

Dos and don'ts for happy polyamorous relationships

Pragmatic advice on things likely to help your relationships work

Guidelines to consider when managing polyamorous relationships

Polyamory adds a significant layer of complexity atop the already complex job of managing a romantic relationship. Building good poly relationships doesn't happen by accident; in addition to the normal challenges anyone in a traditional relationship will face, polyamory offers a few challenges of its own.

This is a simple guide to some of the "dos and don'ts" of polyamorous relationships. Of course, you'll need the relationship skills that go along with any intimate interpersonal relationship as well!

Don't coerce your relationships into a predefined shape; let them be what they are

Sometimes, people—particularly people who are already part of an established couple—decide what kind of relationship they want, what form that relationship will take, and then try to fit a person into that space.

People are complex, and every person will have his or her own ideas and desires and needs in a relationship. Trying to force a person in a box—for example, trying to say, "You can only date both of us and you have to develop a relationship with both of us that's exactly the same and grows in exactly the same way"—rarely works. Instead, treat your relationships in a way that respects what they are. Give each person a voice; you are having a relationship, not looking for spare parts! Listen to what the relationship is telling you, instead of trying to force it to be something specific.

Don't keep score

Often, we may be tempted to try to turn multiple relationships into a tallying game—"You slept with her two nights in a row, now you need to sleep with me two nights in a row!" "You took him to dinner three times, but only took me to dinner once!"

Fairness and compassion are worthwhile goals in any relationship, but as anyone who's ever been a child knows, sometimes things don't work exactly the way we expect them to. "Danny, do the dishes!" "But I did the dishes last night, it's my sister's turn tonight!" "Yes, but your sister is sick in bed tonight." "It's not FAIR!"

Fairness operates on a global level, not a local level; there may be times when one partner, for whatever reason, is going through a crisis or is facing problems or for whatever reason needs more

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support and attention. As long as that support is available to all the people in the relationship when they need it, it's not a question of keeping score.

And while we're on the subject...

Do understand that your needs have nothing directly to do with your partner's other partner

It's usually more helpful to ask "Am I getting what I need?" rather than "Am I getting the same things as my partner's other partner?" Not everyone has the same needs, and happiness is found more easily in having your needs met than in having the same things as the people around you. In fact, I think the goal of a relationship should be in seeking to have your relationship needs met in a way that's fulfilling, not in achieving parity with everyone else.

Don't say "You need to stop giving her X;" say "I need Y" instead. Consider the things you need, rather than what you think your partner's other partner is getting. Being happy is not a competition! Going back to the idea of keeping score, rather than saying "You took him to dinner three times and only took me to dinner once," it's often more productive to say "I would like you to take me to dinner more often."

And that leads us nicely to:

Do ask for what you need

It may seem obvious, but if you don't ask for what you need, you can't expect to get the things you need. If you have a need that you feel is not being met by your partner, say so. Don't assume that your partner knows; don't start with the idea that if your partner "really" loved you, your partner would just be able to tell without you saying anything; and don't assume that if your partner really loved you, your partner would already know what you need. Don't wait for your partner to infer your needs.

When you discover that your needs aren't being met, talk to your partner about it!

Your needs are important, and even if you believe they are irrational, they are still a legitimate part of who you are. Of course, you can't automatically assume that you will have all your needs met at all times by everyone around you, but it's far easier for your partner to meet a need he knows about than a need he doesn't...

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Don't let problems sit

Addressing problems is never comfortable. Approaching a person who is behaving in a way that causes you pain or who isn't meeting your needs carries emotional risk. Sometimes, it's a lot more comfortable just to let small problems slide, at least until they become big problems.

This is true in any relationship, whether polyamorous or not. As tempting as it is to let things slide, though, the fact is that small problems or irritations can become magnified out of proportion when they aren't addressed, and this is dangerous for any relationship.

Get in the habit of being open about problems—even small ones. Listen to yourself and to your emotions; learn to be aware when something is bothering you, and develop the tools to bring these things out into the open before they have a chance to grow.

Oh, and a few more things about problems...

Don't assume that polyamory will solve problems in your relationship

"Relationship Broken, Add More People" almost never works.

Polyamory can be a very potent and rewarding way to improve a good relationship—but as sure as night follows day, it will expose the problems in a relationship, as well. It's definitely not a good way to mend a damaged relationship.

Bringing someone into an existing relationship that has problems is likely to exacerbate those problems. What's more, it's unfair to the person coming in. The greater the problems in the existing relationship, the more unstable the position of the person joining that relationship, and the more likely that person will bear the brunt of those problems.

As a corrolary:

Do pay attention to the state of a prospective partner's existing relationships

If you are considering joining a person who is already in a relationship, take a good look at that relationship. Is it in good shape? Do the people involved have good problem-solving skills? How good is their communication? If the relationship has problems, how will they affect you? Will you be the person who suddenly becomes expendable if the problems in the relationship become too great? You can't look into a crystal ball and see the future of any relationship, and any relationship is going to involve emotional risk. But if your partner can't manage the problems in his or her existing

Source: <http://www.morethantwo.com/polytips.html>

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relationship, your partner may not be able to manage any problems in yours—and it very well might be that the problems in the existing relationship will boomerang onto you. Be careful, and be aware of what you're going in to.

