

Practical Nonmonogamy

The Big Picture

There are lots of different kinds of nonmonogamy. Polyamory, swinging, open relationships, dating around, traditional polygamy, and sex/play parties, to name just a few. And each of these contains numerous sub-groups with their own styles, which are often incompatible. On top of this, there are a huge number of nonmonogamous practitioners have not joined any community, who have just figured it out on their own.

Your type of nonmonogamy is specific to you. You will need to feel out your own style, perhaps drawing on established communities and their knowledge, or perhaps making it up. There is no one roadmap or right way to do it. Part of getting into nonmonogamy is trying out different things and discovering what it is you want and what works for you.

Use polyamorous resources, whether or not you are polyamorous. One of the primary accomplishments of the polyamorous movement is that poly people write how-to books, set up advice websites, hold support and discussion groups, put on conferences filled with how-to workshops, and so on. These resources are typically useful to anyone practicing nonmonogamy, even if polyamory is not their style. It is helpful to think of polyamory as a toolbox of practices and ideas. Take what is useful to you and leave the rest.

You do not need to be evolved or enlightened to do nonmonogamy or polyamory. Nonmonogamous people are pretty much the same as everyone else, only not monogamous. They get jealous, are insecure, screw up relationships, and occasionally break up spectacularly (sometimes with more than one person at once). They are just nonmonogamous despite all this.

Nonmonogamy is not as difficult as it sounds. There is a persistent cultural myth that nonmonogamy is somehow incredibly difficult. People repeat this myth to avoid considering nonmonogamy in their own lives. Nonmonogamy can be hard at times, but then monogamy is plenty difficult in its own right. Nonmonogamy is much easier than monogamy for many people.

Nonmonogamy is not effortless. The culture has been indoctrinating everyone into monogamy in all kinds of subtle and sneaky ways. Just deciding that you are no longer monogamous does not get rid of this programming, and it will show up in surprising ways should you delve into nonmonogamy.

Breaking up does not mean you failed. If you break up, it does not mean you did nonmonogamy wrong or that nonmonogamy is impossible to do. Breakups are a natural part of having relationships. Breaking up allows the people involved to follow their

hearts and move on to better things, which may or may not be other relationships. Having more relationships on average means you will likely have more breakups. It is important to learn to define relationship success using something other than longevity.

Nonmonogamy is not inherently better than monogamy. Nonmonogamy is definitely better for some people, but then monogamy is also definitely preferable for other people. Monogamy has a lot going for it. It allows for a certain sort of very intense relationship focus that can be the foundation for personal growth. It can be comfortable in a way that nonmonogamy often is not. It allows for more free time than most types of nonmonogamy. People who have newly discovered their nonmonogamy can get overly excited and start trashing monogamy as inferior or unevolved. Do not do this.

Safer sex awareness is a must. This is true even for people in a polyfidelitous arrangement. Talk to the people you are sleeping with about STDs. Give history and possible risk factors before having sex (or other activity with STD risk, like blood play) with someone new, and keep people up-to-date on any developments. Plan out scenarios, and get used to the idea that you may catch one of the easier-to-transmit STDs. Condoms are a must if you are in an open relationship or network. Do not be surprised if someone has stricter latex rules than you, and gracefully adapt your practice to theirs. Never pressure someone to use less latex than they want. Always disclose STDs you have, including borderline cases like HSV1 or a yeast infection.

Some Types of Nonmonogamy

There are as many different types of nonmonogamy as there are people practicing it. However, it is possible to categorize nonmonogamous practices in certain ways. The following are some of the more common types.

Dating or playing around. A single person either has a number of play buddies or dates around without any of the relationships getting too serious. There is little conflict with monogamy here, and often monogamous people do this.

License to play. One or both partners in a couple have sexual contact or engage in BDSM play with others, usually on a casual basis. Often they place restrictions on what sort of kink or sex can happen. Sometimes the couple only plays together, or the other partner must be in the room, or there are other situational restrictions.

Open relationship. This term has gotten vague, sometimes meaning a license to play relationship and sometimes meaning that the people in the relationship are free to date outside.

Swinging. Couples-based license to play relationships. Swingers tend to play at sex parties, or find other couples off of personals websites. Some swingers allow the possibility of getting romantically involved with other couples or people, but this is

relatively rare. Swingers are generally heterosexual, though bisexuality in women tends to be prized in the swing scene.

One dominant/one submissive. A D/S relationship where one or both partners cannot take another dominant or submissive. For example, the dominant in the relationship may submit to others (in scenes or relationships), but should not take another submissive. Often this is independent of kink play restrictions and sexual restrictions. Note that the D/S relationship in question may not be the primary sexual or romantic relationship of one or both partners.

Other D/S-based situations. While D/S relationships are frequently monogamous, sometimes they incorporate nonmonogamy into their power structures. For example, a submissive could be collared to multiple dominants, or a submissive may have nonmonogamous freedom with the approval of his dominant.

Triads and quads. Three- or four-person relationships, usually with everyone on a mostly equal footing, though often not everyone will be sexually involved. Sometimes these are closed, other times the people in them are free to date and/or play outside. Group marriage is similar.

Primary/secondary polyamory. Situations where a couple tends to be on a typical monogamous life path (serious, moving in together, possibly children, etc) but they each date other people seriously. Typically there are no sexual or BDSM play limits on such relationships, aside from safe sex requirements. Often this effectively forms large networks of interconnected lovers. Some people are co-primary, forming V-shape or more complex relationships. There is a certain flexibility, with primaries sometimes becoming secondary or secondaries sometimes becoming co-primary. Some people date in secondary-style relationships only, either because they prefer it or because they have not found a primary.

Polyamory. Umbrella term for types of nonmonogamy that involve relationships with multiple people. Includes triads, quads, primary/secondary, and various other arrangements.

