

What is Polyamory?

By Franklin Veaux, edited by Eve Rickert

Copyright ©2012 Franklin Veaux, content licensed under
Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0)

This essay is available for download at
<http://www.morethantwo.com/polyamory.html>

I am polyamorous.

At its simplest, that means I have multiple romantic relationships at the same time, with the full knowledge and consent of all of my partners, each of whom also has other romantic relationships. So simple a statement, though, does little to capture the complex dynamic of polyamory, or to express how it works.

I think I've always been polyamorous. The notion of monogamy never really made a lot of sense to me, even when I was a child. I remember being confused by stories about the beautiful princess having to choose between two princes. After all, everyone knows princesses live in castles, and castles are really quite large. Surely there must be room for both princes, right?

When I grew older, and my interest in romantic relationships became less theoretical and more practical, I kept this idiosyncratic idea about love and romance. I took two dates to my high school prom. I lost my virginity in a threesome; my best friend and I shared an interest in the same woman, but rather than squabbling over her, we both expressed our interest to her, and she found the notion of being with both of us quite appealing.

All this happened while Ronald Reagan was still in office. I didn't have any language to describe the approach to relationships that made the most sense to me, other than the nonspecific "open relationship" (which didn't really describe the *type* of relationship I was looking for) or "swinger" (which seemed an even poorer fit). It wasn't until 1992 that the word *polyamory* appeared. It was invented nearly simultaneously by two different people, as a portmanteau of *poly* (meaning "many") and *amory* (meaning "love").

In the late 1990s, groups of people who shared this idea of multiple romantic relationships started getting together to talk about how to make it work. A language and culture started to form around polyamory. This was the first time I'd encountered people who had some of the same ideas about love and romance that I did, and it was amazing. For the first time in my life, I wasn't entirely alone.

Prior to the advent of the word *polyamory* and the communities that grew up around it, I'd been left to make up the rules as I went along. My hit-or-miss, trial-by-fire exploration led to some really valuable insights at the cost of some profound and expensive mistakes. Without tools for navigating these waters, and without the confidence that there were other people who wanted their relationships to look like mine, I ended up doing some spectacularly stupid things and hurting some people I cared deeply about.

Today, those early, scattered communities have given birth to a relationship movement that has burst into the mainstream. Talk show hosts and reality show producers have filmed programs about it. Late-night radio programs talk about it. Advice columnists give tips about navigating more than one romantic relationship. But mainstream culture changes slowly, and polyamory is still widely misunderstood. Polyamory is often perceived as indiscriminate promiscuity, it's sometimes conflated with religious polygyny, and people often deride those of us with more than one partner as being "selfish." (This charge I find a bit baffling; to my way of thinking, keeping my partner all to myself and forbidding her to be involved with anyone else seems selfish, whereas building a relationship in which she is free to pursue relationships with other people seems like exactly the opposite.)

Like many other subcultures, the poly community has developed its own language. We talk about "compersion," the feeling of joy in a lover's new relationship. We use words like "polyfidelity" to describe multi-partnered relationships that are not open to new partners, to distinguish them from relationships whose members are free to add new relationships. We discuss the pros and cons of "vetoes," agreements that allow one person to compel his or her partner to end a relationship with another person. We celebrate, or sometimes lament, "new relationship energy": that giddy, butterflies-in-the-stomach emotion that seems to be what a lot of people mean when they talk about the difference between loving someone and being "in love." We talk about relationships with our "metamours": the people who are also dating the people we're dating. (Rather than being seen as romantic rivals, metamours often become allies, helpers, and friends.)

And we process. The most distinctive difference I've observed between people who are polyamorous and people who are monogamous is not the amount of sex we have, or the kinds of relationships we have, or even the ways those relationships develop, it's in our willingness to talk about relationships: what we want from them, tools for building them, ways for letting them grow in positive directions. One of my partners says, tongue only halfway in cheek, that thinking and talking about relationships seems to be a hobby for most poly folks. Poly newcomers often describe this level of relationship processing intimidating, even overwhelming. Talk to those same people a year later, though, and they'll likely say they can't imagine going back to a relationship, monogamous or polyamorous, with rules based on default assumptions and where people rarely talk directly about what they want.

