

# How to Make It Work – Tools for Healthy Polyamorous Relationships

By Brian Frederick

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**1. Tell the Truth.** Lasting relationships are built on trust. Trust is built on honesty. Honesty isn't hard and it's a good habit. Bite the bullet, tell the truth. If your relationship can't weather it, you are in the wrong relationship; but it probably can. Telling the truth is easier than lying, all rumor and myth to the contrary. Lies are a lot of work. They weigh you down and isolate you. Small lies get lonely and seek out bigger lies. Don't ask one lover to lie or keep secrets from others. Secrets may not be lies but they breed lies. Secrets build walls and discourage intimacy. Know the difference between privacy and secrecy.

Resist the desire to tell someone what you think they want to hear or try to protect them. "Especially do not feign affection." If you're not sure about love, say so. If your relationships are not a high priority in your life, let people know. Encourage honesty in others. Above all, be honest with yourself. Are you looking to build a family or for a little sexual variety?

**2. Know Yourself.** This is the most important tool and sometimes the hardest to find. Spend quality time with yourself and find out what you're like. Most people never do. Learn to tell when you are moody or unreasonable or defensive or hyper-sensitive or blinded by New Relationship Energy. Know your limits. Discover where you could do better. Learn what's healthy for you and what's not. Figure out what your priorities really are. Learn when to take a walk and cool off.

Many people never see the consistent patterns in their own behavior that are obvious to everyone else, like always pursuing the same type of lover or always turning relationships into soap operas or lovers into adversaries. They are blind to themselves. What don't you know about yourself? If you know about your addictions you can transform them into a preferences and eventually into a choices, but first you have to know about them.

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**2. Know Yourself (cont'd).** Take time to discover things like: what baggage are you carrying from your childhood or your last relationship, what do you need and what do you only want, what pushes your buttons and why, which things are you willing to compromise on, what are your core motivations, what makes you jealous or insecure or competitive, at what point are you over-extending yourself, what are your patterns, strengths and weaknesses, etc. Remember to learn your good points too. A lot of this goes back to honesty.

**3. Take Care of Yourself.** Work on you. "Grow your own garden in your own soul, don't wait for someone else to bring you flowers." Instead of looking to other people for validation or satisfaction or happiness, learn to make it yourself. This is a vitally important skill for living. You will always be at other people's mercy - until you learn to satisfy your own needs. Once you do, you gain a freedom and confidence that can never be taken away. You can meet people as equals and choose to enjoy each other instead of carefully exchanging needs in a scarcity-driven emotional economy. Ironically, people find this kind of independence very attractive.

Take time by yourself to think about what you need to work on and give yourself the space to do it. Take care of yourself, be kind to yourself, like yourself, love yourself, accept yourself, forgive yourself, respect yourself, serve yourself, nurture yourself, just be yourself and please, sharpen a knife and cut yourself some slack. Everyone is too hard on themselves and everyone's mirrors are warped. Yours are too; learn to compensate. Learn emotional first aid. Your relationship with yourself is the foundation of all your other relationships.

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**4. Take Responsibility.** Own your feelings. No one can make you sad or angry or happy either, they are your emotions. They exist in your head and nowhere else. You own them. You. There are always choices. Accept that sometimes you feel good or bad for no reason at all - not because of the people or events in your life. When you make someone else accountable for your feelings, you disempower yourself.

Playing the victim or martyr is just a way to manipulate people. To say, "I hurt you because my parents hurt me", is to surrender your life to other people and to the past. Be here now. Take charge of your own feelings and actions and life. You are responsible for seeing that your own needs get met. (Yes, even your own sexual needs.) Don't tell other people "do me, make me happy, protect me." Learn to take care of yourself.

If there are problems in one of your relationships or if your life is a mess, stand up and carry your share of the responsibility (and no more), even if you don't think you deserve it. Taking responsibility is not taking blame. "It's all your fault," causes new problems, it doesn't solve any. The more responsibility you take over your own life, the more freedom you have.

**5. Encourage Growth.** Remember to care about your lovers as human beings. Support them in advancing their careers, spiritual pursuits, educations and ambitions. At their own pace and in their own way. Help them to heal and understand themselves better. Encourage them to take time by themselves and give them the space they need. Help them cultivate strength. Ask them to do the same for you but tell them how; they can't read your mind. One way to encourage growth is to give those you love the freedom to love others.