Some Reasons People Practice Nonmonogamy

At first take, most people assume that the reasons for being nonmonogamous are obvious. However, people actually practice nonmonogamy for numerous different reasons, so this assumption tends to get us in trouble. Here are some of the reasons that people turn to nonmonogamy. Try to identify your own motives for being nonmonogamous.

Sexual variety. This is the big one, though it is not always the primary reason. Nonmonogamy typically means engaging in sex or erotic play with multiple people, experiencing their styles, different sorts of eroticism, different acts, different bodies,

different genders, and so on. In a culture that values sexual variety and yet mandates that we only have sex with one person, this is one of the biggest reasons to do nonmonogamy.

BDSM play variety. Because people have very specific kinks, it is typically very difficult to find one person who matches exactly and who also is a good attraction match. So people figure out some kind of nonmonogamy and get their kinks met via different people: one person as the rope top, another as the sexual submissive, a third as the pain top, and so on.

Multiple relationships. Some people like having more than one relationship, whether they are serious or less-involved. Multiple lovers means multiple ways of experiencing love, multiple relationship arcs (starting one while well into another, for example), multiple connections, and so on. Some people find that having multiple relationships keeps them from falling into bad codependence patterns, or helps them think for themselves. There are side benefits as well, like a larger support network. This reason is most common among polyamorous people, but is also important in other kinds of nonmonogamy.

New and shiny. Some people really value new relationships or new lovers. Indeed, getting together with someone new can be a real rush, so much so that it has been named NRE (new relationship energy) in the polyamory community. People often feel guilty or shallow for having these urges, but there is nothing wrong with them: new is often fun. This remains true even if it means you only have short relationships (perhaps in addition to a serious relationship): just be frank and upfront about your goals.

Group sex and group BDSM play. Getting three people into your bed or getting those two tops to co-top you always involves some sort of nonmonogamous negotiation. When people decide that they like group scenes, negotiating nonmonogamy is a big win.

Casual play or hookups. Some people are specifically looking for a series of short-term or one-time encounters. They tend to turn to nonmonogamous communities, where these can be found. Often they also misrepresent themselves, because they make the false assumption that other people are not interested in relatively casual encounters. Do not do this: there really are people looking for the same thing as you.

Sex parties or BDSM parties. Many people appreciate going to events where lots of people are having sex or doing quasi-erotic activities in view of each other. It is perfectly possible to do this while monogamous, but it can be much easier (and more fun) to go to these parties if one is nonmonogamous.

Feeling free. Nonmonogamy creates a situation where partnered people can flirt freely, socialize as if they were single, possibly hook up on a whim, and so on. These are fun activities, and some people value them highly. Finding a way to have relationships while not being afraid of their partners' jealousy or possessiveness is a big win for them.

Staying less involved. Some people prefer to date around or otherwise avoid primary-style relationships, either for a while or for most of their lives. It can be difficult to find people to date or play with when one is not willing to enter long-term or serious commitments, at least among monogamous people. Nonmonogamous communities provide plenty of people who are looking for less-involved relationships.

Adapting to differing sex drives. Nonmonogamy is a great way to smooth out sex drive differences in a relationship. If one person has a lower sex drive or is asexual or celibate, then the person with the higher sex drive can find sex elsewhere while staying in the relationship. Some people have extremely high sex drives, and are only happy with a couple hours of sex every day, and figuring out nonmonogamy can be a relief.

Adapting to evolving sexualities. Many people figure out that they are bisexual or into BDSM only after they are in a long-term relationship. Instead of breaking up to explore their new sexual/erotic/power urges, nonmonogamy offers them a way to explore that does not involve trashing a long-term relationship.

In a relationship with a nonmonogamous person. Sometimes love just happens between someone who wants to be monogamous and someone who does not. Even if a person in this situation remains monogamous themselves, they still have to adapt to their partner being nonmonogamous, or at least having nonmonogamous urges. This means they need to do most of the work involved in becoming nonmonogamous: getting over jealousy, scheduling, etc.

Long-distance relationships. Remaining faithful to one person who is far away can basically entail becoming celibate for long periods of time, which tends to lead to infidelity. Rather than put themselves in this situation, many long-distance couples attempt to come up with some sort of nonmonogamous arrangement.

Radically rethinking relationships. People often become nonmonogamous for political reasons or because they dislike some of the ideas (possessiveness, cheating, and so on) that tend to come with monogamy. Because monogamy is central to modern relationship structure, jettisoning it can be a shortcut to building new and different sorts of relationships, which hopefully work better for the people in them.

Getting Started

Be gentle with yourself and others. There will be setbacks and things may move slowly. You will trip over obstacles that you did not foresee. Many people reach a sort of tipping point where they have worked through enough of these issues that things get pretty easy and comfortable, but this usually takes a couple years of seriously practicing nonmonogamy or polyamory.

Take the long-term view. It is very common for people to get discouraged quickly when whatever fantasy they have been harboring does not immediately appear. Getting

your nonmonogamous groove on will take time: even after figuring out what you are looking for, you may need to negotiate or establish boundaries, and then you will need to learn how to date nonmonogamously or hook up, which are their own skills. Do not let a dry spell or a slow start discourage you. Some poly people spend years single or dating only one person, just because that is how their lives work out.

Be flexible about what form your nonmonogamy takes. You may well have some specific nonmonogamous ideal in mind, or may have come up with a plan with a partner. Sometimes these work out, but other times these initial fantasies turn out to be impractical to achieve. Be willing to experiment or divert into other nonmonogamous styles.

