough or not being able to predict the emotions that come up causing a feeling of unsteadiness and needing to recommunicate boundaries.

How to look after yourself:

- Letter writing/free writing - taking some space for yourself to write out what you might want to say unfiltered and without judgement. The idea is that this is for you and not to be seen by anyone else. From here you can work out what you then want to say to the other person(s).
- You & me Vs. the problem, not you vs. me - Trying to reframe the communication issue so that you are working together to sit with or find a solution to the 'problem'. e.g. if jealousy is the issue, looking at what is going on under the jealousy, being able to explain that to the other individuals involved and then what you can work on together with your partner(s)/connection(s).

- Non-violent Communication - "I" statements rather than "you" (blaming) statements. Being able to communicate effectively and assertively without it being actively confrontational or blaming.
- Identifying safety in communication - safe words, signals for breaks etc. It may be that emotions become too heightened when first talking about a problem so discussing with your partner(s) how this can be managed is useful. Do you need a chance to walk away and come back after some reflection? What would this look like? How could they signal this in the moment? etc.
- Schedule in check-ins with your partners so that you can talk through anything that has come up that you didn't expect or if anything has changed for each of you.

We all have different communication styles so the idea is to find a common ground with your partner(s) on how to communicate e.g. letters, text, voice note, in person etc.). Some people prefer to have initial communication as delayed communication, i.e. writing each other a letter, and then come back to discuss this with immediate communication i.e. phone call, in person.



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Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is a big thing in non-monogamy.

All of our emotions and feelings are natural. I like to think of emotions as messages to ourselves, your body is trying to tell you something, and we need to find a way to tune into it. Our emotions are great guides into understanding our experience, but often we tend to be in our head instead of logically working out what's going on rather than feeling it, and unfortunately for us, relationships are a huge trigger for emotions!

A big emotion to mention when looking at non-monogamy is jealousy. A quick distinction here; Envy and Jealousy are often used interchangeably, but for the purpose of this section, as simply as I can put it, Envy is wanting what someone else has and Jealousy is the fear/threat of losing what you already have to someone else. It's seen as a 'nasty' emotion, even though most of the time jealousy is trying to point out that something is uncomfortable and shines a light on our insecurities.

There's a lot of therapy speak lately of, "your emotions are valid", which is absolutely true, but this doesn't mean that your behaviour is excusable because of this. Your emotions *are* valid but you are responsible for how you behave from them.

How to look after yourself:

- Therapy - I might be a bit biased here, but having a dedicated space which is for you to talk about your insecurities, needs, fears, emotions, feelings, dreams, relationships, whatever you want, can be so important when understanding our situation and experiences.
- Learning how to listen to yourself - getting a tune to your emotions and what they might be telling you. This might be meditation, body scans, yoga, guided imagery, writing, journaling, drawing, painting..... this list goes on.
- Learn how to notice your feelings but *not be in* your feelings - Often we say "I am sad" as though the emotion is part of us and who we are, so this exercise is about changing it to, "I am feeling sad". We can then go a step further to "I am noticing that I'm feeling sad". This isn't to stop yourself feeling the sadness but it is bringing you out of being the sadness and getting consumed by it.

- Write down what it is your emotions and feelings are telling you. From here you can then work out how you want to communicate this to others.



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Dating

Dating and searching for other partners can be an exciting part of non-monogamy, however it can also bring up many difficulties too.

There can be feelings of rejection or insecurities on not getting matches, you may feel disheartened that your partners seem to have more success than you do on apps, there may be boundaries that are crossed from potential matches (like unsolicited nudes), there is a lot to navigate if you're not out to others in your life and how you will present yourself to keep yourself safe....

From the off there is also working out your boundary of what you're okay telling your current partners. Do you wait until you're in an established relationship before telling your partners? Do you tell other partners at all? Do you tell your partners of every match and initial talks with someone?

Then adding in what your partners expect from you (if it crosses your boundary this will need further conversations on how to manage it all going forward with your boundary being respected) and what your matches on the apps are okay with too.

Types of apps:

- Kink friendly - there are more kink and BDSM friendly apps out nowadays where people can be more open about what they are looking for from the off (e.g. FetLife, KindD, Feeld).
- Non-monogamy friendly - apps that allow you to choose ENM as an option for your profile rather than having to write it in, and some you can link your account to your partners too (e.g. Feeld, OKCupid, #Open, Lex).
- Casual Sex apps - some apps are made specifically for those casual relationships if that's what people are looking for (e.g. Grindr, Down, HookUp, Wild).
- Traditional apps - Of course there are still the more traditional apps that mostly cater to monogamous relationships but you are able to state in your profile your relationship type and what you're looking for (e.g. Tinder, Bumble, Hinge).

