



**Emotional Edge Play:
Polyamory for BDSM/Leather/Fetish Folk**

Anita Wagner

**Polyamory Community Leader and Educator
Sexual Freedom Advocate and Blogger
<http://www.practicalpolyamory.com>
anita.wagner@practicalpolyamory.com**

I. Introduction

Polyamory is now widely practiced in the BDSM/Leather/Fetish communities. Its members are used to stretching their own emotional boundaries via their kink, yet many say that they were unprepared for the amount of drama that arose when they introduced polyamory into the mix. In a very real sense polyamory is a form of emotional edge play by which we seek to stretch our emotional boundaries around partnership, sex, love and romance.

There is considerable overlap between BDSM and polyamory. While many BDSMers are monogamous, a significant percentage are in open relationships of some type and have multiple partners. There are a lot of reasons for this overlap. And while in many ways polyamory fits well with BDSM, it can also bring up issues that vanilla polyfolk don't experience.

II. Why do kinky people want open relationships?

In her soon-to-be-published book *Love in Abundance: A Councilor's Guide to Open Relationships* (Greenery Press), kink-aware therapist Kathy Labriola says that in general, polyamorists say that they are polyamorous because they either want more of something or something different from what they have. If they are looking for something more, they may want more romance, attention, sex, or time than they can have with their current partner. If they want something different, one or more crucial ingredients are missing from their current relationship that really would make them happier, so they are seeking those ingredients from someone else.

Kinky people who are poly tend to be looking for different rather than more. Usually they are looking for something kinky that their partner doesn't want to do, either because their partner is not kinky, or their partner likes a different kind of BDSM activity than they do. Some people simply have a strong need for novelty and variety in sexual and BDSM partners. If you read the writings of people like anthropologist Helen Fisher, you will see that this desire for variety and novelty is in our human nature, cultural prohibitions notwithstanding.

As most kinky people have discovered, it is difficult to find the partner that is perfectly matched with your core kinks, as well as compatible for a long-term relationship and living together. Often your best kink partner is not your best marriage or life partner, and as a result, people tend to marry or live with people who are well-suited to be their domestic partners, but look outside the primary relationship for BDSM activity with others who are more closely matched with their BDSM needs.

III. Kinky People Have an Advantage

Kathy Labriola observes that people with a BDSM orientation tend to be more successful at establishing and sustaining polyamorous relationships than vanilla or non-kinky people.

While many vanilla people are quite talented and successful at poly relationships, a higher percentage of BDSM poly relationships succeed over time than vanilla poly relationships. At first this gap may seem puzzling. However, it makes perfect sense that kinky people in general are better at polyamory than vanilla people in general for two important reasons:

- A. In a BDSM relationship, each person's role and rights are clearly defined and delineated in some detail.

As any veteran of poly relationships can attest, conflicts over roles, status, rights, and responsibilities are often the snags that cause many poly relationships to crash and burn. In BDSM relationships, each person has a specific set of roles, has a clearly defined status, and each person knows what is expected of them and what they have a right to expect of each other person. For instance, if you are in a D/S relationship, your role as a submissive is clearly spelled out, and you and your dominant have negotiated exactly what you are to provide for the dom and exactly what she or he is expected to provide for you. Your status in relation to your partner(s) and your partner's other partners is also clearly agreed upon, so there is less room for assumptions and misunderstandings about your status and the hierarchy of relationships. In many vanilla poly relationships, unstated and unmet expectations create a lot of pain.

- B. The skill set needed for successful BDSM relationships is also essential for successful polyamorous relationships.

1. Knowing what you want.
2. Being able and willing to articulate your needs clearly. People in BDSM relationships have wisely abandoned the romantic myth that relationships will go perfectly without discussion and negotiation. They have institutionalized negotiations as part of their courtship and relationship rituals.
3. Willingness to negotiate, including being able to set boundaries and knowing how to compromise.
4. Not making assumptions about your partner's desires, needs, expectations, and abilities.
5. Not expecting a partner to read your mind and magically know what you want.