You cannot convince someone to be nonmonogamous. You can plant the idea, but they must be sincerely interested in it and they must decide that they want to do it. Nonmonogamy requires enough effort that people who go into it half-hearted typically bail out quickly. If you want to make the switch from monogamy to consensual nonmonogamy while in a relationship, the other person needs to be enthusiastic about the idea. Otherwise, you will end up returning to monogamy or breaking up.

Nonmonogamy brings many good things other than multiple sex/play/relationship partners. Some of these can be: more flirting, a sense of freedom, an extended family or network, or a chance to experiment. Sometimes accepting nonmonogamy means being able to love that really cool nonmonogamous person. Try to see benefits aside from the carnal or romantic.

Recognize your level of investment in nonmonogamy. Are you one of those people who may go back to monogamy if things do not work out, or who could go either way depending on who you are dating? Or are you someone who needs nonmonogamy to be happy? Or somewhere in between? It is important to match your level of investment in nonmonogamy to any current or new partners, to avoid surprises down the road. Get a sense of how important nonmonogamy is to you, and communicate that to the people you are involved with.

Boundaries

Boundaries are limits obeyed by one partner in a relationship (in this case, around what said partner can do with other people) so that the other partner can continue the relationship without losing their shit.

Boundaries are good. All relationships have boundaries. Most relationships have boundaries around what one partner can do with other people. Most nonmonogamous relationships have safer sex boundaries.

Boundaries are really hard stuff. There is often crying, advances and retreats, renegotiations, things that have to be revisited multiple times or over the course of years. Try to get good at (re)negotiating boundaries while keeping your cool.

Do not feel guilty about boundaries that you need, but at the same time only create boundaries when you need them. If there is a boundary that you need but that you do not want to need, then try to dismantle it slowly over time, while taking care of yourself.

Boundaries are not the opposite of freedom. Well-negotiated boundaries make the relationship a safe space which can allow you to potentially be nonmonogamous without getting dumped. Do not think of boundaries in terms of “freedom from” restrictions but rather in terms of “freedom to” do things. Good boundary negotiation helps you get what you want while still retaining security in the relationship.

Boundaries have to be really specific. Do not make a boundary around “sex”, “kink”, “D/S”, or something similarly vague. If you find yourself doing this, instead spell out specific acts and brainstorm scenarios. It is fine (indeed preferable) to make flexible boundaries centered around intent, but be aware that there will be surprises.

Boundaries may not make much logical sense. Sometimes they are based on people’s jealousy triggers or a need to feel secure, and these things are often not logical. It is important to excavate why a boundary is needed or what feeling is triggering it, as that can be used to figure out a creative boundary that blocks the trigger but is not onerous. Do not try to hide or bury the (potentially illogical) feelings or needs that are behind the boundary, and do not use a boundary negotiation in place of actually revealing those feelings or needs.

Own your hypocrisy. It is very common for someone to not want their partner to do certain things, even as they themselves are enjoying doing those things. People tend to invent all kinds of quasi-logical excuses for this sort of thing, but this just causes more strife. Instead of denying, state your hypocrisy and admit that it is a problem. It is okay to have a hypocritical situation around boundaries, so long as the hypocritical partner views it as a problem and is working to fix it. The flip side is that you should be willing to be on the losing end of such a situation for a period of time without getting resentful.

Good boundaries are renegotiable, and often change over time. Often they will loosen over time as people become more comfortable in a relationship or situation. Drop the impulse to create rules that supposedly last forever. Create a situation where boundaries can be evolve (via a new negotiation) without automatically creating a breakup situation. Consider creating boundaries that automatically have to be renegotiated after a set period of time, like six months or a year. Do not try to predetermine how those new negotiations will go. Also, sometimes boundaries will tighten, or new boundaries will need to be put in place, and that is okay.

The best way to relax boundaries is by extending the safety and trust they create over time. Constantly fighting boundaries or breaking them on purpose rarely helps the

situation. Instead, respecting one's partner's needs and sanity tends to give them the strength to let down their guard.

It is okay to have different boundaries for different people in the relationship.

Instead of having one set of rules for everyone in the relationship, it is common to have different rules for different people. This is because the partners in the relationship have different levels or kinds of comfort, and because they are seeking out different things. Do not use this as an excuse to create unfair situations: the goal is a working compromise where everyone involved gets some of what they want, whatever that might be.

When a boundary is broken, do not break up. It will happen, if for no other reason than misunderstandings. The first time a boundary is broken, use that as a starting point for a conversation or renegotiation. Do not become a “my trust has been broken” martyr. Remember that the person breaking the boundary is almost certainly not doing it to purposefully hurt you.

Often a person will not know that they need a boundary until it has been breached.

When this happens, follow the rules for a jealousy fit. Do not break up. Discuss the boundary when everyone has calmed down. With BDSM, there are more opportunities for this sort of surprise, because there are so many sorts of play and play situations. For example, a partner who has been fine with their partner doing all sorts of pain play may suddenly get extremely upset when they engage in blood play.

Sometimes boundary negotiations are irreconcilable, and one person wants a limit that another person refuses to obey. Then, it is time to radically rethink the relationship. People often avoid talking explicitly about their boundaries or what they want to be able to do, because they fear this happening. But it happens eventually anyways when people's needs become clear, and sooner is better than later.

Boundaries should be realistic, and should not put people in a really difficult-to-maintain position. For example, try not to make “you can date them, but you can't have any sort of sex for six months” boundaries. Some people can handle this sort of tempting situation, but many cannot. Instead, tell your partner(s) that you are uncomfortable with them having sex (or playing, or what have you), and ask them to delay dating until you can get more comfortable.

Boundaries should not be used to determine the shape of a relationship. For example, do not make a “you can only see them once a month” boundary while thinking “this will keep their relationship from getting serious”. Instead, first explicitly negotiate what shape you want your relationship to have, and then use boundaries to keep yourself comfortable and safe in the relationship with that shape.