There is a popular conception that polyamorous people tend to be geeky, techy, and involved with neo-pagan spirituality. In reality, there is no single philosophy adopted by polyamorous people. I've met polyamorous neo-Luddites, evangelical Christians who use Biblical arguments to support non-monogamy, and rationalist, secular humanist polyamorists. The only thing that we all have in common is an interest in having more than one romantic relationship at a time.

And while it's easy to think of polyamory as a lifestyle—as though there's one way to do it, one common set of assumptions that underlie it—those relationships take a staggering number of forms. There are triads and quads, quints and hexagons, open networks without well-defined shapes. There are live-in relationships and long-

distance ones, relationships that are strictly hierarchical and relationships that are more anarchistic.

Any non-monogamous relationship can be thought of as “open.” A relationship can be open in myriad ways, of which polyamory is just one. Some polyamorous relationships are closed to newcomers; these relationships look a great deal like monogamous relationships in the sense that forming new attachments or taking new lovers is a transgression. They merely happen to involve more than two people. Other relationships are looser, less structured; new partnerships are free to develop as the people involved see fit, though ethical and practical considerations may constrain how many relationships are formed. (There is a common saying among polyamorous folks: Love is limitless, but time isn’t.) Many polyamorous relationships exist on a continuum between these extremes, allowing members to add new partners only under certain conditions, and only so long as the existing partners sign on to the new relationship.

This diversity can make it difficult to talk about what polyamory *is* without becoming bogged down in a sea of exceptions and qualifications. Sometimes, it’s easier to talk about what polyamory *isn’t*. Polyamory isn’t indiscriminate promiscuity or an endless stream of one-night stands, though there certainly are polyamorous folks who also enjoy casual sex.

It also isn’t swinging parties, where people exchange partners for sex but then go home with their spouses. Some polyamorous folks also swing, and some swingers develop emotional attachments to their swinging partners and end up in polyamorous relationships; but swinging usually tends to be more about sex, whereas polyamory tends to be more about romantic relationships.

Polyamory doesn’t mean an inability to commit. We are often taught to view commitment through the lens of sexual exclusivity, but a more nuanced view is commitment to building lasting relationships that meet the needs of the people involved. If those needs don’t include monogamy, then commitment doesn’t have to be tied to exclusivity. Indeed, since polyamory tends to be all about forming multiple stable, long-lasting relationships, many of those who practice it approach the notion of commitment with extraordinary zeal.

Polyamory isn’t (necessarily) about harem-building. Historically, multipartnered relationships have usually meant one man with multiple wives. While a small number of people in the poly community practice this variety of relationship, they are uncommon. It’s far more common to see egalitarian relationship structures that allow both women and men to choose more than one partner.

And polyamory isn’t cheating. This is not to say that polyamorous people can never cheat: cheating is breaking the rules, implicit or explicit, of a relationship. If the relationship agreements require openness about new lovers, then taking a new lover in secret, without talking about it to existing partners, is cheating. But simply having more than one sexual partner, of and by itself, isn’t cheating if the relationship structure permits it.

If there is one ethic that's shared by nearly all polyamorous relationships, whatever their form, it's honesty. Core values that come up over and over again in almost any conversation about multiple romantic relationships are honesty and openness. Healthy multipartnered relationships demand a commitment to honesty. It's a truism among polyamorous people that the first three rules for success in a poly relationship are "communicate," "communicate," and "communicate."

From the outside, polyamory can look like quite a lot of unnecessary work. If one relationship is hard work, then two must be twice as hard, and three must be three times as hard, right? I've found that polyamory isn't necessarily more work than monogamy—at least not in the way it might seem. Sure, there is a lot of work to be done, but I see it as being work on *myself*. I work to build good communication and relationship skills, develop a strong sense of self-confidence, and move through life with courage. As I develop those skills, the relationships become easier. But such work *is* necessary to build polyamorous relationships—so why do it?

The quick answer is that building self-confidence, courage, and communication skills benefits anyone, polyamorous or not. These are all skills that make monogamous relationships better, too. But that still leaves the question "Why invest work in building polyamorous relationships?" unanswered.

