How to become a secure person

Some polyamorous people see polyamory as a path to spiritual enlightenment, believing that polyamory connects them with the universal spirit of the Divine or some such thing.

Me, I'm not terribly spiritual. (Yes, it's true!) I don't see polyamory as a "spiritual path," I'm not prone to believing in "sacred sexuality" as a way to explore my connection with the Universal Cosmic Divine, and my own approach to polyamory (and to life in general) is very practical and hands-on. This is why I do not believe, for example, that love is infinite…but that's a topic for another time.

There is a saying: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." I don't believe a word of it. Often, the way it works in practice is quite the opposite. You get rid of fear, and the love follows more easily. The "getting rid of fear" part, though, is the trick.

And getting rid of fear and insecurity makes life better. Ultimately, dealing with fears and insecurities is something that must be done; a person can deal with them by hiding from them, deal with them by rearranging his life around them, or deal with them by destroying them completely, but not dealing with them generally isn't an option. And frankly, with the amount of time and effort people invest in hiding from their fears or building their lives around their fears, just eradicating them to begin with is actually less effort in the long run.

This page is about practical, ordinary ways to deal with fear and insecurity, and become self-confident and self-assured.

Don't always assume you can trust your feelings

Fear is deceptive. Fear will attempt to justify itself. Often, you can think of your fears as though they were living creatures of their own; they will fight to protect and defend themselves, just like any other living thing.

Fear is tricky because it can color and distort the way you see the world. You will often see (or, sometimes, fabricate) things that support your fear while totally missing things that contradict your fear. On top of that, when you are afraid, you tend to project that feeling into the past, remembering most strongly those things that confirm your fear; and into the future, and believe, if only subconsciously, that this is the only way you will ever respond to this kind of situation, and no other response is possible.

Fear tends to wither and die if you drag it out into the light, though. I'm personally a big fan of marching into the closet, grabbing the biggest and ugliest monster in there by the tail, and then dragging it out and going toe-to-toe with it. Fears gain strength when you let them hide in the shadows, and lose strength when you examine them and confront them head-on.

So. I'm going to start with a hypothetical situation, and lay out a plan for conquering a fear, step by step. Different fears express themselves differently, and fears and insecurities can manifest in many ways, but the same tools can be used for dealing with them all. For the sake of example, I'll start with a fairly common response I've seen in poly relationships many times: you have a partner, your partner has another partner, and you feel insecure or jealous when you see them together in a romantic context, like when you see them kiss.

Ready? Here we go!

First, look beneath the surface

Before you can do anything else, you must figure out what lies at root of the response. This is the first and most critical of all tools for dealing with fear or insecurity. Insecurities, jealousies, and fears are often composite emotions—emotions made of other emotions. You can't confront the fear until you understand what lies beneath it.

Say, for example, you see your sweetie kissing someone else, and that brings up a negative emotional response—jealousy, fear, whatever. Look at that fear! (Yes, I know this is difficult; when you're in the grip of a negative emotion, all you want to do is make it stop, right now, by any means necessary.) Examine what it's telling you. Why do you have that response? Is it because you believe that you can't compete

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with the other person? Is it because you're afraid your lover may find you wanting? Is it because you're afraid your lover will leave you, or want you less, or prefer someone else's company? Try filling in the blanks: "If my lover kisses another person in front of me, then the bad thing that will happen is _____." "If this keeps happening, then it means _____." "If my lover really loves this other person, then _____."

Further down the rabbit hole
Once you have an idea of what it is that underlies the fear, keep following it down the rabbit hole. For example, let's say that you have a negative emotional response when you see your partner kiss someone else, and you figure out "I am afraid that that other person might kiss better than me, and my partner might want that other person more than me." Well, now figure out what's underlying *that* fear. Is it rooted in fear of abandonment? Low self-esteem? Fear of competition? Fear of loss? What is it you're afraid that means? Why do you believe that the other person might kiss better than you—and more to the point, why do you think that's even relevant?