Sometimes, people who have problems in a relationship will seek to fix those problems by adding new partners. As a general rule, this approach rarely works. Be careful of a partner who seems to want to be with you because he is escaping things in his other relationships that he is dissatisfied with.

Of course, no relationship is ever perfect. Any relationship can and will have problems from time to time, so...

Don't take sides

There may be occasions where your partners have a disagreement. When this happens, you may or may not be able to help; sometimes, people must work out their disagreements on their own, and you can't always solve problems between people. Regardless of how much you may or may not be able to help, it's important not to take sides; a situation where one person feels ganged up on is destructive for everybody.

This does not mean that you shouldn't offer your honest opinion, if it's asked for. But offering your opinion is not the same as taking sides—and when you do offer your input, you should strive to do so in a way that's sensitive to everyone.

Do strive to be flexible

This is another tactic that works for any relationship, monogamous or polyamorous. However, polyamorous relationships can be more complex than monogamous relationships, if for no other reason that there are more people involved, and polyamorous relationships benefit greatly when the people in them seek to be as flexible as possible, particularly with regard to solving problems.

Many of the problems in polyamorous relationships stem from resource management; a person with two lovers can still be in only one place at a time, and there will be times when that person's attention seems to be divided. Flexibility and creativity can sometimes go a long way toward solving these problems. For example, if a person has two lovers, each of whom wants to sleep with him five nights a week, it may be that the most flexible solution involves sleeping with *both* of them for three

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nights out of the week. A willingness to be flexible in the manner in which a problem is solved is an asset in any relationship.

Don't assume the problem is polyamory

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: Not all the problems in a polyamorous relationship are the result of polyamory! If you're in a non-traditional relationship of any sort, it's easy to point to the fact that your relationship doesn't look like the norm and say, "See? This is why we're having problems!" But it's not always true. Even traditional monogamous relationships can have problems with resource allocation, after all (a person who's spending all his time at work is away from his partner just as surely as a person who's spending time with his other partner). And even issues that may seem at first glance to be directly related to polyamory—jealousy, for instance—might still exist even in a monogamous relationship.

As tempting as it might be to point to the structure of the relationship whenever there's a problem and say, "This is why we're having trouble," it's often more helpful to address each problem on its own, and seek to understand where it comes from, before making assumptions that it's all the fault of polyamory.

Do pay attention to the way you relate to your partner's partners

Love is a funny thing. Sometimes, your partner may love someone you yourself would not really choose to associate with. In times like that, it's helpful to recognize that *you are in a relationship with that person, even though your relationship may be indirect*. That person is part of your lover's life, and therefore, by extension, part of yours.

Be conscious of that fact. Even if your relationship with your partner's partner is ambivalent, it's still a relationship. Like all relationships, it will do better if you pay attention to it, acknowledge it, and are conscious of it.

That doesn't mean you have to be best friends, or lovers, or anything else, with your partner's partner. It *does* mean that your partner's partner is not a nonentity; this is a person who is significant to someone you love, and your life will be easier if that relationship is on as good a footing as may be possible.

And speaking of your partner's other partners...

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Don't make assumptions about your relationship with your partner's other partners

Sometimes, people may assume that anyone who is interested in a sexual relationship with their partner is also interested in a sexual relationship with them, or that a prospective partner must be equally interested in everyone involved in an existing relationship.

There's nothing wrong with leaving yourself open to a mutual relationship, and in fact it's nice when it works out. But you can't always count on it. It's hard enough to find someone who is compatible with you, and it's harder still to find someone who is compatible with both you and your partner.

When relationships form, they don't always follow the same course every time. It's often not realistic to think that a relationship between you and another person and your partner and that person will develop at the same speed, or along the same path, or reach the same intensity.

Relationships work best when you let them grow at their own pace and don't try to force them along a predetermined path.

Do take responsibility for your actions

If there's any rule that's as absolute as the law of gravity, it's the law of unintended consequence. Your actions do and always will have consequences, even if they were not what you intended; your life is shaped by the decisions you make and the things you do. And these decisions touch your partners, and your partners' partners, sometimes in ways you didn't anticipate.

I have met many people who seem to feel disempowered in their lives. This feeling of victimization saves them from having to take responsibility for their actions; but the downside is that it dramatically curtails their ability to take control of their own lives. It can also mean that they use what power they do have carelessly.

Taking responsibility for the consequences—even the unintended consequences—of your actions is sometimes unpleasant. Considering the effects of your decisions on the people around you is sometimes a lot of work. The upside to doing this work, though, is it empowers you, and lets you shape your life the way you want while still being compassionate and responsible to the people around you.

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Don't assume polyamory makes you more enlightened

For that matter, don't assume monogamy is better, either.

If you believe that you are better, more enlightened, or more wise because of your preferred relationship model, you may end up behaving carelessly. Don't start from the assumption that you're better than other people, or that their problems aren't your own. Your relationship model doesn't make you better than anyone else, and doesn't discharge your need to treat the people around you well.