Looking after yourself:

- Think about your boundaries - What are you wanting from dating? What are you okay sharing with others and does this match your potential dates and current partners?
- Protect yourself - keep yourself safe when on dating apps - <https://www.rainn.org/articles/tips-safer-online-dating-and-dating-app-use>
- Try not to compare yourself to others - are *all* their matches quality matches? There's also evidence of the algorithms being in certain peoples favour! - <https://www.sassyhongkong.com/stop-comparing-your-relationship-dating-sex-lifestyle/>
- Try not to get into the dopamine hit loop - some people can get 'hooked' on the dopamine hit they get from matching with people or talking to new people even though they don't necessarily want another partner or don't have the capacity. Clients can get into a cycle of: deleting apps in a moment of overwhelm and frustration, this leads to a feeling of low self-worth, this leads to wanting a boost in self-esteem and confidence, client re-downloads apps to get the dopamine fix, the apps don't live up to the fantasy and leads to overwhelm and frustration..... and the cycle continues.

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Dependants

If you have children, or pets that take commitment, there are things you will need to consider.

Will you tell your children? At what age?

How much will you tell your children?

When will you introduce partners to your children?

Do your partners want shared responsibility in co-parenting?

Living situations?

Safety of your children?

How to manage scheduling around still giving your children enough attention and care?

There are SO many things to consider it can become overwhelming.

An excerpt from my course for Mental Health Professionals of Working with Non-Monogamous Clients:

"Because of the social stigma faced by non-monogamous individuals, as well as fears of the child being bullied or treated unfairly in school systems for example, there are many non-monogamous dyads and families who choose to 'pass' as a blended family or as a dyad. It has been found by some research, also cited in Alarie (2023), that some children were excluded from play dates with others from their peer group due to the parent's 'lifestyle choices' and so there can be a fear that being openly non-monogamous can impact negatively on the children in the family dynamic.

However, there is also research which has shown that multi parent households can have positive developmental influence on children as well as social influence. Having multi co-parenting roles allowed for more time and care to be given to children in the family structures, where the children shared a sibling relationship with other children even if they weren't biologically related.

The multi co-parenting structure also allowed for individuals to remain secure in their own personal identity and continue to express and spend

time on themselves, i.e. having time to be able to meet their own needs as well as their children's. [A Swedish study suggests](#) that non-monogamous individuals may maintain their lifestyle to reinforce the message to their children that life is there to live it in your own way and be able to express yourself authentically.

In relation to swinging as a structure of non-monogamy, [This article](#), details some experiences of couples who opened up their relationship to swinging and how they deal with it around their children as well as a [blog post here](#) which shows an interview of a young woman who found out her parents were swingers. It summarises that often parents will choose not to tell children of their 'lifestyle' keeping their sexual experiences separate from their family experiences; there may be a pattern of closing or minimising their external relationships through pregnancy and infancy, to then open back up once the children are older. Alternatively, couples may choose the approach of honesty, in that they don't want to hide their lifestyle and authentic selves, though again this is dealt with in different ways.

How to look after yourself (and your children):

