

**WORKING WITH POLYAMOROUS CLIENTS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING
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Areas of inquiry:

1. Why is it important that we talk about alternatives to monogamy now?
2. How can therapists prepare to work with people who are exploring polyamory?
3. What basic understandings about polyamory are needed?
4. What key issues do therapists need to watch for in the course of working with polyamorous clients?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT WE TALK ABOUT ALTERNATIVES TO MONOGAMY NOW?

1. Sweeping changes are occurring in the sexual and relational landscape. New models for intimacy are being sought by a growing number of individuals and couples who are hungry for workable alternatives to traditional relationship forms. The current surge of interest in these alternatives can be traced to factors such as:
 - a) longer human life spans: decades of sexual exclusivity increasingly seen as an unrealistic ideal
 - b) high divorce and infidelity rates in monogamous pairings
 - c) dissatisfaction with limitations of serial monogamy (i.e. exchanging one partner for another in the hope of a better outcome.)
 - d) growing economic and social equality of women resulting in greater choice about how to arrange our intimate lives
 - e) increasing acceptance of sex-positive ideologies, variations and practices.
 - f) expansion of the internet, giving visibility and accessibility to sex-positive culture.
2. As clinicians and sexuality professionals, we need to prepare ourselves to help others navigate new relationship terrain.

**HOW CAN THERAPISTS PREPARE TO WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE EXPLORING POLYAMORY ---
PARTICULARLY GIVEN OUR LACK OF FORMAL TRAINING IN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM RELATING?**

START BY RECOGNIZING THE ARRAY OF POSSIBILITIES THAT "POLYAMORY" ENCOMPASSES

1. Polyamory can be defined as the practice of having loving, intimate relationships with more than one person at a time, within an ethical, consensual, agreement-based context.
2. Poly" differs from "swinging". In swinging the emphasis is on couples engaging in recreational sex with others in a party atmosphere. Polyamory is primarily a relationship oriented approach to non-monogamy rather than a casual-sex oriented approach.
3. Polyamory can take a variety of forms, all adaptable to the particular desires, needs and agreements of the individuals involved. These include, but are not limited to:
 - a) Primary-plus: a couple in a primary relationship (marriage or marriage-like) agrees to pursue additional relationships individually. Their new lovers may become "secondary partners," i.e., influential, deep relationships invested with serious time and energy commitments, or "tertiary partners", i.e. occasional lovers.
 - b) Triad: Three people develop a committed intimate relationship. The primary commitment among each to the other two is relatively equal. Triads are most often formed when an existing twosome expands to include a 3rd person.
 - c) Individual with Multiple Primaries (may look like a "V" configuration): One person resides at the base of the V as the pivot point. She/he relates strongly to both partners. They do not relate as strongly to one another.
 - d) Group Marriage or Poly Family: Three or more people form a closely knit, intimate relationship system. They may be sexually exclusive within the group (this is called polyfidelity) or they may agree to conditions by which they have partners outside the group
 - e) Intimate Networks: intertwining connections between "erotic friends" who have relationships of varying degrees of intimacy, intensity and commitment.
 - f) "Swing-Poly" (sometimes called "Social Polyamory"): a hybrid between swinging and polyamory. A committed couple agree to

steer clear of deep infatuations that are viewed as threatening to the twosome, although ongoing erotic friendships may be explored together and/or separately.

g) Poly-dating among singles: Dating relationships which differ from traditional forms of “playing the field” in that the single individual is :

- not searching for “Mr./Ms. One and Only,” though perhaps Mr./Ms. Primary
- makes full disclosure of intimate relationships to all potential sexual partners.

4. Which of the above configurations would a therapist be most likely to see in practice?

- a) individuals involved in primary-plus arrangements
- b) monogamous couples wishing to explore non-monogamy for the first time
- c) poly singles

EXAMINE OUR CULTURALLY-BASED ASSUMPTION THAT “ONLY MONOGAMY IS ACCEPTABLE”. ASK HOW THIS BIAS IMPACTS AND INFORMS THE WAY WE EACH PRACTICE THERAPY.

1. Be aware that mistrust of mental health professionals exists in the polyamory community (as it does in most sexual minority communities) due to our perceived tendency to pathologize deviations from the norm of monogamy.
2. Examine personal triggers based upon our own relationship histories which elicit strong emotional responses (negative or positive) to the idea of polyamory.
3. Recognize the potentially deleterious effects upon clients of even subtle negative biases:
 - a) the client may be guarded; full disclosure is avoided and the effectiveness of therapy is compromised.
 - b) the client misses out on the opportunity to freely examine not just polyamory but monogamy as a conscious choice (vs. cultural edict).
 - c) therapist's faulty attributions of personal or dyadic dysfunction to the structure of polyamory itself may misdirect her or his attention; serious issues may remain unexplored.
 - d) therapists may be unable to distinguish healthy, genuinely consensual polyamorous practices from subtly coercive practices
 - e) therapists may be unable to provide useful tools to help clients navigate the complexities of polyamorous relationships.