It might seem the payoff is more sex with more partners, but that's not always true. It's natural to see relationships in terms of sex, because we're inculcated with the idea that sex and relationship go hand in hand. Sex outside of relationships is discouraged, or even actively despised; we use words like "promiscuous," "slut," and "tramp" to describe people who have sex when they're not in an appropriately prescribed relationship. So on first glance, it might seem like people who are polyamorous are trying to cheat the system, gaining access to more sex with more people under the protective banner of relationship.

But being polyamorous doesn't mean having a higher sex drive than average. In fact, it's possible to be asexual and also polyamorous, or polyamorous but in multiple long-distance relationships, or polyamorous but not (for whatever reason) able to have sex. To understand why people choose polyamory, it's necessary to look beyond sex.

Another common notion is that people choose polyamory because it allows them to have more needs met. A lot of poly folks I've talked to will say things like "It's not reasonable for one person to meet every one of your needs; being polyamorous allows me to choose partners who meet different needs, and not place all that pressure on one person." And certainly that is true in some specific situations. A person who's interested in exploring BDSM but who is married to someone who doesn't share that interest might find a new partner to explore kink with, for example. But I am not polyamorous because there's something lacking in my partners. It's not an imperfection in my partner or an unmet need that makes me look to additional relationships. If I were to find a partner who was flawless, who was 100% compatible with me 100% of the time, who met every one of my needs

with unvarying success...I would still be polyamorous. My being polyamorous is not a reflection on the quality of my partners.

So why have multiple partners at all? It if it's not about needs (I'm not looking for others to do things for me), and it's not about searching for some missing component (I feel complete as I am), then what's the point?

There are practical benefits, of course. When there are three people in a relationship, there is more support available to help through hard times. There are more eyes on a problem, more resources for coping with life's occasional difficulties. But there's more to it than that.

One of my partners introduced me to a beautiful quote by Anaïs Nin: "Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." That quote resonates strongly with me. Each connection I make offers an entire new world: through my relationships, my life is enriched, and I have the opportunity to enrich, in turn, the lives of the people close to me. A loving, romantic relationship, even more than a friendship, opens up worlds within us.

The same applies to my partners. It has never been important to me that my partner be with me alone. As long as my partner treats me with love, respect, and compassion, and the relationship we build together brings us joy, it seems of little concern to me whether she has another partner. Any other relationship she may engage in isn't a reflection on me; I don't believe that if a partner of mine seeks to build a relationship with someone else, it's because I'm not good enough for her. In fact, if my partner's other relationships enrich her life, or help make her happy, then that makes my relationship with her that much better.

There is a certain degree of "either this makes sense to you or it doesn't" to all these answers. For many people, monogamy works quite well, and polyamory just looks like a lot of work for no real benefit. For people like me, though, polyamory seems like a natural fit; the idea of it simply makes sense on an intuitive level.

Even for people who take naturally to polyamory, it's still a relationship style that requires care. Having three romantic partners means the consequences for making mistakes go up by at least a factor of three. When more people have entrusted the care of their hearts to you, it becomes more important that you learn how to take care of them. Poly people tend to focus a great deal of time and attention on relationship skills, possibly because it seem that we live in a society that doesn't emphasize teaching good relationship habits.

Much of the world seems to regard relationship skills as things the relationship fairy will ride down in a shower of fairy dust to bestow upon us as soon as we meet that One Special Someone who will forever after become the source of our nookie. Before then, we're taught a kind of abstinence-only approach to learning how to function in a romantic relationship. "Don't worry about it," the prevailing cultural dialog seems to be. "You'll figure it all out as soon as you meet your soul mate, and then you'll live happily ever after. If things go wrong, that just means it wasn't Meant To Be." This approach no doubt benefits the writers of Walt Disney movies greatly, since it

allows for lazy storytelling, but it serves those of us in the real world rather less well.

Poly people don't have a lot of models for relationship. Monogamy comes neatly bundled up with default rules, expectations, social norms, conventions, and assumptions. Those of us who are polyamorous, and especially those of us who have been polyamorous since before the poly community existed, have often felt like we're making things up as we go along, trying to fill in the remedial skills that our society does such a poor job of teaching at the same time that we're enrolled in an advanced curriculum of relationships without ordinary boundaries.