Disassemble! Disassemble!
When you've done that, you've made a lot of progress. For example, let's say you have a negative emotional response when you see your partner kiss someone else, you've figured out that the response is caused because you fear that if your partner's other partner is a better kisser than you, you will lose something, and you've figured out that this is rooted in the idea that if your partner's other partner is more pleasing to him, your partner will want to be with that other person and not with you.
Okay, now we're getting somewhere! The root of the response is fear of abandonment. Now you need to take that fear apart. This is what I mean when I say "drag the fear out of the closet and go toe-to-toe with it." You need to disassemble the response, and figure out whether or not it's valid.
One way to do this is to examine the assumptions about your relationship that your fear reveals. Do you believe that your partner is with you because of the way you please him in bed? Do you believe that if your partner finds another person more sexy or more pleasing, you may lose some or all of your relationship? Are those beliefs founded? Is it possible that your partner is with you for reasons besides those? What might those reasons be? What value do you add to your partner's life? Does your partner value you for the way you please him, or for who you are? Is it even meaningful to say that one person can replace another?
Now, the danger in doing this is that sometimes, you may find your fear really is justified. Not all fears are irrational. There are people in the world who are only with someone for a lay, and will move on as soon as they find a better fuck. It could very well be that in this hypothetical situation, this is the case. If so, so be it. The best way to keep from being disillusioned is not to have any illusions in the first place; if your partner is only with you for a lay, then this is the kind of thing you should know.
But more likely, you will find that when you do this, your fears fall apart. When you examine your relationship with your partner, you will likely find that, no, you add value to your partner's life in a myriad of ways, large and small, and that even if your top-level fears are realized and your partner finds someone better in bed than you (or whatever), it does not mean you will lose your partner.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?
At this point, I'm going to digress a bit and talk about what it means to be a "fearful person" or an "insecure person" or a "jealous person."
I've talked to a lot of people who say things like "Oh, I could never be polyamorous; I'm just a jealous person"—as if being a jealous person were some matter of genetics, something over which we all have no control, like being born with blond hair or…well, no, people actually think they have more control over their hair color than over their own conceptions about themselves, which is interesting.

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Let's say you went to a piano concert. Would you say that the pianist up on the stage was "just a good pianist," as if that's all there was to it? Hell, no—and if you did, she'd likely punch you. You get to be a good pianist by long, hard practice. A good pianist is made, not born.

The same is true of being a secure person—or an insecure person. People are accomplished at being insecure because they practice being insecure. They practice diligently, every day, for years; it's no wonder they're good at it.

You practice being insecure every time you let yourself think "Oh, I'm not good enough for that" or "Oh, my partner doesn't really want to be with me" or "Oh, I don't deserve that" or whatever.

After a time, this way of thinking becomes natural and effortless. A pianist who has practiced enough does not consciously have to move each finger to the proper key; after a while, they find the keys by themselves, without conscious effort. A person who practices being afraid or insecure soon becomes very natural at it; you find the things to support your fear, you learn the tools to reinforce your fear, without consciously thinking about it.

The same is true of self-confidence and security. These are things you practice; practice them enough, and they become totally natural, a part of who you are.

Building better habits

So back to dealing with fear. Once you've deconstructed your fear, discovered what it's rooted in and taken those roots apart, once you've found a list of things that discredit your fear, it's simply a matter of reaching for those things that your partner values in you and that you add to your partner's life whenever the fear raises its head. The thing about fear and jealousy and insecurity is that these things are a lot like like playing a piano; they represent ways of looking at the world that improve with practice. Just as practice can make a person into a highly accomplished pianist, so does practice turn someone into a highly fearful or highly jealous person. And on the contrary, practicing discrediting your fear, developing the mental habit of staring down your fears and insecurities and saying "No, you're wrong, and here's why" whenever they stir, will make you accomplished at feeling self-confident and secure.

