

Cultivating the Spirit of Compersion in Polyamorous Relationships

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CULTIVATING THE SPIRIT OF COMPERSION

Introduction:

- Not a therapist
- Poly for about 14 years.
- Website and blog
- Loving More,
- Poly FAQ

QUESTION: Who here has heard of the term “compersion” before they saw it on the program here at DOWF? What does it mean to you, what’s it’s definition?

Definitions:

- The term compersion originated at and was defined at the Kerista Commune in SFO in the early 1990s just before it closed in 1991.
- Kerista residents practiced polyfidelity.
- PolyOz (Australia poly group) defines compersion as "the positive feelings one gets when a lover is enjoying another relationship. **Sometimes called the opposite or flip side of jealousy.**"
- Poly community leader Joreth defines compersion as "A feeling of joy when a partner invests in and takes pleasure from another romantic or sexual relationship. ... **Compersion does not specifically refer to joy regarding the sexual activity of one's partner, but refers instead to joy at the relationship with another romantic and/or sexual partner.**"
- Poly author Pete Benson in his *Polyamory Handbook* says, "... compersion can be described as a feeling of joy when your primary partner (or anyone you love) shares loving feelings or activities with someone else – **because your love for your partner means that you genuinely want your partner to have a joyous, rich life. Your partner is in your life not just for your own self-gratification – not just to scratch your itch. Compersion is thus a type of empathy.**"
- Raven Kaldera in his book *Pagan Polyamory* says that compersion is an emotional state where **your insecurities are so low, your trust so high, and your value in the happiness of your partner(s) so far beyond your own baggage**, that seeing them have good relationships with other lovers inspires nothing but joy and contentment in you.

- As experienced, some think of compersion as a **form of unconditional love**, for it doesn't make exclusivity a condition of giving our love to someone else.

Related terms:

- The **adjective frubbly and the noun frubbles** are sometimes used, in the poly community in the United Kingdom and the United States, to describe the feeling of compersion.
- These terms are more suited to cheerful, light-hearted conversation, and they are more grammatically versatile, for example: "I'm feeling all frubbly" and "Their relationship fills me with frubbles".

Compersion in the News:

- In late 2007, The New York Times reported on former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's acceptance of her husband's romance with another woman.
- The article opens, "So this, in the end, is what love is. Former Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's husband, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, has a romance with another woman, and the former justice is thrilled -- even visits with the new couple while they hold hands on the porch swing -- because it is a relief to see her husband of 55 years so content."
- The remainder of the article discusses Justice O'Connor's reaction as an example of mature, "more complex" love and contrasts this with popular conceptions of "young" love.

QUESTION: Who here has come to this workshop hoping to identify strategies for overcoming jealousy?

Compersion and Jealousy:

- In romantic relationships, jealousy refers to the negative thoughts and feelings of insecurity, fear, and/or anxiety over an anticipated loss of a partner or of that partner's attention, affection, or time.
- Because polyamorous relationships often exist within cultural frameworks of monogamy, where jealousy is understood and even encouraged as a natural reaction to perceived competition for a partner's attention, affection, or time, treatments of jealousy in polyamorous literature are quite extensive.
- In her book *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits*, Dr. Deborah M. Anapol describes five different types of jealousy - possessive, exclusion, competition, ego, and fear - before discussing compersion.
- The books *The Ethical Slut* and *Opening Up* also devote entire chapters to discussions of jealousy.

- Anapol also says that jealousy is most often found when a person's need for control is threatened.
- In her book *Opening Up*, Tristan Taormino says that part of achieving compersion is letting go of any perceived control we have over our partners.
- When we do this, we give our partner the freedom and support to grow and change in whatever way they need.
- According to PolyOz's website, compersion can coexist with jealous feelings.

QUESTION: Anyone ever have the experience of feeling both compersion and jealousy at the same time?

- Jealousy is really about fear. Fear of
 - The unknown
 - Change
 - Losing power and control
 - Scarcity
 - Loss
 - Abandonment
- According to polyamorous journalist Eric Francis, compersion can be considered a kind of fearlessness, or at least embracing the fear and not letting it drive your decisions.
- It stands to reason that the better emotional shape both we as individuals and our relationship(s) are, the less there is to fear.
- Recommend confronting fear and how it works in your life. Read *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Dr. Susan Jeffers.
- For more on jealousy, see *Making Peace with Jealousy* handout on the practicalpolyamory.com website under Downloadable Documents

Compersion, competition and possessiveness:

- Jealousy, possessiveness and competitiveness are the roadblocks to compersion.
- Western society's cultural standard is a sense of entitlement to ownership of a monogamous partner's body and emotions. This is where many of us are coming from when we try to work with traditional, habituated emotions inside new ways of relating.

- It's understandable to have fears and competitive and possessive feelings and thoughts. By catching ourselves at them and challenging them, we can make good progress toward turning a desire to compete for and possess a partner to feelings of generosity toward our partner and their partners. We can do this because we know our relationship is safe no matter how our partner may feel about another.