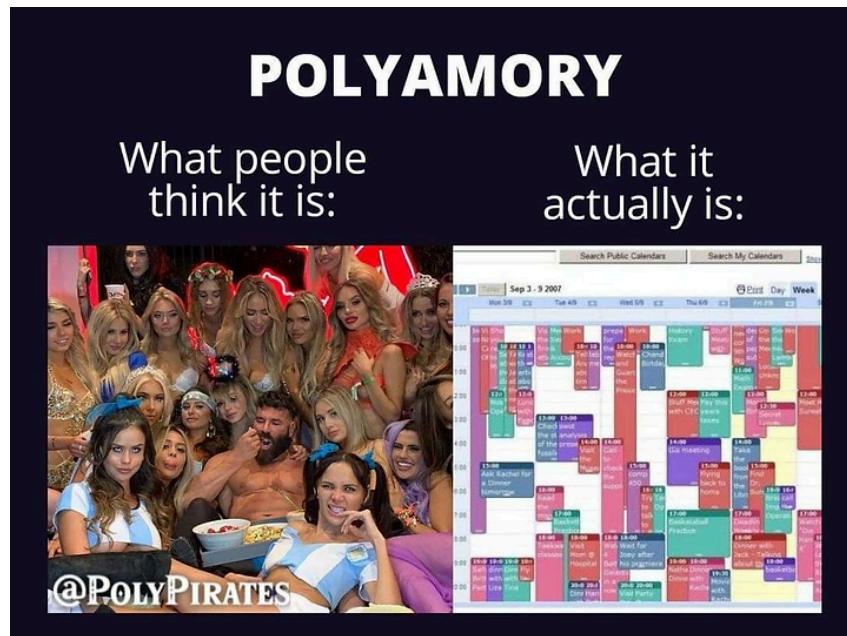
- Take some time to consider how you want your relationships to look?
- If you don't have children yet, but hope to, how will this look?
- Are you okay with your partner having children with others? How will this look?
- When do you feel able to introduce partners to your children? Will this depend on your children's age and understanding?

Remember you are human, you're allowed to live your own life as yourself, whilst still being responsible for your children. Try to give yourself some compassion and kindness in your experience. You can only do the best you can with what you have at the time.

Again, therapy (or using your support network), can be a good space to explore all of this.

Capacity

There is a joke within the non-monogamous community that you need a google calendar expert to be able to manage the scheduling!



We can get to a point in relationships where we are saturated and at capacity, i.e. we have no more energy, time, or desire to add anything else into our relationship dynamic. It is difficult to juggle health, work, dependents, education, family, friendships, and relationships amongst anything else going on in your life, so your capacity to do all of this whilst still looking after yourself is important.

Using Spoon Theory as an example of capacity. This theory was proposed by Christine Miserandino in 2003 to explain what living with a chronic illness was like in relation to a diminished capacity and energy levels to a healthy person. The idea is that you wake up with a certain number of spoons each day (e.g. 10). Each thing you do in the day takes a certain number of spoons (e.g. a shower takes 2), from here you can show what your capacity is and how your day uses up your spoons. This can be really useful when looking to communicate your capacity to others, as most people with diminished capacity will wake up with less spoons to use than a healthy person. For more info on this Happiful covers it well - <https://happiful.com/what-is-the-spoon-theory>

Issues can arise when someone's capacity doesn't match another's (jealousy/insecurity), where the want doesn't align with capacity to do, and misjudging/changes in capacity.

Looking after yourself:

- Self care - not just as a reactionary maintenance but as a consistent ongoing care towards yourself allowing you to give more to other places.
- Communicating your needs to others to look at ways of supporting each other.
- Self check ins on how you're doing and what you're able to manage



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Relationship Escalator

In Western Society we tend to follow the relationship escalator, this is the timeline in which we feel a relationship should follow in order to be "good", "worthwhile", "healthy". There is a feeling that the relationship needs to be moving forward in order for it to survive and keep the relationship going.

The escalator has [8 steps](#) from initial contact to "legacy" being fully merged in livelihood, marriage, cohabiting, and being family.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, and many non-monogamous people still do follow this escalator to some degree, but the importance of bringing it up is **you don't have to**. Love isn't a "one size fits all". You can work out your way to be in a relationship! This article describes it all really well - <https://greatist.com/connect/relationship-escalator>