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**5. Encourage Growth (cont'd).** Some people find neediness and weakness very attractive. Maybe they think they'll be abandoned if their loved ones get strong. They might try to keep people weak and needy so they'll stay. They might give generously but with conditions and strings attached. This is not unconditional love - it may not be love at all - it might just be aggressive need.

Growth can be stunted by difficult emotions like insecurity or fear of abandonment. One way to manage a limiting emotion is to meet it head on. "The only way out - is through." Don't hide from it; that just gives it power. Dive in and weather it and survive it and examine it. Your fear is far worse than reality. Learn that and the emotion loses its power and you grow stronger. You can even use jealousy, insecurity, etc. to teach you about yourself. They are valuable. Pay attention to them and learn from them.

**6. Respect.** Respect is a form of love. Respect yourself, set limits and boundaries and respect those of other people. Know how and when to clearly say 'no' and how to listen when others say 'no'. Never tolerate abuse. You deserve better. Remember to be polite to your partners, they deserve it even more than the stranger down the street.

Try not to save all your best stuff for one partner and take your partners for granted, especially when they are together. Try to treat them evenly or someone will feel slighted. Comparisons make people compete and force someone to be the loser. Find a way for everyone to win.

Respect relationships as well as people. Each relationship seems to have a natural shape; don't try to force it to be something else. Think of each relationship as a separate entity that could be healthy or sick. Resist the urge to use a relationship to get your head in order; a lover is not a life raft. If you need therapy, see a doctor.

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**6. Respect (cont'd).** It's easy to project your expectations onto other people. "Maybe they'll change." Don't try to force a person to be someone they are not. People are package deals; accept them for who they are, good and bad, or don't accept them at all.

If you want respect, keep your word. Keep to the spirit of your agreements; don't squabble over semantics looking for loop-holes to exploit. If you make an agreement in the kitchen, keep it in the bedroom. Every agreement you've ever made is really with yourself.

**7. Communicate.** If you want a healthy relationship, strong communication skills are a necessity, not a luxury. Trouble usually starts when talking stops. Things come up all the time that have to be worked through patiently and lovingly, even when you're having a bad day. It gets easier over time, but it takes work and a willingness to break up scar tissue and tear down walls. Communication skills are what make a person a good lover.

Arguing skills are not communication skills. Arguing better than someone doesn't make you right, it just makes you better at arguing. Sometimes people strive to 'win' an argument at the cost of their own relationship. Negotiate a way for everyone to win.

Listening is more important than talking. Listen actively and don't just hear. Make eye contact. Be here now, don't wander. Paraphrase their words to see if you heard them right. Notice your own words and feelings, ask why they are what they are. Listen to unhappy feelings (yours and those of others) without needing to fix them. Listen to disagreements without taking sides. Listen to non-verbal communication, which usually speaks more clearly than words. Be aware of how the people in your life are loving you.

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**7. Communicate (cont'd).** Some talk is not communication. If you get lost in the woods and pass the same landmark several times, you are making the same mistake over and over. Raising your voice or speaking harshly makes you harder to understand, not easier. Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements. "I think you're wrong" is easier to accept than "you are wrong." Directness works better than manipulation.

Clearly express yourself; people can't read your mind. Tear down the wall between your feelings and your words. Set limits and boundaries and communicate them. Make sure everyone knows what they are getting into. Learn how to defuse arguments. If necessary, learn how and when to say goodbye. Actions communicate better than words. Show people that you love them. Share kindness and affection and laughter. When in doubt, rub their feet.

**8. Attitude.** Having tools isn't enough, you have to really want to use them. Ya gotta wanna. Your disposition will make it work or blow it. Find a way for everyone to win. Make important decisions unanimous. Shine a positive light on difficult situations too; many relationships wither from negative energy. Don't turn little things into big things. Look for solutions, not someone to blame. Practice tolerance, patience, flexibility, generosity, understanding, forgiveness. Learn to apologize. Laugh at yourself.

Be wrong; you can't learn from errors if you always gotta be right. Let it go; be happy instead. Listen more than you talk. Give someone else the last word. See things through their eyes; empathy is the cure for anger. Stay calm and remember to breath. Let down your walls, trust, open up, risk and let yourself be vulnerable. Without vulnerability there is no intimacy. Take your time and emphasize friendship over romance. Savor what you have instead of dwelling on what you don't have. Practice truly unconditional love. Share.