

DESIGNER RELATIONSHIPS

A GUIDE TO HAPPY MONOGAMY,
POSITIVE POLYAMORY, AND OPTIMISTIC
OPEN RELATIONSHIPS



MARK A. MICHAELS AND PATRICIA JOHNSON

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Foreword

by Kenneth R. Haslam, MD

Founder of the Kenneth R. Haslam, MD Polyamory Archives, the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University

We are living in an era of major change in terms of how we practice sex, love, and relationships. Thanks to the Internet, whole communities now exist that honor a variety of non-monogamous relationship structures—polyamory, swinging, and other alternative arrangements. Finding people and places to explore this wide variety of sexual and romantic options can now be done with ease, something that was hard to imagine a few decades ago. The novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* has led millions into a consideration of adding kink and BDSM into their intimate repertoire. Marriages have been failing at a high rate for years. Many older people, who find themselves suddenly single, are exposed to a cyber world of online dating and a social acceptance of a new sexuality that are light years away from how they grew up. Many younger people, who may have been raised by divorced parents, are actively seeking healthier alternatives.

Times are changing.

Designer Relationships is a guidebook for these changing times. It explores what is now available to anyone with a computer, a modicum of curiosity, and the willingness to take a risk and explore.

I was born in the mid-1930s and grew up in the very conservative '40s and '50s. My generation was led to believe that our only option was to marry the virginal Prince (or Princess) Charming of the opposite sex, have babies, and live in the suburbs with wood-paneled station wagons. It was assumed that our lifelong partners would meet all our sexual, emotional, and practical needs for sixty years and

that we would die in each other's arms still ecstatic in love. These misguided beliefs still hold sway in popular culture.

Buying into these myths didn't work for me. After two wives and a couple of long-term girlfriends (I stopped getting married in 1977 after a traumatic divorce), I began to understand that I just wasn't cut out for compulsory monogamy. I was a failed serial monogamist.

In the mid 1990s, my romantic life changed for the better when I bought a modem—the gadget that connected my primitive computer to the then primitive Internet. Quite by accident, I stumbled upon *CompuServe* and then upon the polyamory community. I had no idea such a thing existed.

It changed my life.

Polyamory introduced me into a new way of thinking about sex, love, and relationships. That old demon—my still abundant raging sex hormones and attendant sex drive—could now be channeled into something that was acceptable to an entire community of intelligent and well-educated people. I could have loving and sexual relationships with more than one person of any gender, in an abundance of relationship structures, and in a myriad of sexual expressions. Honesty and communication were the guiding principles, and everyone knew what was going on. NO CHEATING REQUIRED. Wow! There was a growing and supportive community with local and annual national meetings where I could hang out without stigma.

I became a polyamory activist and flew about the country doing workshops, giving lectures, and talking about my new discovery to everyone who would listen. I established what may be the world's only formal collection of historical material on polyamory at Indiana University's Kinsey Institute of Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. I was hooked, and I was finally at peace with sex, love, and relationships.

A couple of years ago, Mark and Patricia called me for an interview for what would become their very successful book *Partners in Passion*. They were well informed, agenda-free, and sex positive; they took plenty of time, so the interview was comfortable, extensive, and penetrating. We discussed the wide variety of names given to the myriad forms of relationship and sexual expressions available. We also discussed what I call the swing/poly-wars, during which activists argued over the differences between swinging and polyamory, as well as the heated and failed debates over defining polyamory in a way that would satisfy everyone. During those wars, I started using the term “designer relationships” as an alternative. *Designer Relationships* demanded only that all parties sit down and discuss openly what each one wanted and how the relationships would progress as life and times changed. Discussion of relationship fluidity (and even sexual fluidity) was mandatory because children, new partners, shifts in sexual orientation, and just plain getting old can all come into play. For me, this was the perfect term for this new age.

For many years, I planned on writing a book with the title *Designer Relationships*, but a major geographical move, a new romantic partner, increasing age, impending senility, procrastination, and just plain laziness got in the way. My conversations with Mark and Patricia, however, were fruitful, and we all eventually understood that they would write the book.

