

# Compersion for Beginners

by Koko Taylor

**Can you imagine taking pleasure in your boyfriend's feelings for someone else? That's compersion.**

Amidst a crowded dance floor, a slender blonde woman leaned over to whisper in my ear. "You're a very attractive couple," she purred. I smiled at her—an ego boost is always nice—and continued dancing with my **boyfriend**. The man with her gave me a high-five and kept flashing smiles my way. Was he trying to hit on me? It could not have been anymore clear: I was there *with* my boyfriend.

For the next half hour every time I looked up, I felt one of them trying to make eye contact with me. When we left the bar my boyfriend asked if I'd noticed the couple. "I think they were trying to hit on me," he said.

"No, they were hitting on me," I replied. Then it dawned on us: they were hitting on us as a couple. That's funny, we both thought. And then he looked at me and said, "I don't want to share you with anyone."

"Neither do I," I replied. Exclusivity with one partner is where I'm comfortable in a romantic relationship.

The model for **romance** in our culture is so dominated by the **monogamous** male-female relationship that most people subscribe to it without stopping to consider the alternatives. But not everyone is uncomfortable with sharing his or her partner.

People in open **relationships** often feel joy or pleasure when their partner has romantic adventures with other people. This feeling is sometimes called compersion. The Keristan Commune, a now defunct San Francisco-based polyamorous community, gets credit for coining the term, which is often defined as the opposite of jealousy. The word compersion is widely used in poly circles, but anyone in a non-monogamous relationship can experience joy from a partner's other **love** interests.

When Shara Smith started dating Brian Downes, he was already in a relationship with someone else and he wanted to be careful about respecting Stephanie, his first partner. "He wanted to take all the right steps, and that made me more attracted to him," said Shara, who describes compersion as a "positive emotional reaction to a lover's other relationship."

"I love to watch his face light up when she calls because I know how much he cares about her." Shara doesn't view other partners as competition. "Every relationship is unique and nobody can replace me, because they are not me."

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"It's like a parent watching their children spread their wings and fly," says Anita Wagner, of the joy she feels when someone makes her partner happy. Anita is a polyamory skills educator and advocate who decided to go the non-monogamous route in her 40s, after two marriages and divorces. "I like the openness and [honesty](#) polyamory offers. I'd rather share my partner openly than be cheated on."

Openly sharing [love](#) is the essence of compersion. After a dinner with her partner Tom, his new [girlfriend](#) Mary and Mary's husband Clint, Anita said she "couldn't help feeling happy for [Tom's] happiness. I could see how appreciative he was that I had gone out my way to put Mary at ease and signal my approval. His happiness at being free to develop a relationship with Mary was so warm and his love for me so evident."

Birgitte Phillipides, president of [Polyamorous](#) NYC, feels "glorious and wonderful" seeing someone fulfill the desires of her partner. Recently the spouse of one of Birgitte's partners told Birgitte she loved her in a platonic way. "It doesn't get much better than that in this relationship style," she says.

Shara, Anita and Birgitte's happiness seems to defy the well-known adage, "you can't have your cake and eat it too." Wouldn't these types of [relationships](#) create [jealousy](#) and insecurity?

"It does require a fair amount of emotional intelligence and maturity," says Anita. Her path from monogamy to experiencing compersion in open relationships took some "emotional stretching."

"If I'm feeling jealous, it's probably because I'm not getting some of my needs met, and that is usually because I haven't asked for it or created the environment to receive it," says Birgitte. She feels that being open about her jealousy is the first and most important step to getting past it.

All three women stated directly or indirectly that you can avoid or overcome jealousy and insecurity by making sure that everyone's needs are met and that all partners are equally happy. Achieving that balance seems essential for people in open relationships to experience compersion.

These women are unapologetically happy with their non-monogamous relationships, and compersion appears to be a cherished benefit of this lifestyle. For these women, love is not a zero-sum game; it can be shared and enjoyed across multiple people in non-traditional formats.