Transformation -- Jealousy, Acceptance and Compersion:

- Dr. Anapol says that if you can't imagine feeling compersion instead of jealousy, you might begin to move in this direction by
 - focusing on the happiness your beloved feels at the prospect of an additional love relationship rather than your own discomfort about the possibility of losing someone who is important to you.
 - Just having a concept that acknowledges that you have the potential of feeling joy and expansion rather than fear and contraction in response to a loved one's sharing their love with others can go a long way toward transforming jealousy.
- In *The Ethical Slut 2nd Edition*, Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy talk about the useful strategy of fixing your partner up with dates.
 - Story 1 - Janet recalls meeting a new Internet acquaintance for coffee who described a pet sexual fantasy that was startlingly similar to that of Janet's existing partner. Janet set up a first date between the two who went on to have a long and intense love relationship with Janet joining in later on.
 - Story 2 - Dossie was once out on a date with a longtime lover of hers when she noticed an attractive person trying to catch her eye behind her date's back. She explained the situation to her date who had a stroke of genius. He strode over to the young man in question and with great dignity announced, "My lady would like you to have her phone number." The young man looked terrified at the time, but he called the next morning. Dossie has made use of this strategy repeatedly since then and recommends it highly: they always call!
- Tristan Taormino in her book *Opening Up* writes at length on the subject of compersion and specifically discusses compersion and jealousy. She says that:
 - In an ideal world, when your partner is happy, you are happy, even if you have done nothing to provoke this happiness. But this may be easier said than done for folks who wrestle with jealousy.
 - People work hard to tolerate and support their partner's other relationships.
 - It's one thing to accept that your partner has other lovers or partners; it's another to take joy in them.

- The gap between acceptance and joy can be wide. She believes that acceptance is a skill that can be learned rather than a static state of mind.
- Acceptance is not a skill most of us are taught or that is encouraged in our culture, a culture much more given to encouraging and reinforcing jealousy and competitiveness.
- For some compersion can be learned, and like anything else it takes patience and practice.
- Tristan says that the first step to learning compersion is unlearning jealousy – letting go of feelings of insecurity, possessiveness, and fear, striving for a shift in consciousness.

Erotic Compersion:

- Tristan Taormino, also in *Opening Up*, identifies and discusses erotic compersion which she says can be achieved when you enjoy or get turned on by watching your partner have sex with someone else.
- She says that some people who experience erotic compersion don't even need to be present to be turned on and uses the following example:
 - When Ruby and her husband were first dating and he was on a date with someone else, Ruby knew that her husband's and his date's intention was to have sex.
 - She was alone that night and was sitting around with an icky feeling like, oh my god, what does this mean, maybe I'm not pretty enough – all those insidious things – and she just started imagining the two of them together.
 - It was an incredibly beautiful turn-on. So she brought out her Hitachi vibrator and had amazing orgasms thinking about them having sex together.
 - Somehow eroticizing it took away the ickiness and replaced it with excitement.

Compersion and Empathy:

- The definition of empathy according to Merriam-Webster: The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also, the capacity for this.
- Try to think of other situations in your life where you felt empathetic in a positive way, perhaps for a good friend or child or other relative.

- Think of a time when you had no sense of envy or jealousy, just an understanding about what they must be feeling, including pleasure, and your reciprocal pride for them and pleasure at their success.
- This is what we are talking about when we talk about compersion.

Quote:

- I have been able to enjoy the pangs of jealousy, and grow from them, and begin to understand what compersion is when I look at the happiness of one of those that I love looking at someone else that they love. – Theresa, *What Polyamory Has Meant In My Life...*, an essay published on the polyamory society website.

Generosity of Spirit and a Gift of Love:

- I have found that the approach that makes me feel best about waving goodbye with a smile on my face when my dearly cherished sweetheart goes off on a date with someone else is to remember that I bring to our relationship an intention not to own him or compete for him with others.
- Instead I respect his autonomy as an individual and as someone who is with me because he wants to be with me, not because I have some kind of claim on him.
- I do my best to bring to this a generosity of spirit that makes it a gift of love. If I want him to be happy, then I want him to find joy in whatever makes him happy. If that includes the freedom to love and be loved by others in addition to me, then I can't really imagine any greater gift (except perhaps parenthood.)
- Which leads me to what I call....

The Secret of Polyamory:

Here's a secret:

- If you and your partner have a solid relationship and each is committed to and values the other no matter who else enters the picture, then giving your partner the gift of freedom to love others, too, frequently causes them to love you even more for giving them this gift.
- The abundance of love they receive as a result of your generosity is likely to secure your place in their life far better than fits of anger and jealousy ever could.
- This is how it works in my life and the lives of many, many other polyamorists I know. I feel significantly more secure in my primary relationship today than I ever felt in either of my supposedly monogamous marriages where cheating led to a lot of heartbreak.
- I like to look at not being possessive of all of my partner's love as a gift of love to him from me that not only he deserves, but that everyone deserves.

Conclusion:

- Learning to be compersive takes some time and work for most of us,
- If you are new to polyamory, you should not expect to master compersion right away.
- It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the idea that you *should* be more compersive and less jealous.
- Be kind to yourself and know that we are all works in progress.
- Keep working on trust in your relationship(s) and self-awareness.
- Focus on your partner's happiness at having this abundance (or potential abundance) of love in their life and be conscious of and intentional about giving your blessing as a gift of love.
- Most partners will recognize this for the great gift that it is and love you even more for it. You will feel more secure in your relationship, and new loves will feel much less threatening.
- Quote from *Opening Up*: The closer you come to embracing the spirit of compersion, the better you are at managing jealousy, letting go of possessiveness, and feeling positive about all your partner's relationships, even the ones you are not a part of.
- Ultimately if this keeps up, you will find yourself one day smiling at the knowledge that you and others who love them add up to a whole bunch of love for this special person, your partner, and if we really love our partners, we should want this for them and they for us.
- Keep an eye on the goal of one day being able to move through your day centered in confidence, self-esteem and the strength and health of your existing relationship so that you feel content in your relationship(s) and yourself. And then – surprise! - compersion is the natural result.

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Compersion For Beginners

By Koko Taylor

Pub. Oct. 20, 2008, on tangomag.com

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."

"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 ^[3] 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.