But the truth is, very, very few relationship skills are unique to polyamory: nearly all of them benefit monogamous people as well. Our society does a remarkably terrible job of teaching communication, which is arguably the most basic of all relationship skills. So many sexual, romantic, and relationship problems disappear when people just talk to each other—openly and without fear or shame—that I really feel we should advertise it on billboards and write it in elementary school textbooks.

Just like with everything important, there's a difference between knowing communication is necessary to a strong relationship and being able to do it well. A lot of barriers stand in the way of good communication, especially about sex. Fear of rejection is a big one. "What if I hear something I don't want to hear?" "What if he says no?" "What if she thinks what I'm asking for is too weird?" "What if I make myself vulnerable and my partner doesn't treat me well?"

A friend once claimed that nearly all communication problems have the same causes: a desire to control what the other person thinks of us, or a desire to protect ourselves from something we're afraid of. In communication, as in just about everything, life rewards those who move in the direction of greatest courage.

There is a downside to open communication, of course; once you've started practicing it, romantic comedies become unbearable. (Or more unbearable than they already were, at least.) Going to the movies with a group of poly folks becomes an exercise in "Why won't they just talk to each other?"

A tougher relationship skill is expectation management. It's difficult to master, because often we hold expectations that we don't talk about directly—or even admit to ourselves. It's easy to feel that someone else has done something wrong when an expectation isn't met, and when we feel wronged, it's difficult to ask, "Was this a reasonable expectation?" or, better still, "Did this person even know I had this expectation?" Just because we may feel bad doesn't necessarily mean someone else has done something wrong.

Partner selection is another skill that benefits anyone, monogamous or polyamorous. When we fancy someone, and that person fancies us back, we fall altogether too easily into the trap of believing the only thing for it is to start a relationship. However—hundreds of hours of Disney movies notwithstanding—it takes more than just love to make a relationship work.

One of the hardest lessons I've ever had to learn is that it's possible to deeply, truly, sincerely love someone else and still not be a good partner for that person. There are some incompatibilities that no struggling, no effort can overcome. Careful selection of partners goes a long way toward stopping problems before they even start.

The very small handful of relationship skills that *are* unique to polyamory often come down to time management, for which Google Calendar is a godsend, and safer sex and STI risk management, for which open conversation, regular testing, and the ability to talk about sexual health without shame are valuable tools.

Intuitively, it might seem that polyamorous people are at higher risk than monogamous people for STIs, though what little research has been done on the subject tends to show that's not the case. For example, a 2012 study published in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, "Unfaithful Individuals are Less Likely to Practice Safer Sex Than Openly Nonmonogamous Individuals," showed that nominally monogamous but cheating people are far more likely to engage in risky sexual practices than people who are open about nonmonogamy. This conclusion echoes the findings of many other studies, which consistently show that cheaters are unlikely to practice safer sex and likely to engage in high-risk behavior with partners of unknown STI status.

I'm not suggesting all monogamous people are careless about STI risks, or all polyamorous people are careful, of course. But polyamorous people tend not to take sexual health for granted. I know relatively few monogamous people who discuss STI testing, sexual history, and sexual health before taking on a new lover; indeed, many folks seem to be very embarrassed talking about things like STI testing, and reluctant to talk about sexual history. On the other hand, it has consistently been my experience that polyamorous folks are meticulous about STI testing, exchanging test results and talking about sexual risk and sexual history before taking a new lover. In fact, I know a surprisingly large number of polyamorous people who keep their test results and sexual histories online, in Google Docs or similar places, where they can be referenced easily. When the people in my romantic network want to change their sexual boundaries with new partners, we will often spend quite a bit of time talking about it first.

I've seen a lot of folks come to polyamory with wide-eyed wonder and, often, a great deal of trepidation. This whole business of responsible, open non-monogamy can look pretty intimidating from the outside, particularly for folks who've had a lot of experience with the rules and assumptions of monogamy. The openness with which poly folks talk about delicate subjects like sexual health and relationship expectations can be especially consternating.

