

# Jealousy and Compersion with Multiple Partners

How polys deal with jealousy and feel happy when their lover loves someone else

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From *The Lives of the Rich and Famous* to *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, mainstream culture in the US is saturated with jealousy. Popular images of romance cast jealousy as an emblem of true love, because someone must really care if they are jealous, right? The flip side of jealousy, *compersion* or the warm glow of happiness that comes when one's lover is happy with one of their other lovers, is so little known that the polyamorists had to make up a word for it.

The majority of polyamorists (and a significant number of serial monogamists) experience jealousy at some point in their relationships. Polys have four primary responses to jealousy, frequently moving among them and combining them so that they can go from freaking out to introspection, through compersion, and back to freaking out again in the same evening.

## **Freak Out and Want to Control Others**

Often, especially when initially exploring polyamory, people who experience jealousy get extremely upset and feel threatened. This feeling of threat can spur the jealous person to want to control others, which often results in a slew of rules that limit how/when/where/who their partners can see, and what/when/how/where they can do/say/think with other people. The idea behind the rules is usually that, if they can arrange things just right and the rules are followed to the T, then no one will feel jealous because the feelings of jealousy will either go away, or situations will be controlled to the point that they no longer provoke jealousy. Usually that doesn't work, though, and people still experience jealousy, so the rules have to be rewritten to include the new situation that provoked jealousy and new rules about how to interact with others so jealousy will not appear. This strategy often results in an ever-growing list of rules that governs ever-shrinking and circumscribed relationships. Sometimes polys who feel the desire to control others recognize it as a booby trap and talk about it instead of actually trying to do it.

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## Discussion, Introspection, and Negotiation

Another way people deal with jealousy is to discuss it with their lovers and lover's lovers or paramours (sometimes called other significant others or OSOs). Speaking openly of jealousy can help to defuse the charge around the situation, and partners can respond by offering reassurances of lasting love and demonstrating appreciation. Practiced polyamorists talk about focusing on the emotions that are underlying the jealousy, often insecurity or fear of loss. By facing those fears directly, polys are able to address the issues head on instead of allowing them to run the show from behind the scenes.

Negotiating the situational and practical elements of the relationship can go a long way towards alleviating jealousy: If one partner is constantly staying home with the kids eating macaroni and cheese when the other is out on dates eating steak and dancing until 3am, it is bound to create jealousy and resentment. By making sure that everyone is getting personal time equitably (regardless of if they are dating or not), and equally distributing fun, money, and work, polys can forestall many of the situations that could provoke jealousy before they even become problems, or address them once they have been identified as problematic.

## Anticipate and Overcompensate for NRE

New Relationship Energy, or NRE, is the effervescent feeling that accompanies new love. The rush of new love makes everything associated with that person glow with the brilliance of infatuation and the fun of spontaneity. In contrast, long-standing relationships can seem boring or simply get overshadowed by the brilliance of the NRE. Practiced polys take several steps to overcompensate for NRE, such as making sure to spend time and attention on longer-term relationships as well, being aware of and acknowledging the narcotic effects of NRE, and avoiding making any big life decisions when in the grips of NRE.

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## Compersion

Compersion is the flip side of jealousy, or the glee of seeing one's lover falling in love with someone else. Polys who experience compersion liken it to being happy that their partner got a part in a local theater production or was chosen employee of the month – it does not affect the person directly, but they are still happy to see their partner happy and having good things happen, regardless of the nature of those good things. If something brings joy to your partner, then it makes you happy. Practiced polys act in compersive ways like vacating the large bedroom for their partner to host a visiting lover, taking care of kids so their partners can go on dates, and treating their paramours kindly.

It is important to note that compersion must be authentic to truly work. Feigning compersion with forced cheerfulness in the face of pain will only go so far. Talking about discomfort early and often tends to be a far better strategy than “fake it till you make it,” which more often leads to explosion and disaster.

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## Lack of Jealousy?

A few of the polys in my study reported that not only did they did not feel jealousy, they didn't really even understand it on a visceral level. They generally related their lack of a jealousy response to either never having learned to be jealous as a child, or to being polyamorous by sexual orientation: Either their upbringing did not emphasize jealousy, or they were not "wired" for jealousy or monogamy. In some cases people's assertions that they did not experience jealousy seemed a bit too blithe and smacked of superiority to those jealous monogamists and cheaters. In other cases, however, I witnessed people responding with compersion to situations that could have easily provoked jealousy instead. At one poly campout I attended, a man with several lovers spent the first night in the tent with his wife and then spent every other night with a different woman in a different tent. In a situation that could reasonably provoke jealousy, the woman did not appear jealous at all.

On the last night of the campout I finally asked her how she felt about her husband's absence from their tent. She responded that she was an introvert and liked the space to herself, she got enough attention from him (and others) at different times to meet her needs, and she did not "need to keep him in my back pocket all the time to know he loves me." Importantly, she emphasized the fact that her needs were getting met on the broader level. Because she felt loved, considered, and safe, she could relax and be comfortable with his camp-ground roving. While jealousy was not an issue for the camping woman and some others, in most polyamorous relationships it comes up at least occasionally and people simply learn to deal with it.