IV. Kinds of Kinky Poly Relationships (as defined by sex educator Tristan Taormino)

- Events only
- BDSM only
- Mentoring
- Role Specific - Strategy that works for people with a lot of different partners, i.e. "you will be my one and only daddy."
- Co-topping - Package deal, only play with others together.
- Events only
- BDSM only
- Mentoring
- Role Specific - Strategy that works for people with a lot of different partners, i.e. "you will be my one and only daddy."
- Co-topping - Package deal, only play with others together.
- Service Only - Significant partners but no sex, usually adopted by people dedicated to DS.
- Queen Bee - Dominant has multiple sub partners who don't have other doms
- Leather Family
- Vanilla/Kinky combos

V. How can you increase the odds of successful and happy kinky/poly relationships?

A. Consider writing a contract so agreements are clear - potential terms include (again according to Tristan Taormino):

- Statement about the nature of your relationship and your commitment to one another
- Statement about your personal values and philosophies
- What you hope to achieve through polyamory
- What the rules/guidelines are: who, what, when, where, other, safer sex
- Other limits or boundaries
- Schedule of time and date commitments (especially events, holidays and birthdays)
- What the process is for starting a relationship with a new partner
- Which characteristics of potential partners and activities are OK and which are forbidden - consider checklist (see attachment A).
- What the process is for airing grievances
- Agreement about being out to other people
- Explanation of how to amend the agreement

B. Pick orientation-appropriate partners.

Many people make the mistake of picking partners who are poly but are not kinky. Even if you're compatible on poly issues, if your partner does not share your BDSM orientation, a relationship is unlikely to be sustainable over time. Some mixed couples where one is kinky and the other is vanilla build poly relationships in which the kinky partner has permission to do BDSM activities with outside partners. (This is the sole exception to the rule against opening a troubled monogamous relationship.) Sometimes such couples agree that only non-sexual kink activities with outside partners are acceptable, and that sex will be exclusive in the primary relationship. (Such couples must negotiate their own definitions of what constitutes "sex.") Others are comfortable with their partners having sex and BDSM activities with other partners.

It is also a mistake to pick partners who are kinky but are not poly. Sometimes this can work if a non-poly submissive is comfortable allowing their dominant to be poly, seeing their own commitment to be monogamous as part of being submissive. Typically, in this situation, the dominant partner has other sexual partners and/or submissives, but the sub agrees to be monogamous. However, many submissives are not willing to agree to this arrangement and feel very threatened by their partner dominating anyone else or having a sexual relationship with anyone outside the primary relationship. This can be a deal-breaker if the dominant partner feels they have the right to have outside partners, and the submissive partner insists on monogamy.

Most people do not get it right the first time, and need to go through a few relationships, and some trial and error, to learn what does and doesn't work for them.

C. Know which model of polyamory you are in, and pick appropriate partners who match that model.

It is imperative that you figure out which model of polyamory works best for you and pick partners that are looking for the same model. This is even more true for BDSM relationships, because of the explicit roles and hierarchy in kinky relationships. For instance, if you decide on the primary/secondary model, you would be wise to pick a primary partner who wants a long-term, committed relationship and wants only secondary partners outside your relationship. You would also be smart to choose outside partners who are also in primary relationships or who are looking for a casual or secondary relationship rather than seeking a primary relationship with you.

Conversely, if you are looking for a committed primary relationship, it would be disastrous to pick someone who is already married and not looking for an additional spouse.

Unfortunately many people pick partners who want a different model, and make each other miserable by trying to force their partners to accept a model that doesn't work for them.

D. Pick partners with appropriate levels of experience

If you choose a partner who claims to be a dominant but has little experience in that role, proceed with caution. This new partner is still green and has a lot to learn, about BDSM and about BDSM in a polyamorous relationship context. At minimum, be sure to have clear discussions about expectations and boundaries with both the existing partner and the new one.

E. Expect and learn to handle jealousy, both yours and your partner's.

The vast majority of people experience jealousy when their partners get involved in a romantic, sexual and/or BDSM relationship with someone else. Sharing our partner's time, attention, loyalty, and sexual intimacy with another person represents a potential threat to survival and stability of our precious love relationship. It is natural to respond with concern and anxiety. Try to be caring and compassionate with yourself and your partner(s) through this process, expressing feelings and fears, listening carefully to your partner's feelings and needs, and trying to support each other. For a complete guide to handling jealousy, you can review the handout from my jealousy program which you will find on my website under "Downloadable Documents."

