



IS MONOGAMY OVERRATED? OPEN COUPLES TELL ALL

They're married, but they each sleep with others. Do polyamorous people understand love and sex better than you do? Could be. By Kristin Canning

KEVIN AND ANTOINETTE, A MARRIED couple in Philadelphia, are out to dinner with their two little girls. Between inside jokes and bites of chicken fingers and pasta pomodoro, they talk about their day, about school, about movies. Like any typical family. But two other adults are with them at the table, a man and a woman. After settling the check, Antoinette leaves with the man—her boyfriend, Gary. Kevin says goodbye to them and to the woman, his girlfriend, Maggie. (Their names have been changed.)

Kevin will take the kids tonight while Antoinette sleeps at Gary's. Tomorrow, Antoinette will be with the kids while Kevin stays with Maggie. People sometimes think they're divorced with new partners, trying to make coparenting work. Nope: "I have a new partner," Antoinette quips, "but I kept the old one too."

Antoinette and Kevin recently celebrated 10 years of marriage. Their open relationship started when they stumbled into a threesome 15 years ago. Antoinette, a physical therapist, says she's "the hinge of a V"; she has a relationship with her husband as well as with Gary, a long-term boyfriend. Kevin, a writer, calls himself a "relationship anarchist" with too many partners to count.

If that's hard to wrap your head around, you're not alone. For most of us, the traditions and limits of monogamy are deeply ingrained. There's courtship, marriage, and children. Then you grow old together, faithfully. That's relationship success, right? For those who aren't monogamous, there's no such road map. And that, they'll tell you, is a good thing. With fewer rules, there's more negotiation, more talking.

"Open relationships require so much communication just to survive," says Kevin. His previous monogamous relationships, by comparison, were on nonverbal autopilot. "We didn't feel we needed to talk about things, because all of our lessons came from TV shows and pop culture. Everything was just on a default setting." Antoinette agrees: "The moment we chose to step off the relationship escalator, we had to say, 'Okay, what are we doing?'"

For starters, they're having sex with others. Another married-but-open couple in New York City, Sam and Kate, say they'll sometimes share partners and sometimes date separately. It's at the point where they've had women cold-calling them for threesomes. The unexpected result: Outside dating brings a new, appreciative vibe to their relationship.

It makes sense, says Kate: "We humans love seeing ourselves anew reflected in someone else's eyes." Sam

has been dating an Italian woman who often greets him by leaping into his arms and wrapping her legs around him. When he brings home that buzz of confidence, it's a major turn-on for Kate. "You go on a date with someone and they think you're kind of awesome," Kate says. "And you go home and tell your partner, and they're like, 'Yeah, you are—let's go have sex!'"

Right. Wouldn't happen in your life? Probably not, but these couples are out there. Reliable statistics don't exist, but "alt" couples are becoming more common, says Jonathan Smith, Psy.D., a therapist who works with them in Chicago. It's certainly not for everyone; even Antoinette admits that not knowing exactly how many people Kevin's seeing gives her pause. But Smith thinks that someday, open relationships will be viewed as just another option.

You can view all of this as a titillating fantasy, or just listen to these couples with an open mind. Start by nixing your default setting. "We shouldn't be static," says Renee Divine, L.M.F.T., a sex and relationship therapist in Minneapolis. "We should constantly be looking at what's going on, communicating what we need, and thinking about how we can make things better."

For Kevin and Antoinette, that means not taking each other for granted—ever. "If I'm not being a good partner to my wife, she can be with someone else in 0.0 seconds," Kevin points out. "Half the women that I date want to date her, and they're all so disappointed in her heterosexuality. I can't pretend that this is just always going to be there."

That desire to continuously be a better partner—that's where open couples might be onto something. The lifestyle may not be for you, but their love lessons could be instructive.

Six principles of poly

Open couples reveal the secrets that make their relationships strong and their sex lives hot.