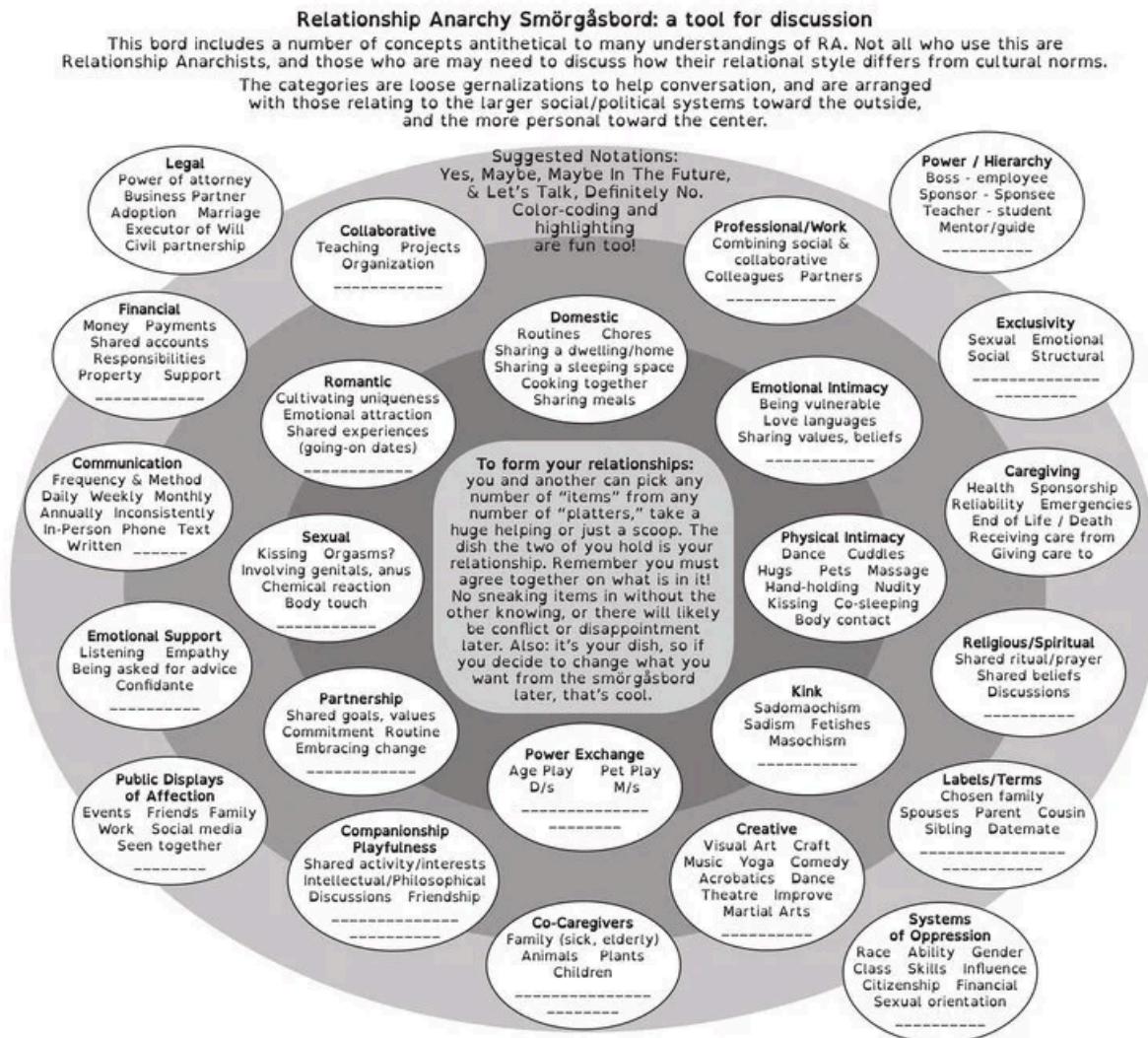
Breaking away from this escalator is particularly key in Relationship Anarchy as relationships platonic, romantic, sexual etc. are all "defined" by the individuals involved in them rather than any societal expectation. This can change and adapt as life goes on.

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In doing this, there is a handy Relationship Smorgasbord created by Andie Nordgren in 2006 which allows you to sit down with others and look at how you would like your relationship to be:

Emotional intimacy	Physical intimacy	Sexual intimacy	Companionship
Sharing vulnerability Emotional support Confidante Words of affection	Cuddling Kissing Hand-holding Dancing Massaging	Sexual acts Intercourse Sexual talk Kissing Fondling	Playfulness Shared activity/interests Friendship Intellectual/Philosophical discussions
Long-term partnership	Caregiving	Co-caregiving	Entanglement
Having shared goals for the future Commitment Chosen family Embracing change in each other	Receiving care Giving care Emergency contact	Elderly, sick or disabled adults Children Plants Animals	Cohabitation Finances Routines and chores Legal commitment
Collaborative partnership	Kink	Voluntary asymmetry	Social partnership
Teaching Leading projects Organisational activities Artistic collaboration Business partnership	Domination Submission Sadism Masochism	Sponsor - sponsee Teacher - student Mentor - guide Guardian - ward	Public Displays of affection Shared social circles Presenting as a social unit

And other versions which allow you to add in your wants like this one updated by Maxx Hill in 2019:



Originated by Lyrica Lawrence & Heather Orr of Vancouver Polyamory in December 2016 (v1). Updated by Maxx Hill with the guidance of the Relationship Anarchy, Polyamory, and Solo Polyamory Facebook Groups: April (v2, v3) & September 2018 (v4), & January 2019. This is Version 5.