Here are some specific tips for working with jealousy in BDSM/poly relationships:

Try to identify exactly what triggers your jealousy. Some people discover that they are much more jealous of a partner engaging in BDSM activities with another partner than having sex with another partner. This is because for some people, specific types of BDSM activities are even more personal and intimate than sex.

For example, a femme dom may be hurt and jealous because her submissive wants to do a humiliation scene with another femme dom. While the scene would not involve any sexual contact, it would include the sub being extremely submissive; the dom may feel threatened by the level of intimacy and vulnerability her sub is willing to experience with another dom. She wants these experiences to be "special", which to her requires that they be experienced only via their relationship and no other. She has no problem with her sub performing sexual acts with another person, as she does not feel this is as unique and personal as the BDSM experiences she wants reserved only for her.

A lesbian couple who enjoyed flogging and other impact play discovered that they each became extremely jealous when their partner wore their leather and fetish clothing or used their floggers or toys on another woman. Both women felt that their BDSM clothes and toys were special to that relationship and should not be used outside the relationship.

Other people find that they are very comfortable with their partners doing many types of BDSM activities with outside partners but want to reserve sex (or certain types of sexual activities) to the primary relationship. Some people find it easy to separate sex and BDSM, and compartmentalize some BDSM activities in outside relationships that do not include sex.

However, for many people, sex and BDSM are difficult to separate and keep neatly in separate relationships. This can create jealousy and conflict if a couple agrees to sexual monogamy but their outside BDSM activities tend to lead to sex, or conversely if outside sexual relationships inevitably lead them into BDSM activities.

- F. Be clear on your role in each relationship, what role you want from each partner, and negotiate to change those roles if your needs or desires change.

This is especially important in BDSM relationships, because something that starts out as a casual "play partner" relationship can rapidly become a dom-sub relationship or even a master-or mistress-slave relationship. As a result, any or all partners can be hurt or disappointed if their escalating expectations are not met.

When one or more partners are switches and want to change or alternate roles in one or more relationships, more discussion and negotiation is always better than less to clarify and define needs, expectations, and boundaries.

Having too many doms in a given poly relationship grouping can be a thorny problem, as it is difficult to know who has authority to tell whom to do what. Establishing a clear hierarchy of all existing relationships at the beginning of each relationship is crucial, as is clarifying matters immediately if anyone's status changes.

Clearly defining what each partner means by the terms they use is also imperative. Terms like top, dom, and master or mistress, bottom, submissive, and slave can mean very different things to each person. While there are no universally agreed upon definitions, it doesn't matter how you define them as long as everyone in the relationship grouping is working with the same definitions.

VI. What trumps what? Poly or BDSM?

When problems develop in a BDSM/poly relationship, the bottom line is usually this: *will being poly trump the BDSM role, or will BDSM trump being poly?* Essentially it boils down to this: are you more kinky or more poly? Is BDSM your primary sexual orientation, and is that central to your relationship "world view," or is polyamory your primary orientation and will that be the arbiter of how you want to do relationships? Some people find that their poly and BDSM orientations are roughly equal, and they must decide on a case by case basis, depending on the relationship and the specifics of that situation.

VII. Dictating the Terms (or Not)

A frequent dilemma in D/S poly relationships is that many doms believe that it is their right to have outside partners or bring other submissives into their primary relationship but that their submissive primary partner should be monogamous. Some subs are very happy with this arrangement and see being monogamous with a non-monogamous partner as part of their submission. However, submissives whose core orientation is polyamorous may not be willing to be monogamous, creating an intense conflict over appropriate relationship roles and boundaries.

Some pairings with this problem make very specific rules about what kind of play is permitted outside of the primary relationship. Some decide that only BDSM activity is allowed outside of the relationship, and that no overtly sexual activity is allowed. Some limit the activities only to BDSM activities that are not practiced within the relationship.