Know what you each want

Alice is a polyamorous woman in Portland, Oregon, with a husband, Sean, and a boyfriend, Jon. She recalls a spat from her monogamous years when she spent the day with a guy friend from childhood. They'd hugged and held hands—an innocent show of affection, she thought. Her boyfriend at the time thought otherwise. "He assumed everyone thought it was inappropriate, and I didn't," she says. "We'd just never talked about it before." Neither of them could get past it. "He felt like I disrespected the relationship; I felt like I was walking on eggshells."

Lots of monogamous people know that walking-on-eggshells feeling. If needs aren't expressed, Divine says, a relationship can crumble. Successful poly people form their guidelines from scratch and know exactly what they are and aren't cool with. Conventional couples too often have an unspoken expectation that their partner will know the right thing to do, which can be damaging, she says. "With polyamory, that idea goes out the window

pretty quick—you have to tell people what you want and how you feel." Talking about expectations up front helps cut down on drama.

Back to reality Make a "want, will, won't" list with your partner. Don't roll your eyes; experts say this can work. Wants are what you'd like to get from your relationship (support for your goals, for instance), wills are compromises you could make (moving for a partner's job), and won'ts are hard-stop things you can't live with (drug use, say; or handholding with an old friend). You each write yours down on separate Post-its and stick them to a board in three columns. Then share and compare. You can move them among the columns as you come to understand your partner, Divine says. (If this feels too workshop-like, use a Google Doc, or at least just talk.) Your priorities will change over time—and when they do, break out the stickies again.

Take time for yourself

Juggling several partners can, paradoxically, make you selfish in a healthy way, says Jenn, 25 and polyamorous. (She's a bartender in Toronto with a Bettie Page look.) It helps you establish yourself as an individual and forces you to tend to your needs outside the group.

"When you're monogamous," Jenn says, "you can lose yourself in another person. I used to be so intense with relationships that they would fall apart because I wasn't giving myself the space I needed." Now if Jenn's partners are busy, she doesn't mope—she's often at the gym, filling her time with battling ropes, squat racks, and progress photos.

When Alice, the Oregon woman, left her ex-husband, she says, "I realized I didn't really know anyone who wasn't his

friend or family." Now she has more interests and friends; she'll spend a day away from her partners hiking. She used to define herself as half of a couple. "But now I'm an individual who has partners. That shift helped develop my independence."

Back to reality Agree with your partner that you each deserve "me time." Then schedule it and enforce it, Divine says. Therapists call this self-care. Work together to help each other recharge. Not used to the extra time? Try a few minutes a day doing something that makes you happy and relaxed, and then work your way up from there. When you both feel good, you'll be better partners when you're together.

Accept the inevitable jealousy

Robyn and Jesus first met in a small town in northern California at a conference on polyamory (aptly named “Loving More”). Robyn was running it; Jesus was a rookie. They started dating, keeping things open—Robyn already had two long-term, long-distance partners, and Jesus later got another girlfriend too. Now they’re “nesting partners” on a farm in Colorado—Loveland (of course), at the foot of the Rockies. They have a small menagerie. Idyllic, right? Well, even after years of living a peaceful, poly lifestyle, they still struggle with jealousy. “Jesus recently had this hot chick over and took her up to the bedroom, and I managed to sit on the couch and watch TV by myself, and I was like ‘Yes!’” says Robyn. “That’s still a major victory for me.”

How do they deal? By admitting the emotion—out loud. And by taking responsibility for it. “I’ll say, ‘My inner 2-year-old is having a tantrum right now. Can we talk about it?’” says Jesus. “I don’t

blame a partner for my own issues right off the bat.” Smith, the Chicago therapist, approves of this strategy. “When you feel jealous, it doesn’t mean anyone is doing anything wrong,” he says. “Feelings are just feelings, but they can give you good information.”