Please share. Translations into any language are welcome. Contact Maxx for editable file: maxxhillcreates@gmail.com

- If we take away the pressures of society, how do you want your relationships to be?
- Would they be different to how they are now?
- Would you like to be able to have fluid relationships that can adapt with life?
- Would you be open to de-escalating relationships when certain parts aren't working any more without it meaning it has to be an ending?
- Does the idea of not having a "label" for your relationship scare you? or excite you?

Safe Sex Practices

If you're looking at non-monogamy in a way to explore your sexuality then safe sex is definitely something to consider. Safe Sex practices generally consist of using birth control, protection from STDs, and STD tests done periodically. This will be different for each relationship and the boundaries of the people involved but think about:

Do you want to fluid bond with people (not using barriers (like condoms) for fluids to be transmitted in sexual practises)?

- With more than one person?
- How will you manage this in a safe way for everyone's health?
- Is everyone okay with this?

When being with a new partner:

- Will you get tested before and then 3 months after?
- Will you use protection until you have test results or abstain until you've been tested?
- Will you take their word for their results or want to see them together?
- Will this decision include your current partners - what are their boundaries and wants?
- Will you tell current partners when you have a new sexual partner? Or if you plan to be sexual with someone e.g. one night stands?

In terms of Kink, Swinging, Threesomes, Orgies, planned Sexual Events:

- Will you "vet" the event? And the people?
- Check out where the event takes place first for safety reasons
- Try to check reviews or speak to others who have been to events to weed out any unsafe events (unfortunately there are a few out there)
- Remember to have discussions around pre-care, care during (e.g. safe words), and after-care for **all** involved. Doms/Tops need this care just as much as the Subs/Bottoms.

This post goes into things to look out for in a lot of detail and is useful to think about here -

<https://thiskindagirl.co.uk/what-are-the-dangers-of-swinging/>

In terms of learning each other's Kinks you can use things like

<https://www.quiv.re/> to see your compatibility and what might be on or off the table.



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Things to Avoid

Non-Monogamy being "a fix"

As mentioned before, non-monogamy isn't a "fix" to something that has happened or something that is "missing". It can be unfair to put those expectations onto someone who isn't yet aware of your situation.

This can lead to much more heartache down the line for your original people involved but also for whoever else is involved afterwards. You may decide to open up your relationship following an affair, find that you haven't done enough work on your current relationship, and then decide to close your relationship back to monogamous.

There is also the treatment of an individual as an object to take into consideration here - especially where sexual relationships are involved. Whilst having a non-monogamous urge for sexual exploration with others, remember that they are people too, they deserve a say in how the relationship works and they are allowed to set their own boundaries, they are not there explicitly for your pleasure.

Non-Monogamy being "superior"

As stated, non-monogamy is just as valid as monogamy, there are pros and cons to each of them. No matter the relationship type, they can be healthy or unhealthy. If monogamy works for you amazing, as for non-monogamy, but that doesn't mean that will be the case for everyone else nor "should" it be - who are you to judge that?

Unfortunately, there can be a train of thought in some non-monogamous communities that being non-monogamous means you're more "emotionally involved", whilst it can be argued more internal work is needed in order to manage multiple relationships, it doesn't necessarily mean you're more evolved than others.

Abuse and cheating can still happen in non-monogamous relationships, they are not immune to harmful ways of being in relationships.

Control

CONTENT WARNING - mention of abuse in relationships - not detailed.



Ideally you are looking into non-monogamy because you want to do this for yourself or you're looking into supporting someone.

If I haven't driven this home already, you get a say in how your relationship looks!

However coercive control is still something that can happen in relationships at any point in your non-monogamous journey. Coercive control is where someone manipulates, harms, threatens you into things you wouldn't choose to do yourself. This can be in an emotional sense but also in a sexual sense.

If someone is trying to open up their relationship with you by threats (You will do this otherwise....), manipulation (Don't you want me to be happy?), or harm (I will [insert harmful behaviour here] if you don't....), then this is coercive control by getting you to behave in a way they want without considering your feelings or thoughts on it.