Another common dilemma arises when the submissive is feeling jealous and insecure. Some doms, especially the inexperienced ones, have been known to attempt to resolve this problem by naively directing their submissive to accept the presence of other submissives as their duty as a submissive. In doing so they fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of the submissive's feelings and attempt to help them feel more comfortable via negotiation of the terms of adding new people to the relationship. This has led to crash and burn in many a BDSM relationship.

The most essential means of resolving this problem is to suspend role play for whatever period of time is needed to discuss and negotiate as equals the terms of the relationship. It is naive at best to believe that you can direct someone not to feel jealous or to deal with their jealousy on their own in deference as a submissive. At worst, unless there is true consent it is emotional abuse and certainly NOT what love is about.

VIII. Conclusion

As you can see, people with a BDSM orientation face some unique challenges in navigating open relationships. However, as we have discussed, kinky people tend to be very successful at developing and sustaining polyamorous relationships. This is because clear communication, negotiating boundaries, and explicitly identifying rights and expectations are a core component to BDSM relationships. For people to succeed in kinky relationships, they must develop the same skill set necessary for healthy open relationships.

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ATTACHMENT A

Tristan's Checklist - Characteristics of Potential Partners and Activities		
Who	Options	
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Women <input type="checkbox"/> Men <input type="checkbox"/> Transwomen/MtF	<input type="checkbox"/> Transmen/FtM <input type="checkbox"/> Genderqueer <input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
Coupled Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/> Partnered	<input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
Sexual Orientation	<input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian/gay/queer <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual	<input type="checkbox"/> Straight <input type="checkbox"/> Pansexual
BDSM Orientation	<input type="checkbox"/> Top <input type="checkbox"/> Bottom <input type="checkbox"/> Switch	<input type="checkbox"/> Dominant <input type="checkbox"/> Submissive <input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
BDSM Role	<input type="checkbox"/> Slave <input type="checkbox"/> Boy <input type="checkbox"/> Girl <input type="checkbox"/> Daddy <input type="checkbox"/> Master <input type="checkbox"/> Mistress <input type="checkbox"/> Mommy	<input type="checkbox"/> Servant <input type="checkbox"/> Pet <input type="checkbox"/> Lady <input type="checkbox"/> Sir <input type="checkbox"/> Ma'am <input type="checkbox"/> Sissy maid
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> Older <input type="checkbox"/> Younger	<input type="checkbox"/> Approx. same age <input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
Familiarity	<input type="checkbox"/> Stranger <input type="checkbox"/> Acquaintance <input type="checkbox"/> Best/close friend <input type="checkbox"/> Friend <input type="checkbox"/> Neighbor	<input type="checkbox"/> Co-worker <input type="checkbox"/> Ex-partner <input type="checkbox"/> Relative <input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
Other Characteristics	<input type="checkbox"/> Appearance <input type="checkbox"/> Body Type	<input type="checkbox"/> Identity (swinger, crossdresser, butch, etc.)
What Characteristics of potential experiences/relationships can include:	<input type="checkbox"/> Affectionate/Sexual Activity (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Socializing <input type="checkbox"/> Friendship <input type="checkbox"/> Flirting <input type="checkbox"/> Dating <input type="checkbox"/> Courting/Romance	<input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing Communication <input type="checkbox"/> Sleepovers <input type="checkbox"/> Travel/Vacation <input type="checkbox"/> Events <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional Connection <input type="checkbox"/> Love <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment
What Specific to BDSM:	<input type="checkbox"/> BDSM activity (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Temporary marks on body <input type="checkbox"/> Permanent body modification	<input type="checkbox"/> Wearing a collar <input type="checkbox"/> Honorifics (Mistress, Daddy, etc.)
When Frequency of contact, days of the week	<input type="checkbox"/> One time only <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing, infrequent (Specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing, frequent (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Special occasions
Where	<input type="checkbox"/> Out of town <input type="checkbox"/> In town <input type="checkbox"/> Public settings (parties, clubs) <input type="checkbox"/> Events	<input type="checkbox"/> At home <input type="checkbox"/> Not at home <input type="checkbox"/> Other