One of the things that couples, in particular, can be tempted to do when they approach polyamory for the first time is hang on to as many of the ideas and conventions of monogamy as they can, in the hopes that doing so will cause as little change to their existing relationship as possible. A common way this manifests is in what we poly folks call "unicorn hunters": couples looking for a single, bisexual,

polyamorous woman who will agree to be romantically and sexually involved with both of them, as long as she promises not to be involved with anyone else.

On first blush, this may not seem unreasonable. Many men are intimidated by the idea of sharing a partner with another man, and many couples begin to talk about exploring polyamory because the woman wants to explore the idea of having sex with another woman. So why not a single bisexual partner? But there are, unfortunately, a number of problems with this approach. First, since many couples are looking for this combination, competition for single, bisexual women who are open to this dynamic is fierce. And because most people become polyamorous because they reject the idea of a restrictive relationship model that says, "When you are with me, you are forbidden to be involved with anyone else," the poly community is a poor place to look for a partner who is going to agree to a restrictive relationship.

It sometimes does happen that someone starts a relationship with one member of a couple and discovers that he or she is attracted to the other member as well, and three-way relationships sometimes form. But an *expectation* that sex with someone has to mean sex with that person's partner is an entirely different thing. Sexual and romantic attraction rarely develop at the same time, at the same speed, and in the same way with two different people; the up-front requirement "If you have sex with me, you also have to have sex with my partner" can seem quite invasive, disrespectful, or both. Despite this, quite a number of polyamorous bisexual women have at one time or another agreed to date a couple, often when they themselves were new to polyamory, and their experiences are rarely positive. Most surprisingly for couples new to polyamory, however, is the realization that structural approaches to handling jealousy rarely work.

Unicorn hunters aside, the members of any established couple come into a new relationship with an overwhelming number of advantages over a new partner: they have a shared history, shared experiences, even a shared language. Yet in spite of that, when one of the members of an established couple feels uncomfortable (which will happen, as surely as night follows day; any change to a relationship involves discomfort, and adding a new member to a relationship is a big change!) it's often the new person who bears the brunt of it.

Even when established couples sincerely believe that they are offering newcomers an equal position, it's rarely true. Consider, for example, the likely difference in outcome if a wife tells her husband "I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable right now; can you stop having sex with your other partner for awhile until I feel more comfortable?" vs. if the new partner were to go to the husband and say, "I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable right now; can you stop having sex with your wife for awhile until I feel more comfortable?"

On paper, it seems plausible that if two people share a lover in common, neither of them will get jealous. In practice, jealousy isn't rational, by definition. It absolutely is possible to be jealous of your partner's lover even if you're also having sex with that

person. When that happens, many couples find a way to blame the third. (This is something one friend of mine refers to it as “being a couple’s chew toy.”)

This is not to say that couples who are looking for such a dynamic are bad, or that such a dynamic never works. Rather, the point is that this dynamic is particularly difficult, and is often the result of unexamined expectations, fears, and prejudices.

It can feel a lot more threatening, at first, to be open to new relationships without pressing them into a predefined form, though it almost always works out better: relationships work best when they aren’t about finding people for the empty places in one’s life, but about finding places for the people one connects with.

Another approach many first-time couples take is to negotiate a lengthy list of rules they believe will help them feel safe. Again, this seems, on paper, perfectly reasonable thing to do. If you are aware that seeing your wife holding hands with another person might trigger feelings of jealousy, why not pass a rule that your wife isn’t allowed to hold hands with her new boyfriend? If you feel special because your husband calls you his snuggle-wuggums, it’s reasonable to ask that he not use that term with anyone else—right?

Such lists rarely survive first contact with the real world. Partly, that’s because people don’t like being handed a set of rules when they agree to start dating someone. Imagine what might happen if a single person carried a list of rules governing everything from pet names to sexual positions and whipped it out on every first date, somewhere between the hors d’oeuvres and dessert. Most folks would probably look at such a person like he’d suddenly sprouted an unexpected and unfortunate extra appendage.