Do not use safer sex boundaries as a stand-in for emotional boundaries. You should definitely have safer sex boundaries, if you are nonmonogamous. However, do not create safer sex boundaries instead of boundaries you want for emotional reasons. If you need a boundary for reasons other than safer sex, admit it.

Negotiation Skills

Practice negotiating on relationship topics. If every negotiation turns into an all-night crying jag or blamefest, then negotiation will not happen because you will be afraid of it. Practice various sharing and listening exercises until you can negotiate effectively even on emotional subjects.

Bring up hard subjects. It is unfortunately common for people in relationships to avoid hard subjects for months or years, making things much worse when they do come to a head. While there are more and less diplomatic times to bring something up, do not use the “it’s not a good time” excuse to put something off indefinitely. At the same time, do not browbeat your partner by repeatedly bringing up the same subject.

Do not negotiate while upset or freaked out. Take a break (possibly of a couple days) or a long walk if you need to. If the negotiation is happening because of a surprise jealousy experience or similar surprise, wait a while before addressing it.

Do not chase your partner. If they say that they cannot discuss this right now, they probably mean it, and any amount of chasing them around the house will not change that (and can hurt your relationship). Give it a break and try again later. However, do not allow this to become an excuse for avoiding difficult conversations.

Create space in your negotiation for “illogical” emotions (which are rarely as illogical as they might seem at first). Admit the emotions you are feeling. Practice listening without judging or interrupting. Acknowledge your partner’s emotions without feeling like you need to necessarily do something about them, or that you need to fight them. Do not try to make all your arguments logical, and do not try to use logical arguments to conceal your emotions on a subject.

Dig into the reasons behind your negotiating position. If you can establish a chain of reasons for the way you feel, often this will provide creative solutions that are satisfactory at a different level than the initial concern that started the negotiation. Ask your partner(s) to describe into their reasons, and then listen to those reasons non-judgmentally. Do not try to devalue your partner(s) arguments by trying to show they are baseless.

Bring a can-do attitude to negotiations. What can you do to make your partner feel safer, more free, or more loved? What compromises can you make? What relatively small things can you compromise on in order to get the big things you want? Even if you cannot get the big things, what would you be happy with to start? Always bring some level of compromise to the table: sticking to a hard line will only ensure that you remain at an impasse. This does not mean you should let them walk all over you.

Be willing to not solve the problem in this round of negotiations. Bridging hard differences will take a number of periodic negotiations, sometimes over the course of months or years. Also, try to keep the negotiation short.

Negotiate for the short term. People tend to assume that whatever they are figuring out will apply to the rest of the relationship, and this tends to put people at an impasse. Make agreements that only last for a certain amount of time: a week, a month, two months. Negotiate for certain events, like a weekend away. Make it clear that what is determined only applies within the time limit, and you will need to renegotiate when the time limit is up.

Leave space for reopening negotiations. Leaving a space open for renegotiation prevents people from feeling trapped, which helps them honor any agreements. Creating a hard permanent rule just encourages your partner(s) to break it. Of course, this should not be abused: do not try to open a renegotiation just to take advantage of a particular situation.

Do not allow D/S dynamics to derail your negotiation. If it is not possible to take a short negotiating hiatus from the D/S dynamic (which is the case in many D/S relationships), then somehow work it into your D/S practice. For example, by having a mechanism where the submissive can make nonmonogamy requests of the dominant, which are judged on a case-by-case basis.

Negotiate even when there is no obvious need. Not only does this keep you in practice, but it gets you to brainstorm possible scenarios, which can be the key to avoiding nasty surprises later.

People will always hear different things. We seem to always interpret agreements in our own personal best interest. Be specific when negotiating. If you find that one or both (or all) negotiators have divergent interpretations after the fact, take to writing things down. Do not be surprised or derailed when this sort of divergence happens, as it almost certainly will.

Managing Jealousy

It is okay to be jealous. Do not beat yourself up over it. Joining a BDSM or other nonmonogamous community does not instantaneously cure you of a lifetime of heavy monogamous conditioning. Most people (including most nonmonogamous people) get jealous, though some people do not.

Accept your jealousy. Do not be scared of it. Do not be scared of your partner's jealousy, and do not get on their case about it. If you are afraid of jealousy, or you try to bury it or hide it, it will get worse, and it may come out in unproductive ways.

Feel your jealousy. The way to reduce or get rid of jealousy is to ride it out. Beat up a pillow or two, go for a long walk, or just feel crappy and do what you can to take care of yourself. It will get better.

Own your jealousy. Take responsibility for it. Do not take your jealousy out on your partner or use it to try to change their behavior. Do not use your jealousy as an excuse to create distance between your partner and their lover/partner/play buddy. Do not negotiate boundaries while upset due to jealousy. Do not hide your jealousy from your partner(s), but at the same time let them know that you are taking responsibility for it. Do not cater to your partner's jealousy.

Figure out your jealous triggers. Often these will be relatively silly things that you can avoid without putting a crimp in your relationship. If you know your partner's triggers, do not poke them if there are other reasonable options.

Jealousy often hides some other problem or emotion. Try to analyze your jealousy. Have things changed recently, and the changes could be threatening in some way? Have you changed in some way? What fears are at the root of your jealousy? If you can figure out the root of jealousy, it can often be defused, for example by facing the fear in question and accepting it.

Jealousy is often a surprise. Try to take it in stride. For example, if you are at a social event, try to bow out gracefully. Ride the jealousy, and take care of yourself, whether that means taking a walk, beating up a pillow, going to a movie, etc. Do not make relationship decisions of any sort in the midst of a jealous fit. Discuss the jealousy when everyone has calmed down.