EDUCATE OURSELVES

1. There is very little in the way of current research focusing on polyamorous people; there are few “experts” and even fewer teachers.
2. Resources are available, but they are primarily community based. (See attached resource list.)
3. Thus, professionals are learning about these issues together, through experience and the sharing of that experience.
4. It is not important that therapists working with poly people be “expert”
5. It is important that they be willing to learn and keep learning
6. It is not important that they be polyamorous.
7. It is important that they accept that polyamory is a valuable, viable relationship option for some people.
8. If they cannot embrace polyamory to that degree, they should refer clients to others who can.

WHAT BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT POLYAMORY ARE NEEDED?

A. UNDERSTAND THE REWARDS OF THE POLY LIFESTYLE.

1. Living “al fresco”; i.e., in the open. Consensual, honesty based living and loving is both an ethical practice and a reward in itself. Deeper bonding is possible in the absence of deception and withholding.
2. Sexual diversity. Exploration of desires that may go beyond a primary partner's interest or capacity (i.e., bisexuality, BDSM, Tantra, etc.).
3. Empowerment. Many women, in particular, relish the feeling of owning their desires, bodies and sexual-loving choices as a means of challenging generations of patriarchal oppression.
4. Capacity to meet more of one's emotional, intellectual and sexual needs through accepting that one person cannot provide all.
5. Conversely, release from the expectation that one must meet all of a primary partner's needs.
6. Opportunity to develop new aspects of personality through association with diverse individuals.
7. Honing of ability to communicate and negotiate (by virtue of necessity and practice).
8. Validation for companionate marriages which can be satisfying even if no longer sexually vital. Romantic needs are met elsewhere.
9. A sense of extended family composed of chosen intimates.

10. Cooperation in household, financial, and child rearing responsibilities (in cohabiting triads or group marriages).

B. UNDERSTAND THE COMMON CHALLENGES THAT POLYAMORISTS FACE.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

1. Discrimination by mainstream society, employers, etc.
2. Necessity for secrecy or for leading a double life
3. Family Disapproval
4. Issues related to disclosure of polyamory to children
5. Lack of legal protection in property law, inheritance law, parenting and child custody

RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES

1. When primary partners bring up the issue of non-monogamy for the first time:
 - a) the relationship paradigm is immediately altered
 - b) poly conversation forces the exploration of needs that are not being met and emotional secrets that have been kept.
2. Making the decision about whether to move forward in exploring polyamory, and, if so, determining which form is best suited to one's needs.
3. Learning the ropes:
 - a) takes time and involves growing pains
 - b) mistakes will be made
 - c) these can either divert the process or offer important lessons.
4. Development of boundaries:
 - a) drawing, communicating, maintaining one's own boundaries
 - b) respecting others' boundaries.
5. Negotiating and making agreements:
 - a) each agreement is a reminder that consent is at the heart of successful poly relating
 - b) consent must be given at an explicit and detailed level
 - c) the sheer volume of discussion involved in juggling complex issues with multiple partners may seem daunting
-when overwhelmed, it's best to slow down, back up, and ask, "What skills am I lacking and how can I acquire them?"
-therapists can be very helpful at this juncture.
 - d) issues often taken for granted in monogamy require exhaustive processing in poly, for example:
Time and Resources: how much should be expended on whom?
Sex: what type of sex is OK, with whom and under what circumstances? (i.e., male or female, casual, party, bdsm play w/ or w/o genital contact, penetration, etc.)
Safer sex: medical issues, contraception
Disclosure: how much sexual/emotional disclosure about other partners is desired; how much is too much?
Relating to a lover's other partners: to what extent? meet them before sexual activity occurs?
Belongings and personal space considerations: i.e., "No, your lover can't wear my bathrobe to get in and out of the hot tub," or, "Yes, it's Ok if you and he make love in our bed."
Integrating new partners with family and friends: if, when, how?
Parity: attaining relative equivalence in extra-dyadic relationships; addressing the ramifications of lack of parity
Veto Power: who has the right to say "no" to a partner's choice of another?
6. Agreements often proceed through a process of self-assessment, communication, negotiation, experimentation, more self-assessment, discussion, and if re-negotiation is desired the process repeats.
7. Adhering to a "no surprises" policy
 - a) caution and timing is required so as to avoid skipping necessary steps in bringing new relationships on board or adjusting to changes within ongoing relationships
 - b) importance of thinking ahead and communicating thoroughly so that no one is surprised by "out of the blue" developments.
 - c) avoid initiating change faster than the slowest person in the group can accommodate
8. Maintaining integrity of agreements in hierarchical arrangements and staying alert to dicey situations, such as when:
 - a) a "secondary" partner invests primary energy (and expectation) into a relationship with a lover who already has a primary partner
 - b) a slow seeping of time/energy from primary relationship into secondary (or secondary into tertiary) occurs without consent all around

- c) time is spent with one partner to avoid attending to difficult issues with another partner
- 9. Coping with “counterbalancing forces” in the emotional realm (see following section of outline)
- 10. Jealousy (see following section)

IN ADDITION TO HELPING CLIENTS COPE WITH THE AFOREMENTIONED CHALLENGES, WHAT OTHER KEY ISSUES DO THERAPISTS NEED TO WATCH FOR IN THE COURSE OF WORKING WITH POLYAMOROUS CLIENTS?