More than that, though, human beings are colossally poor at predicting in advance how we will behave in unfamiliar situations; the things that seem important when we’re speculating about a new kind of relationship are rarely what turn out to be important when things get real. Rules-based relationships offer a seductive illusion of safety, but they don’t usually deliver on that promise. It’s common to see newcomers to polyamory with long lists of rules, but it’s rare to see poly veterans with those lists. It *is* difficult to let go of the illusion of safety they provide—but then, life rewards courage.

Polyamory requires courage. It requires the courage to believe that your partner *won’t* leave you for the new shiny, discarding you like yesterday’s newspaper when a new offer comes along. More than that, though, it requires the courage to believe that even if your relationship *does* end, things will still be okay.

At least for some of the people who practice it, polyamory requires letting go of the notion that the way to keep a relationship strong and happy is to compel one’s partner to exclusivity—whether sexual or emotional. If the relationship is solid, and the people involved are passionate and committed to it, then limiting a partner’s involvement with anyone else is unnecessary; and if the relationship isn’t strong and healthy, or the people involved are not committed to it, then controlling how or whether a partner becomes involved with anyone else is insufficient to save it.

One of the most wonderful things I see in people in the poly community is an abundance model of relationship: the idea that opportunities for love and commitment are all around us, and therefore the idea of being alone does not need to hold any fear.

Relationships do end. In the polyamorous world, just like in the monogamous world, things can change, priorities can shift, people can grow apart. With monogamy, it's often taken for granted that a new relationship will mean the end of the old relationship, so people guard their mates from temptation by limiting their access to new and perhaps threatening people. In polyamory, a new relationship doesn't necessarily have to come at the expense of an old one...but relationships can still end, just the same.

It might seem that since few people are poly, finding compatible mates who are open to polyamory might sound like a statistically improbable proposition. Yet we live in a world with seven billion people and change—a number so bogglingly huge, it's almost impossible for us to comprehend. If even one-twentieth of those people are at all open to polyamory, and only half of those are the appropriate sex and/or orientation, and only a tenth of those are available for a new relationship at any given moment, and only a tenth of those are accessible through the right accident of geography, and only a tenth of *those* are people who might ever cross our paths online or in the real world, that's still more than a hundred and seventy-five thousand people...surely an embarrassment of riches for even the most determined polyamorous person.

Our attitudes about the abundance or scarcity of relationship possibilities play an important role in how many opportunities we see. Two otherwise identical people, one of whom believes relationships are abundant and opportunities for connection are easy to find, and the other of whom believes opportunities are scarce, will have vastly different experiences looking for partners. The notion that love is rare and that any relationship, however unsatisfying, must be held onto tightly because if it is lost, another relationship might never appear, tends to lead to jealousy and fear of loss.

There. I said it. The J word. The subject that's sure to come up in nearly any conversation about polyamory: jealousy. "Don't you get jealous? How do you deal with jealousy?" I'm asked. "I am a jealous person; I could never be polyamorous," I'm told. And, most bizarrely to me, I am often informed, "If you don't feel jealous when your partner takes a new lover, it must mean you don't really love her."

These ideas all rest on a few tacit assumptions: jealousy is caused by a partner's actions. A person who feels jealous is a jealous-type person, rather than a person who occasionally experiences the emotion of jealousy. Jealousy doesn't have a solution, only workarounds; a partner's sexual encounters are inevitably bound to provoke it. Jealousy is proof of love. Jealousy is always bad; avoiding it is the prime directive of relationships.

We don't seem to think this way about any other emotion. We don't hear people say things like, "I am just an angry-type person; I could never be involved with someone

else.” We don’t say, “Well, you know, I would be reluctant to live with someone, because what if I felt worried at some point?” If someone talks about planning to move to a new house, she isn’t likely to be met with “Wow, that’s a big step; aren’t you afraid you might feel frustrated if you do that?” We accept that all sorts of emotional responses are part of our normal mental landscape: we feel afraid, hopeful, bored, serene, angry, sad, joyful, disappointed...but we don’t usually seek to make avoiding any of these feelings the cornerstones of our romantic lives, and we don’t usually identify ourselves in terms of these emotions.