Do not compare yourself to your partner's other partner(s). There will always be someone more domme-y, more subby, sexier, taller, shorter, or with better opera singing skills. Accept that people are actually unique, and that you bring important things to any relationship. If insecurity is a problem for you, try to find ways to be more secure in yourself.

BDSM creates a number of new potential triggers for jealousy. The focus on public play parties creates sensitive situations to negotiate, and the wider range of play techniques means there are more opportunities for triggers. Non-kinky nonmonogamists worry about sex and love, but kinky nonmonogamists also worry about D/S, pain play, bondage, kidnap scenes, erotic wrestling, wax play, etc.

Do not mistake social weirdness for jealousy. Meeting a partner/lover/play buddy of your partner or lover will always be awkward the first time, but the awkwardness will disappear after a couple such meetings. Do not be afraid of such meetings, as they will almost certainly happen.

Your jealousy may never go away, and will certainly not go away overnight. It is rare for someone to be able to entirely divest themselves of jealousy, and it usually takes a

couple years when it does happen. However, jealousy can almost always be managed and it will almost certainly reduce in intensity over time.

Finding Nonmonogamous Partners

One of the most common questions in nonmonogamous circles is: how do I find new partners? Usually this question is asked after the person already has one (possibly primary-style) partner. This section is devoted to finding that second person.

Be patient. Finding that second person is on average just as difficult and time-consuming as finding that first person. It will not happen immediately, and may take months or years. It will probably require building new social connections and investigating new scenes. Be willing to put some effort in, and do not get discouraged, defeatist, or desperate, as these attitudes will turn off new people.

Not a lot of people are willing to be nonmonogamous. If you are used to being able to date anyone whom you have chemistry with, it can be a shock to start dating in the much smaller pool of people open to nonmonogamy. Cruising through life and hoping someone shows up will generally not work. Be willing to join explicitly nonmonogamous social scenes or online forums.

Converting formerly monogamous people is usually difficult. Some people make an art of introducing open-minded monogamous types to nonmonogamy, but this is always harder than starting with someone who is already practicing nonmonogamy. It is very common for the formerly monogamous person to discover they are somehow incapable of being nonmonogamous, which causes heartbreak all around. In particular, avoid the situation where someone is only trying out nonmonogamy because they want to be with you, as this usually ends badly.

Be flexible in choice of partners. If the second relationship is a less-involved one (which is not always the case), then relax the standards you would hold for a primary-style partner. One of the neat things about less-involved relationships is that the other person does not have to be perfect for you, and you can take the opportunity to experiment with types of play, types of people, gender attraction, and so on. However, if you are radically experimenting, let potential partners know that – nobody likes to discover they have been cast as someone else's guinea pig after the fact.

Be very honest and direct. Disclose exactly what you are looking for, whether that means heavy romance with a quick move-in date, or a casual get-together once a month. It may seem that saying this sort of thing will turn people off, but in fact there are people looking for exactly the same thing and being direct will save you headache later. Tell people you are nonmonogamous at least by first date, preferably earlier. This will never be an easy conversation, but do it anyways.

Put the word out. If you can be open about your nonmonogamous practice, let your friends know that you are looking. There is a good chance that other nonmonogamous (or curious) people are floating around your social network, and having your situation well-known will draw them to you.

Use the online personals. If you are the sort who can start with someone online, using a free and nonmonogamy-friendly online dating website is a great way to filter through a large number of possibilities for someone compatible. Include good pictures of yourself, write interesting things in your profile, and write *interesting and individual* messages to people who seem like a good match. Be patient: using the personals is a skill that you will need to develop, and it may take months or years to bear fruit.

Go to play parties. Many people do not enjoy play parties, but if you like them, they are a prime place to meet nonmonogamous people. There are various kinds of play parties: BDSM-oriented, sex radical parties, swinger parties, and so on. Match the type of party to the sort of people you are looking for. Pick a party scene and attend regularly through a number of parties, as it will take that long to start meeting and playing with people. Again, be patient. Also, be aware that anyone you meet will likely want to keep playing (with other people) in the scene even as you get involved.

Go to polyamory events. This is a guaranteed way to find nonmonogamous people. Visit all the events in your area, as they will draw different types of people. Again, pick an event or two and start going regularly. Do this even if you are not polyamorous: just be open and upfront about your particular style of nonmonogamy, and do not hit on people in a sleazy manner. While the focus is on relationships at these events, they are typically friendly to anyone nonmonogamous, and some subset of poly people are open to casual hookups, BDSM play, group sex, play parties, and the like.

Do not be creepy. Do not come on to people constantly, or hit on a lot of people at parties. This will only turn people off, and word will get around, and you will be shunned. Instead, make connections and friends. You should see someone a number of times *and get to know them* before propositioning them. The exception is play parties – if you seem to have chemistry with someone, go for it, but only if they are clearly very into you. Remember that a play party or other casual hookup may be just that, and do not assume that you will automatically have a relationship or even a repeat performance with this person.

Do not blame your gender. Straight men in particular tend to get discouraged quickly and assume that their chances are poor due to gender balance. This is generally inaccurate, as there are plenty of women in mixed-gender scenes. But even when it is accurate, whining is not a solution. Instead, consider what you might be doing that turns people off, and how to play to the things that make you attractive. Do some self-examination, put some effort in, be flexible, and above all *be patient*. Take the long view and your turn will come around.

Nurturing New, Secondary-style, and Play Buddy Relationships

It is difficult to manage new, secondary-style, and/or play buddy relationships.

These relationships present a different set of difficulties than primary-style relationships. We have plenty of models for primary relationships, but none for relationships with less involvement, less attraction, less time commitment, or that are growing in the shadow of an established relationship. Pay attention and do not take these relationships for granted.