If you find that this is happening to you, please try to reach out to someone for support. You can read more about coercive control here - <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/coercive-control/>



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Couple's Privilege

This is normally seen in hierarchical relationships where the primary partner's relationship is prioritised before any other relationship. This can include veto powers as described below, limited privacy on other relationships without consent from the secondary partner, or "rules" rather than setting individual boundaries.

- Veto powers - this is where a primary couple decides that their primary partner can veto behaviour in their secondary relationship, e.g. A + B are a primary 'couple', B has another partner, C, and have been dating for a little while. A decides that they don't like the idea of B + C having a sexual relationship and so vetoes any sexual behaviour past kissing. B agrees to this. C is then unable to have a say in whether they agree with this or not and their own relationship is being controlled by their meta.
- Privacy consent - If you are texting with Partner A and then decide to show Partner B these messages without getting consent from Partner A, this can be breaking someone's privacy, boundary, and trust. It is something that isn't always thought about when entering non-monogamy, but this is why talking about all types of boundaries is important.
- Rules such as One Penis Policy (OPP) - This is normally in relationships where the penis owner puts a rule down that their partner can't have other partners with a penis. This typically comes from male (AMAB) entitlement and not wanting their partners to have penetrative sex with anyone else, even though they themselves are able to have as many partners they want where penetrative sex is key.

Essentially, putting "guidelines" in place for someone without considering their place in it all. This is also seen in triads where a couple has opened up to become a triad dynamic (discussed more in Unicorn Hunting).

Unicorn Hunting

A "unicorn" is normally a bisexual individual targeted to join an already existing relationship, however the gender and sexuality of the individual can vary!

And so, Unicorn Hunting (UH) is where a couple looks for a 'third' to join them in a relationship either romantically and/or sexually. This is often seen as unethical in the polyam community where couples privilege is involved and with the idea that the 'third' is an option without having a say in how the dynamic works. The general feeling is that having a triad - a relationship between three people - relationship is valid, but specifically opening up from a couple looking for someone to date you both in a forced way isn't okay.

Using the term "a third" is automatically deprioritising that individual's importance in the relationship to be as the last thought. There are also complications where this is targeting bisexual individuals in that it fetishizes their sexuality!

There can be ethical ways of having a triad, this is generally where the relationship happens organically rather than being forced, and where each dynamic is on equal footing; Triads are made up of 4 relationship dynamics. e.g. Partner A + Partner B, Partner A + Partner C, Partner B + Partner C, and Partner A + B + C and so giving time and energy to each of those dynamics is important.

Resources

Further Resources:

Websites:

<https://www.morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html>

<https://medium.com/polyamory-today>

<https://poly.land/categories/start-here/>

<https://polypirat.es/explain/enm/>

Books:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ethical-Slut-Practical-Polyamory-Relationships/dp/0399579664> - also on audible

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Polysecure-Attachment-Trauma-Consensual-Nonmonogamy/dp/1944934987> - also on audible

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Anxious-Persons-Guide-Non-Monogamy-Relationships/dp/1839972130>

Podcasts:

<http://polyweekly.com/>

<https://www.normalizingnonmonogamy.com/>

<https://lovingwithoutboundaries.com/>

<https://www.multiamory.com/podcast#gsc.tab=0>

Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/chillpolyamory/>

<https://www.instagram.com/polypages/>

https://www.instagram.com/polyamory_awareness/

<https://www.instagram.com/polyamproud/>

<https://www.instagram.com/polyamfam/>

<https://www.instagram.com/polyamcomix/>

<https://www.instagram.com/polyamorousplatypus/>

<https://www.instagram.com/thepolyamoroustherapist/>

<https://www.instagram.com/polyphiliablog>

Communities:

I am hesitant to recommend any as many are big groups and so each person's experience of them will be different but some ideas of places to look that others have found useful:

- [Search "polyamory" on Facebook](#) for groups you can join.
- Reddit has many different subreddits around non-monogamy:

<https://www.reddit.com/r/nonmonogamy/>

<https://www.reddit.com/r/polyamory/>

<https://www.reddit.com/r/Swingers/>

- Try looking on meetup for in person non monogamy groups:
<https://www.meetup.com/topics/polyamory/>

- Discord is a wonderful online community space with many servers available to join:

<https://disboard.org/servers/tag/polyamory>

Thank you so much for downloading and reading through.
If you would like to send me any feedback, suggestions, or a testimonial please do via info@emilyduffytherapy.co.uk