Yet we treat jealousy as a fearsome, ravaging monster, sure to destroy any relationship it touches, rather than as an emotion that people sometimes feel. Yes, polyamorous people can and sometimes do feel jealous, just as poly folks feel angry, happy, discontented, euphoric, heartbroken, annoyed, surprised, stressed, hopeful, doubtful, and all the other feelings that go along with being human. More importantly, however, poly folks tend to understand that jealousy is no different than any other emotion; it often says more about what’s going on in our own heads than what’s going on between our partners’ legs.

When, in a relationship many years ago, I encountered the green-eyed monster for the first time, I assumed I must be feeling bad because my partner was doing something wrong. I ended up destroying my relationship with her because of it. Later, when I realized what had actually happened, I started to understand some things about the inner workings of jealousy.

The most important thing I learned was that it wasn’t anything about her behavior that had triggered the jealousy. Instead, it was my own uncertainty about what the new relationship she had just started meant to me. I didn’t feel confident that she wanted to be involved romantically with me—despite a preponderance of evidence demonstrating that she did—and I lacked the communication skills (or perhaps the courage) to simply ask, “So, uh, this new guy you’re interested in...does that change things between us?”

That lesson turned out to have wider applicability than just dealing with feelings of jealousy in a relationship. The realization that someone I care about can make decisions, and most of the time, those decisions are not about me, had huge implications for many parts of my life. We tend to think of ourselves as the centers of our universes and the heroes of our own stories, so we interpret the things that happen around us as though they are always about us. Learning when a lover’s decisions aren’t about us leads to much less stress in our romantic lives.

Another thing I learned was that jealousy is almost always rooted in some other emotion, like insecurity or fear of loss or abandonment. The quest to overcome jealousy is indistinguishable from the quest to become more secure. When the underlying emotion is dealt with, the jealousy tends to evaporate—often so completely that it leaves nothing behind except a slightly puzzled “wait, why did that used to make me so upset?”

Jealousy, in other words, is not some strange and alien thing, totally unlike any other emotion. It’s a feeling, and like other feelings it’s an attempt by the parts of our

brains that don't have language to communicate something. It might be something like, "Hey, I'm scared of abandonment," or something like, "Hey, my needs aren't being met," but either way, it's not an emotion that particularly needs to be feared. Instead, it needs to be thought about, understood, and talked about—and then it often disappears like morning dew.

It sounds simple, and it really is, though "simple" and "easy" aren't the same thing. A complete discussion on the tools for understanding jealousy and the emotions that lie at its roots might fill a book—a chapter or two of which would probably be quite useful in any relationship, monogamous or polyamorous. The practical bit is that jealousy management is a learned skill, not an arcane secret passed down through generations of mountaintop-dwelling, hermetic monks. It's a skill that benefits everyone, polyamorous or not.

So, with all that said, what is the most successful way to get into the world of polyamory?

Experience is the best teacher, no doubt about it, but the tuition can be alarmingly high. Often, it's better to learn from other people's mistakes than from our own. It can seem difficult to find other polyamorous people. But these days, nearly every major town or city has a poly community, even in the Bible Belt or other places you might not expect to find one. Locating a poly group can be as simple as typing "polyamory" and the name of a city into Google. And one thing that makes finding other poly people easier is transparency; success in finding other poly people is often directly proportional to one's own openness.

As poly has come into the mainstream, a lot of resources have emerged. There are books, magazine articles, support groups, Web sites, and more. I have an extensive Web site, now in its second decade, at www.morethantwo.com, aimed primarily at newcomers.

There are poly dating sites like polymatchmaker.com and okcupid.com, the latter of which isn't exclusively poly but has a very large number of poly users. There are books like *The Ethical Slut* and *Opening Up*, along with dozens more that I list on my site.

Even if polyamory isn't your thing, the mainstreaming of the poly community has started people talking about relationships, assumptions, and default expectations in ways that they haven't before. Polyamory, like monogamy, isn't for everyone; relationships don't come in one-size-fits-all. The greatest value the discussion about polyamory has, I think, is that it takes relationships away from default assumptions and into the realm of conscious choice.