It is okay to have uneven relationship involvement levels. These are a fact of life in nonmonogamy. Do not pretend that relationships are at an equal footing when they are not. If nothing else, a longer history with one partner will create an unequal footing. If you want things to be equal, you will typically have to overcompensate to do it. Do not use the excuse that the relationships are unequal to squish or sideline a less-involved relationship.

Boundaries and negotiation are not just for primary or primary-like relationships. When starting a new or less involved relationship, lay out your desires and expectations to ensure they are compatible. Go through relationship negotiation similar to that in primary-style relationships.

Be willing to ask for what you want. If you are in a less involved relationship with someone who has a primary-style relationship, do not be afraid to ask for what you want, as that is almost always preferable to trying to suppress your needs, or trying to get them met other ways.

Find ways to reassure non-primary partners. People in less-involved relationships tend to assume they will be cast aside without care at the first hint of trouble. Figure out what you can promise to them in terms of stability or commitment, and then make those promises.

Give the new/secondary/play buddy person a voice. Try to avoid making decisions in your primary relationship(s) and then presenting them to other relationships as a done deal. Try to create a three-way negotiation pattern, even if it is one that is unbalanced or has to be channeled through the shared partner. Even if a big decision is something non-primary partners will not have a say in, discuss it with them.

Build trust and comfort between primary partner(s) and non-primary partner(s). This is an effort that should go both ways, and one that will pay off for everyone involved despite any initial awkwardness. Have partners mingle in social settings, go out together to movies, have everyone over for dinner, or otherwise interact. Do not start by having everyone go to the same play party or other sexually charged environment.

Be flexible about where a new/secondary/play buddy relationship can go. Relationships (even play buddy relationships) tend to have a mind of their own, so trying to fit them into a particular pre-defined mold causes drama and often fails. Instead, try to go with the flow as time passes and things find their own level or rituals. It is possible to

fall in love with someone you see rarely, so be prepared for this possibility. Also, this goes both ways. For example, do not assume that a new relationship will necessarily become more serious over time – often the reverse happens.

Keep a sense of perspective when creating rules for less-involved relationships. It is unfortunately common to go over the top with boundaries laid down from a primary-style relationship. Try to keep a sense of perspective by imagining yourself single and starting to date with these same rules in effect. Would you want to be involved with someone who couldn't be seen in public with you, or who could only have sex at play parties? Try to put yourself in the shoes of the other person in the interests of fairness, and recognize that each one of these boundaries effectively reduces your dating pool.

Share STD information. STDs do not care if your relationship is primary, secondary, or play buddy. Share the responsibility for STD control across the network, and bring in less-involved partners on decisions regarding what risks you are taking. Keep people up-to-date on your STD situation, including any recent new risk factors. If you think you might have an STD but are unsure, do not sit on that information.

Don't be a flake. Call people back. Set up dates and keep them. People often do not do these things because they see it as a way of keeping things casual or maintaining their independence. They treat these relationships as disposable, and they are surprised when the other person disposes of them. If you want things to be casual, just say so. Do not try to show it in other ways.

Don't lie or act sketchy. Another common technique for maintaining independence is by using avoidance tactics or outright lying. Do not lie or avoid hard subjects, especially regarding STD status or other people you are seeing. Do not give excuses if you simply do not want to see someone. Do not hide your relationships from each other, refuse to acknowledge people in public settings, or otherwise act sketchy or cagey. Doing so will get you dumped, quickly.

Do not be a cowboy or cowgirl. A cowboy/girl is someone who enters a nonmonogamous scene and tries to “rope one off from the herd”. Do not plan on being nonmonogamous for now and becoming monogamous later, unless you have explicitly negotiated it. Do not fool yourself into thinking that you will someday replace a primary relationship: this rarely happens purposefully, and trying to make it happen will just create drama and get you dumped.

Cross-Partner Interactions

People in nonmonogamous situations often have trouble interacting with their lover's other lovers, partners, or play buddies. This happens because the only cultural scripts we have for these situations are involve competition and violence. We are never taught to relate positively to people who are involved with someone we are involved with. This

section addresses how to approach these meta-relationships. We use the term “metamour” to describe a lover of one’s lover.

It will usually feel weird. There are some people who gracefully enter nonmonogamous social situations as if they were born to it, but they are rare. Most people find the experience surreal. The weirdness dissipates once the metamours get to know each other, usually after the first couple socializing opportunities. Do not mistake the weirdness for jealousy.

Try to relax and act natural. It is common for people to go a little crazy trying to figure out metamour social codes. Secondary or less-involved partners worry that they are overstepping their bounds. Primary partners worry that they are unfairly monopolizing their partner. People with more than one lover on hand fret about how to divide their attention appropriately. Some people worry about what they can say to whom. All this makes people tense and can exacerbate three-way situations. Try to relax, be gracious, and not take things too seriously.

Do not start in sexualized settings. Having one’s lovers meet for the first time at a play party or sex toy store tends to be a bad idea, as sex is in the air and this leads to tension. Instead, start with dinner, coffee, or some other neutral event.

Do not pressure your partners to like each other. Either they will like each other, or they will not, and pressuring them just makes the situation difficult. If two partners start forming a bond, view it as a lucky circumstance. And of course, never pressure your partners to have sex or play with each other: put those threesome fantasies aside. If there is group social bonding or a threesome in the works, you will know.

Going out with a group of lovers is great when it works. It can take a while to establish enough comfort for this, and it tends to depend on the personalities involved. But, if you can do it, it feels really nice to be out in public with more than one lover.

Do not act possessive in public. Do not get territorial, try to establish a pecking order, or try to assert your position. In general, acting conservatively and respectfully is the safe bet. If you meet someone in public with people you do not know, you usually should not bring up sexual or kink stuff.