A. THE SHADOW SIDE OF POLYAMORY

1. Coerced consent vs. true consent
2. Therapists may see clients whose relationships reflect manipulation, dishonesty, or other dysfunctional patterns that are no more representative of healthy poly than healthy monogamy
3. It is important to distinguish troubled individual, couple, or group dynamics from troublesome passages in predominantly healthy polyamorous relationships.

B. STRONG EMOTIONS IN OPPOSITION

1. Clients may experience distress, confusion, or self-doubt when idealistic views of polyamory are eclipsed by primitive emotions that seem at odds with their “evolved” thinking.
2. The exuberance attached to some aspects of polyamory will be counterweighted by corresponding surges of pain or grief over other aspects. For example:
 - a) joy in expanding the horizons of love is counterbalanced by grief in letting go of romantic fantasies about having and being the “one and only”.
 - b) thrill of sexual diversity is counterbalanced by a struggle with inner demons (fear of loss, abandonment, insecurity about desirability, sense of failure as mistakes are made, etc.)
 - c) pleasure in having more needs met by more people is counterbalanced by the weight of responsibility for self and increased accountability to others. There is pain in the recognition that even in the world of alternative relationships, the dream of “having it all” cannot be realized.

C. JEALOUSY

1. An erroneous perception that jealousy does not exist in poly (or is a moral failing if it does) is often found outside of poly circles and among people new to poly.
 - a) what we call “jealousy” is more akin to a full cache of varied emotions than a single feeling: each needs to be separated out and examined
 - b) jealousy can be managed through re-negotiation with partners, desensitization, self-awareness
2. “Compersion” is the opposite of jealousy
 - a) refers to taking delight in a partner's love for another
 - b) this is an ideal, not always attainable quickly
 - c) compersion is connected to parity; parity helps enable compersion

- feelings of jealousy toward a partner's lover may be exaggerated in the absence of a complimentary, satisfyingly equivalent relationship. Jealousy may more accurately reflect envy.

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RESOURCES

Recommended Reading:

Polyamory : The New Love Without Limits : Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships
by Deborah Anapol, Ph.D.

The Ethical Slut : A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities
by Dossie Easton, Catherine A. Liszt

The Lesbian Polyamory Reader : Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex by Marcia Munson (Editor), Judith P. Stelboum (Editor)

The Myth of Monogamy : Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People
by David P. Barash Ph.D., Judith Eve Lipton M.D.

Sex, Love, and Marriage in the 21st Century : The Next Sexual Revolution
by Timothy Perper (Editor), Martha Cornog (Editor)

Web sites:

The Institute for 21st Century Relationships
www.lovethatworks.org

From their mission statement: We seek, through education, research, and support, to create a climate in which all forms of ethical, consensual and fulfilling relationship styles are broadly understood and are equally respected and honored as legitimate choices. Publication of "Journal of Alternative Relationships" pending.

Loving More
www.lovemore.com

Publisher of Loving More Magazine, dedicated exclusively to topics involving multi-partner relating. Distributes poly relevant books, hosts conferences and workshops, and acts as a national clearinghouse and public forum for the polyamory movement.

The Anakosha Organization
www.Anakosha.org

Anakosha is rooted in both swinging and polyamory. Anakosha supports polyamory to the extent that caring friendship is encouraged, and "teachings emphasize the sensitivity, consideration and trust which are indispensable to intimate friendship". Anakosha primarily supports committed couple relationships.

Society for Human Sexuality
www.sexuality.org

Exceptional breadth of material on various sex-positive subjects, including polyamory, swinging, s/m

www.polyamory.org - Home page for the Usenet newsgroup alt.polyamory. Lots of generally helpful info.

www.polyamory.org/SF/mail-lists.html - Provides extensive list of poly-oriented email discussion lists.

www.polychromatic.com/pfp - Listing of poly-friendly professionals, including therapists

www.polyamory.com - More resources and links

www.uupa.org - Unitarian Universalist's for Polyamory Awareness

Dr. Joy Davidson holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology. She has been a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist since 1980, and is an AASECT certified Sex Therapist as well as a Diplomate of the American Board of Sexology. Formerly of Los Angeles, Dr. Davidson relocated to Seattle in late 1997, where she divides her time between private practice and writing. She is the monthly sexuality advice columnist for both Men's Fitness and Playgirl magazines. Her feature articles on love, sex, relationships and women's issues have appeared in Cosmopolitan, New Woman, Family Circle, Men's Fitness, Seasons, and First for Women.

Dr. Joy Davidson is the author of "THE AGONY OF IT ALL: The Drive for Drama and Excitement in Women's Lives" (Tarcher, 1988) which Kirkus Reviews described as: "a genuine contribution to the growing library on women's studies." Her book was a selection of the Literary Guild and was excerpted in Glamour, Ladies Home Journal, Woman, Cosmopolitan and New Age Journal. She is currently working on a new book that focuses on female sexuality.

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