Back to reality Ask yourself why you’re feeling jealous. (Of something less egregious than your partner taking some dude up to the bedroom.) See if there are other reasons you’re feeling less secure. Maybe you think your partner isn’t supporting you during a rough patch at work. Tell her, Smith advises. If she’s the jealous one, perhaps worried that you’re out with someone, agree to text what you’re doing and when you’ll be home. Without this kind of transparency, Divine notes, “we’re really good at making up stories.”

Welcome change, always

Open couples and poly groups are constantly tweaking the boundaries of a relationship—adding people, breaking up with others. They expect change, which can help the relationship endure (paradox again) even as partners evolve with age, Divine says. Wanting a change doesn’t have to doom a relationship. “We’ve always looked at issues as ‘how can we fix this, what can we do?’” says Lilly, a woman in her 20s who’s currently in an open relationship. “It’s never been, ‘this is the way it is, or we’re going to break up.’”

Back to reality Asking for a change can be terrifying, Smith admits. Focus on what’s going well first, and then use the word “and” (not “but”) to segue into your request. Such as: “I’m really happy with how things are

going and wonder if it could be even better if we didn’t go out with the same people every weekend.” If you’re asking for a change in behavior, your keyword is “I,” says Divine. As in: “I feel bad when you get ticked off at my schedule, and I’d feel great if we could come up with a compromise.” This takes the blame off the partner and turns it into a discussion that you both can tackle. Awkward, maybe, but Smith says being direct is productive. Give any change a three-month test run, “the way a corporation might roll out a pilot program,” Smith says. “To actually get any useful data, they need to stick with it for a period of time, rather than reacting every time it feels off.”

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Be radically honest

People don’t hold back at Loving More conferences. They get real about their feelings, sometimes while naked. “After I took my mom to a Loving More conference, she told me, ‘I can’t be around normal people now. They don’t talk about anything!’” says Robyn. Mom’s got a point. People in open relationships have unpacked a lot of intimate thoughts—about desires, jealousies, and interests—that many monogamous couples never talk about. “You have to give yourself permission to want what you want and admit when something is bothering you,” Lilly says. Look at repressed thoughts as logs being stacked, says Jesus. “If it catches on fire, it’s going to blow up spectacularly.” Keep that stack small.

Back to reality Stop censoring yourself. Saying what you mean is worth the wince—and might just pay off. “Do you really want to be in a relationship where you can’t be your genuine self?” says Divine. So put it out there when you want your partner to quit consulting her parents about everything, or, say, try a sexual fantasy. “They could say no,” says Divine, “but they also might surprise you and be more willing to listen than you expected them to be.”

Think differently about sex

Lilly and her boyfriend James are clothes shopping, in line for the fitting rooms. They exchange glances and check for security cameras. They’re on a secret mission assigned to them by Dustin, a poly pal of theirs. They slip into a room together when the attendant isn’t looking. As they kiss and take off each other’s clothes, Lilly pulls out her phone and snaps a photograph in the mirror. They get comfortable and she starts recording.

“Dustin has a much higher libido than either me or James, so he’ll suggest sexy scenarios we could try out, and we’ll send him videos of us,” says Lilly. There was a time in a theater closet, another in an Amtrak sleeper car. “We’ve never been that adventurous before, and it’s been really helpful to have someone say, ‘Here’s something fun you could do,’” says Lilly. By outsourcing the creativity to

Dustin, Lilly and James found a way to amp up their sex lives. For many poly people, spreading out the sexual responsibilities means more sex for everybody.

“My sex life with Jesus gets better when I’m having more sex with another partner,” says Robyn. “It takes the pressure off him to be the only one to satisfy my needs.” This makes sense to Divine: “Less pressure equals more pleasure.”

Back to reality Try actively avoiding sex (yeah, we know) and focus on intimacy instead: touching, cuddling, kissing. Taking sex off the table reduces pressure and helps each partner loosen up, Smith says, and makes intercourse a forbidden and more appealing act. Okay, fine, most couples who do this end up having sex, says Smith, but that’s because they’ve put intimacy first and built up desire.