If you are uncomfortable with metamours, this will make your life difficult. You will end up dealing with them at some point. You will probably run into them, and this goes double if you move in the same community or social circles. It is generally better to dive in and try to deal than to set up elaborate avoidance schemes.

It is okay to not like your metamours. You may happen to like the same person, but that does not mean you will like each other. Do not try to force it. If you do not get along with a metamour, be willing to limit your time around them, but do not use your dislike as an excuse to be unfair or to start power games.

Do not take the jealousy of others personally. If you find yourself the cause or target of someone's jealousy, remember that jealousy often does not make sense, and try to take it in stride. Be accommodating where possible, but do not be a doormat.

Common Pitfalls and Difficult Situations

Introducing the idea of nonmonogamy to a monogamous partner. This is always a hard conversation to have, and there is no good time to have it. Before starting, be very clear on how important nonmonogamy is to you: would you be happy remaining monogamous or is this a dealbreaker? Communicate this to them, though perhaps not at the beginning of the conversation. Be prepared for a variety of possible responses: sometimes the other person is all for it, other times they will decide it is a good idea once they've had a chance to consider it, and other times the answer is an absolute no. This will be harder if there has been infidelity in the past or if you are currently cheating. It is very rare for an affair to be converted to an openly nonmonogamous situation without at least one breakup.

Quick retreat from nonmonogamy. Often people will get quickly frustrated with nonmonogamy, due to jealousy, difficulties dating or playing, or because it does not match a fantasy that they started with. They then want to go back to being monogamous, often without having given nonmonogamy a serious try. If they are single, this is not an issue, but if they are in a couple often the other partner wants to continue trying out nonmonogamy. Try to plan for this eventuality, for example by promising each other to give it your best shot for the next six months and then regrouping. If returning to monogamy is a real possibility for both people, this can also help ensure that neither gets too heavily involved with anyone during the trial period.

Two people in a relationship, one monogamous, one not. This can be done, and is known as mono/poly in the poly community. If you are headed in this direction, look up mono/poly forums and resources. These tend to last when the nonmonogamous partner is willing to find workable compromises, and when the monogamous partner is willing to handle their jealousy and understands that nonmonogamy is a package deal with the person they are seeing.

Failure to take nonmonogamy seriously. Monogamous people often use nonmonogamous terminology during their dating around periods, and this leads to people making bad assumptions, such as: nonmonogamous relationships are never serious; a nonmonogamous person will become monogamous as soon as they fall in love; or nonmonogamy means something is wrong with a person's current relationship(s) and they are looking to change up partners. When a friend makes these assumptions, it is annoying. When a new lover or play buddy makes these assumptions it leads to huge drama and breakups. Be very clear with them about what your nonmonogamy does and does not mean and if they do not seem to get it, rethink the relationship.

Less-than-temporary monogamous arrangements. It is common to temporarily be monogamous in a nominally nonmonogamous relationship, typically to work on the relationship. These can be useful, but these arrangements have a bad habit of becoming permanent, or of putting off monogamous/nonmonogamous incompatibility problems to a future date. Make sure that any such arrangement has a strict time limit, which should probably be a year or less: I usually recommend three to six months. Check in frequently to remind both partners of the end date. Also, it is probably a bad idea to enter into temporary monogamy if it requires breaking up with an outside party.

Tendency towards deceit or failure to disclose. The larger culture tends to think of nonmonogamy only in terms of cheating and its attendant deceit, and it can be hard to shake this even when nonmonogamous. It is very tempting to fail to mention something that happened, or to be really vague, or to not check in regularly about what is going on, or to tell someone what they want to hear. In negotiation, this tends to lead to bad situation where a conversation happens only once and both parties walk away with different ideas, which ends up being problematic when they discover this months later. I refer to that feeling of not wanting to talk about what's going on as "that cheating feeling". If you are feeling that cheating feeling, it is time to speak up.

"Don't ask don't tell" arrangements. DADT arrangements are situations where one partner has given the other partner a certain nonmonogamous freedom, but does not want to hear about what is happening. Sometimes these are two-way. These can work out well, but are usually trouble. They are often used as a denial mechanism or to cover insecurity, and sooner or later the denial has to face facts or the insecurity explodes. If you do embark on a DADT arrangement, be very clear in your initial negotiation, to the point of writing things down. Also, check in about the arrangement every two to three months, again being very precise as to what is happening. If the clear negotiation or checkin is too much for one or both partners, DADT is probably a bad idea. Another problem with DADT is that if there is no way to verify your arrangement, potential partners will assume you are cheating. This is a reasonable assumption on their part, as a significant number of people who claim to be in DADT relationships are actually just stepping out.

Mercenary or competitive attitude towards nonmonogamy. It is unfortunately common for people to approach nonmonogamy with a heavy "what's in it for me" attitude. This can lead to very difficult tit-for-tat negotiating where one person has to have some freedom or experience before the other can do something. Try to drop competitive and self-serving attitudes. Nonmonogamy is a kind of sharing, and turning it into a competition means that everyone involved has already lost.

One person with more relationships or play. It is fairly standard for the two people in a nonmonogamous couple to have different levels of success at dating or playing outside the couple. Sometimes this means that one partner has no new lovers or play partners for months or years. If the couple converted to nonmonogamy, it is the non-initiating partner who gets more attention about half the time. This imbalance tends to be a fact of life in nonmonogamy, and it is important to expect it and accept it, even if you are the less

successful partner. Try to take the long view, see the other benefits, and remember that “success” can mean many things.

Sense of entitlement to play, sex, or relationships. After doing all the work of negotiating nonmonogamy, some people enter with the unfortunate expectation that hordes of sexy people will suddenly appear from nowhere and descend on them. They then get frustrated a couple months (or even weeks) later when this has not happened. Dating nonmonogamously is just as difficult and time-consuming as dating monogamously, only with a smaller pool of potential dates. Finding play buddies or casual hookups is also typically much harder than it sounds, and takes time. Put the effort in and take the long view.