Once you understand why your fear is flawed, you simply have to train yourself to stop reinforcing it, and to reinforce the feelings of value and security instead. This will feel awkward and unnatural at first, just as learning to play the piano feels awkward and unnatural at first. But you become good at what you practice. If you practice being afraid, you get good at it; if you practice being courageous and fearless, you get good at that.

When I feel something that makes me feel insecure or fearful, I tend to want to push on that thing. So to take my hypothetical example, if I were to feel an unexpected negative reaction at seeing a partner kiss someone else, rather than try to hide from it or to tell my partner not to do it, I would instead tell her, "I feel this way when I see this, so when you do this when I'm around, I may want to talk to you about those feelings later." I certainly would not expect her not to do it in front of me; I believe that approach is the way away from courage, and would simply make the fear stronger.

When you push on the things that make you afraid—when you deliberately expose yourself to those things—you rob them of their power. On the other hand, when you give in to those fears, or (worse yet) when you pass relationship rules designed to hide the things you're afraid of—"No kissing when I am around!"—you reinforce those fears, and you allow them to control your life. Building your life around your fears is not an effective strategy for leading a happy life; and maneuvering your partner's behavior around your fears is not a good strategy for building a happy relationship.

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Three easy steps to self-confidence
How do you practice being self-confident? How do you make all this theory happen? In three steps, just like the title says, of course!

Step 1: First, understand that you have a choice. You did not choose your past experiences, of course; you did not choose to have people make fun of you back in the fifth grade, or have a past partner who told you you weren't good enough, or whatever…but you did have a choice about believing these things and internalizing them, and right now you do have a choice about continuing to believe them, or changing the things you believe about yourself.
The single hardest thing to do if you want to change your self-image is to realize that it is a choice. Once you've made that step, the rest is easy.

Step 2: Once you understand that you have a choice over the way you feel, the next part is simple. Choose to act like someone who is self-confident, even though you are not. Remember, you control your actions; you control your body; you can choose to act self-confident and act secure even if you don't feel it. You will feel uncomfortable, of course; your feelings will try to get in the way of your actions. Acting self-confident will feel phony and forced at first. You will obsess, going over in your mind all the imaginary reasons why you shouldn't be acting this way, you need to be afraid or insecure instead. You still have a choice. You still control your actions. You can choose to act confident even though it feels uncomfortable.

Step 3: Practice. You become good at whatever you practice. A person who is insecure becomes very good about being insecure because he practices being insecure every day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. You practice being insecure by thinking about those old insults you heard in fifth grade, remembering them, believing them, telling yourself they are true. You practice being insecure by going over in your mind all the reasons you are not good enough to be with your partner, and imagining how easily he could abandon you if he just wakes up and realizes how worthless you are. You practice being insecure by making lists of everything that is wrong with you.
People who are secure practice being secure. It's no different, really. To practice being secure, stop thinking about all those old insults—when they come into your mind, tell yourself firmly, "No, these are false, and I choose not to believe them anymore. Why should I believe people who do not like me?" When you find yourself thinking about all the things that are wrong with you, stop, and say, "No, these are wrong, and here is why. Here is a list of things that are good and sexy about me instead." (Corny as it sounds, keeping a written list of things you like about yourself in your pocket helps.) When you find yourself thinking of all the reasons your partner does not really want you, or all the reasons some other person is better than you, stop yourself and say "No, this is false."
If you practice the piano every day and then one day start playing the harp instead, it will feel uncomfortable and awkward and unnatural, and you will not feel at first like you are making any progress. Do it anyway. You get good at something by practice. You want to be a confident, secure person? Practice being confident and secure, in your words and in your actions.
When you do this, even though it feels uncomfortable and even though you do not want to, you will find that your insecurity goes away remarkably quickly. It doesn't actually take very long to become more secure.
If you want to become secure without ever thinking or doing things that are uncomfortable for you, though, forget it; it will never happen. In order to change your image of yourself, you have to understand that changing the way you act and the way you think is always uncomfortable at first.