Don't make assumptions about your partner's other relationships

When your lover takes another lover, particularly in the first rush of a new relationship, it's sometimes easy to make assumptions about the direction that relationship will take, or what they're doing or experiencing together—"he must be better in bed than I am," "she is going to want to replace me," "they have more fun without me," "he's going to want to do more with her than with me," and so forth.

None of this is necessarily true. Keeping a realistic assessment of your partner's other relationships, keeping informed and in the loop about what's going on in your partner's life, and seeking to bring any concerns you may have about their relationship up before those concerns become problems can all help to make you feel more comfortable.

And speaking of which...

Don't vilify, demonize, or build up your partner's other partners

Your partner's partner is not (or should not be) your enemy, a demon, or an angel. Your partner's partner is a human being, just like you, with quirks and flaws and all the things that go along with being human.

Don't turn your partner's partner into a monster, or imagine that your partner's partner is better looking, better in bed, funnier, smarter, or more generally worthwhile than you. The first path leads to hostility and anger; your partner's partner has feelings, just like you do, and they deserve to be treated with respect. The second path leads to insecurity, resentment, and feelings of inadequacy.

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Tearing down your partner's partner won't make anyone any happier. Neither will tearing yourself down. If you can see your partner's partner clearly and objectively, as a human being, and strive to treat that person gently and with respect, everyone—including you—will be happier for it.

Don't make assumptions on behalf of other people

It can sometimes be tempting to speak for the other people in your relationship, or to make assumptions on their behalf.

Sometimes, this happens out of simple miscalculation. Sometimes, it's a subconscious desire to avoid taking responsibility for something (it can be easier to say "Well, I'd love to date you, but my other partner feels uncomfortable" rather than "I feel uncomfortable about dating you but I don't want to talk about why"). Sometimes, it can be wishful thinking ("Oh, sure, my other partner is going to be fine with what we're doing, no problem!").

No matter the reason, any time you find yourself speaking for, or making assumptions on behalf of, somebody else...look out.

Don't look to your relationships to offer you validation

It seems to me as though our society often looks to relationships to define a person's worth. People who are single are sometimes seen as being less valid as human beings than people who are married, and so on.

If you look to your relationship to tell you who you are, or to define your worth, then your sense of self will always be tied up in the form of your relationship.

You have power over your life. Your worth depends on you, not on your partner and not on your relationship. You have an identity that exists independent of your relationship, and your relationship does not describe your value. These ideas empower you to seek happiness on your terms, but more important than that, they give you resiliency that can help you over the inevitable rough patches that any relationship is likely to face.

Value and worth that come from within you rather than from things outside yourself, such as your partner or your relationship, can never be taken away from you. There is a difference between a person who *wants* to be in a relationship and a person who *needs* to be in that relationship. Quite frankly, I'd rather be involved with a person who wants to be with me than a person who needs to be

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with me; the people who want to be with me are there because of the value I add to their lives, not because they have no other choice!

If your sense of value comes from yourself, it frees you from dependence on the people around you.

If your partner's sense of value comes from within himself, it frees you from the responsibility of telling your partner who he is.

Don't seek to give your partner happiness at the expense of your own

A relationship should serve the needs of all the people in it—including you. Furthermore, it's a mistake to think that you can "make" another person happy, particularly by sacrificing your own happiness. That road leads to codependency.

If your lover cares about you, then sacrificing your happiness will have an effect on your lover.

Making yourself miserable for the sake of another doesn't serve anyone's needs.

Do know your limits, your needs, and the things that bring you happiness

Know thyself. This is perhaps the most important single thing you can do in any relationship.

Knowing what you want and need in order to be happy is an excellent first step in being happy.

Just as importantly, it's an excellent first step in not being unhappy. If you do not know where your absolute limits—the boundaries that, if crossed, will ensure that you cannot be happy—are, then you're likely to discover them only when those boundaries have been crossed...which means you'll be unhappy.

Forget the romantic myth that your only concern should be for the happiness of your partner; every person in a relationship deserves to be happy, including you.

If you don't ask for what you need, you can't expect to get the things you need; and if you don't know what you need, you can't ask for the things you need. You can more easily be happy if you understand what you need and where your limits are, and you can more easily build a healthy relationship if you are happy.

Doing this successfully relies on absolute, unflinching honesty with yourself. Polyamory relies on honesty, and this requires self-honesty. Examine the things you need closely; are you secretly hoping for things you aren't saying? Are you secretly trying to push your relationship into a direction

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it doesn't seem to want to go? What are you expecting to get from your relationships? Are those things realistic?

Don't be afraid of change

Relationships are living, breathing, dynamic things; like all living things, they change over time. No healthy relationship is going to stay the same forever.

As long as you are willing to commit to the idea of changing in ways that include your partners, and you are willing to work with your partners as your life changes, you'll be okay.

Do know what place you have to offer someone

When you bring a new partner into an existing relationship, it's easy to see how that person might be intimidated, especially if your existing relationship has a long history behind it. It's important that you know what it is you have to offer that new partner, and seek to provide a safe and secure space for that relationship to grow.