Starting with small closed groups. Closed triads and quads (where people do not date or play outside of the group) often seem appealing to people new to nonmonogamy, but actually tend to be more difficult to arrange and maintain than open arrangements, where people can date or play on their own. When they do happen, it is typically by accident rather than design. These relationships can be quite wonderful and it is fine to desire them, but you should expect that it will take years of searching to find one, and it may never happen. This is doubly true if you do not practice open nonmonogamy as a sort of dating stage – a desire to move straight to a closed situation tends to turn people off, as does couples-based dating.

Hot Bi Babe syndrome. HBB syndrome is the tongue-in-cheek name applied to M/F couples who are looking for a bisexual woman to form a triad. Often these couples will not date individually, insist on a closed situation from the outset, and fail to treat any women they date with respect. Also, there are a lot more M/F couples looking for bisexual women than bisexual women looking for M/F couples, though the latter do exist. The bad history of such couples and relative scarcity of prospects means that being such an M/F couple is difficult. If you are in such a couple: date individually, start with open arrangements, be respectful and flexible, and understand that you will likely be frustrated despite all this.

Nonmonogamy Books

There are a number of books out that effectively act as guidebooks to nonmonogamy or polyamory. These tend to cover the same subjects (handling jealousy, getting away from monogamous thinking, converting a monogamous relationship to polyamory, etc) but have different approaches. If you pick up any one of these books, chances are that much of the book will not apply to you. This is reasonable, since these are general guidebooks and nonmonogamy tends to be really specific to the people practicing it. Take advantage of the parts that apply to you, and discard the rest.

In particular, if you are practicing a form of nonmonogamy that is very close to monogamy, these books may be frustrating to you. They tend to incorporate radical anti-monogamy politics and take strong stances. Be patient with them, do not get upset, and

look past the ideology to the useful techniques they describe. The flip side is that if breaking with monogamous ideology is important to you, then these books will work very well.

Opening Up, by Tristan Taormino. This is the most recent polyamory how-to guide, and Tristan has addressed the subject better than anyone previously. She devotes a large chunk of the book to the various ways that people approach nonmonogamy, and really distills the collective wisdom of the poly community, hitting all the major points in detail, like jealousy, safer sex, and negotiation. At the same time, the book delves into a number of less well-tread but very important topics, such as legal ramifications, returning to monogamy, and raising children in a nonmonogamous home.

Open, by Jenny Block. Unlike the other books, this is not a how-to guide, but rather a very readable memoir of the author's personal journey to polyamory. She tells the full story of her path from monogamy (with cheating), to experimenting with an open relationship, to her current V relationship. Jenny also connects her bisexuality and feminism with her perspective on our modern relationship woes. Not only is this book a good read for experienced nonmonogamous folks, it is also the perfect book to recommend to your monogamous friends and family members.

The Ethical Slut, by Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt (aka Janet Hardy). This book is widely regarded as the bible of polyamory, despite actually having few mentions of the word "polyamory" in it. It address a variety of arrangements including less-involved (casual, play buddy) relationships, sex and play parties, and multi-person dating. Has an awesome chapter on jealousy. It was written by two queer kinky women.

Redefining Our Relationships, by Wendy-O Matik. Wendy-O Matik is a poet/activist associated with the anarchist and queer communities, and she incorporates a liberationist perspective into this book alongside lots of straightforward advice on the usual subjects. In addition to promoting multiple relationships, she encourages us to break down what it actually means to be in a relationship, and find many ways of relating, thus the title.

Pagan Polyamory, by Raven Kaldera. As the title suggests, this book approaches polyamory from a spiritual perspective, focusing on the crossover between polyamory and neo-pagan practice and worship. At the same time, the author includes a lot of practical insight, to the point where this book is often recommended to non-pagans.

Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits, by Deborah Anapol. This is another solid guidebook, one that explicitly addresses polyamory. This book spends a lot of time on the political and social implications of polyamory, and makes some claims which are overblown. It is written from a new age perspective, and incorporates a lot of spiritual discussion alongside the very good nuts-and-bolts advice. It focuses more on multiple-person love and relationships, and stays away from types of nonmonogamy that incorporate casual sex or play.

Internet Resources

Franklin's Poly Pages. <http://www.xeromag.com/fvpoly.html> This website is widely regarded as the most authoritative set of online advice on polyamory. It takes a fun and pragmatic tone, and covers subjects that are not well-covered in the books, like mono/poly relationships and being a secondary.

PolyWeekly Podcast. <http://www.polyweekly.com/> These are a series of half-hour radio-show-style segments on polyamory. They can be downloaded to an iPod or similar device, or you can listen to them on your computer. The host, Minx, is charming and engaging, and the audio format allows her to cover a lot of territory. Most of the shows are on polyamory how-to subjects, but she also mixes in interviews and erotica readings.

Livejournal Polyamory Community. <http://polyamory.livejournal.com/> This is the best forum for advice on polyamory, with daily questions posted and a host of community members willing to offer good answers. If you want a more humorous (and sarcastic) take on poly advice, check out the dot_poly_snark community.

OkCupid. <http://www.okcupid.com/> People usually have the best luck on this free personals website, due to a very strong matching system and a kink-friendly and bi-friendly approach. This is not a polyamory or nonmonogamy-specific website, but the matching is flexible and as a result, your top matches will share your nonmonogamy style.

Polymatchmaker. <http://www.polymatchmaker.com/> This is the premier polyamory-specific personals website, with a good set of discussion forums and a strong mix of members, including queer folks and couples. There are usually around 5000 people on the website at any one time, which makes the pickings a bit slim.