My vision was always that this would be a short book that could be purchased in an airline terminal in Boston and be finished before landing in Los Angeles. *Designer Relationships* meets that criterion (well, almost for slow readers). Patricia and Mark have done an admirable job covering the wide variety of subjects so necessary for understanding the vast, ill-defined and ever changing world of consensual non-monogamy.

Thank you, Mark and Patricia, for doing what I was too lazy to do!

Introduction

OURS HAS BEEN A designer relationship from the very start, though we were not familiar with the term at the time. When we got together in 1999, it was to practice sexual Tantra. Neither one of us was seeking a long-term partner, but things evolved quickly, to our surprise. Once it became clear that this was more than a casual or purely practical relationship, we began what has been an ongoing process of examining and purposefully shaping our partnership.

Time passed. The relationship deepened, and so did our trust in each other. With that trust came the ability to be more adventurous, and in the intervening years we've been exposed to a wide variety of alternative sexual and relationship communities and have presented to a broad spectrum of people—from monogamous to pansexual—and we've done our share of sexual exploration, while maintaining a strong pair-bond.

No doubt some imagine that our life is an endless party, and that we're lust-crazed libertines. The reality is a lot more mundane. And that's fine. While we're unconventional, we're by no means radical in the scheme of things, but our designer relationship is one that we've created. It works for us, and that's all that matters.

In 2013, when we were writing *Partners in Passion*, we elected to describe ourselves as both “a devoted married couple” and as “pair-bonded nonmonogamous.” (If we had it to do over, we'd probably use *nonexclusive* instead.) The idea that two people in a nonmonogamous relationship that has lasted for over fifteen years can be both happy and devoted to one another challenges conventional wisdom—it is even perceived as a threat to the social order by some.

Thus, the decision to come out fully was not an easy one to make, even though we have never been deeply closeted, have never concealed our attendance at alternative events, and have been inclusive of nonconforming relationship styles in our writing. We're also in the privileged position of being a white, mostly heterosexual, childfree, and self-employed couple, so writing openly about our relationship was less risky for us than it would be for many others.

Despite our circumstances, we were somewhat reluctant to reveal any personal details for two reasons. First, *Partners in Passion* is a book that's written primarily for couples, including monogamous ones, and we were concerned that discussing nonmonogamy as a valid option for some would be off-putting to a significant segment of potential readers. We were also concerned that we would be stigmatized for being forthright.

We have been pleasantly surprised, though we still have our uneasy moments. There's no way to tell whether some monogamous readers have been deterred by the content, but the reviews have been favorable, and readers have observed that they learned from the experiences of our nonmonogamous interviewees. On a personal level, our uneasiest moments were on a drive-time radio show; the host mocked us and insisted on calling us "swingers"—in a feeble attempt to offend us and titillate his audience—without any knowledge of our relationship structure or agreements. Despite his mockery, he eventually revealed that, prior to their marriage, he made it clear to his wife that he couldn't promise lifelong exclusivity, which means that he, too, is in a designer relationship of sorts.

Notwithstanding the positive response to *Partners in Passion*, attitudes like that shock jock's remain all too common, so we were delighted when Brenda Knight at Cleis Press suggested that we write a follow-up, companion piece that focused more explicitly on the spectrum of relationship possibilities that includes but is not limited to sexually

exclusive arrangements. We were also grateful to have the opportunity to explore the subject in more depth and to expand our scope to include a variety of other and more radical alternative structures.

Designer Relationships incorporates some of *Partners in Passion*, sometimes restructured and refocused. It also contains new material, and new research. To a significant degree, it is a response to the rapid and dramatic cultural changes that have taken place since 2013. We think of it as a companion piece; where *Partners* is encyclopedic, covering relationships and sexuality throughout the life cycle, *Designer Relationships* is more narrowly focused on relationship structures and skills, including a critique of the way monogamy is conventionally practiced (but not a critique of monogamy itself) and an exploration of alternative possibilities. We hope that this book will contribute to a trend that's already in motion—the increased acceptance of a wide variety of consensual domestic, erotic, and emotional arrangements. We also hope it will help you define and create the domestic, erotic, and emotional relationships that work for you.

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Designer Relationship?

CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS ARE IN a state of rapid evolution. We see these changes as empowering. They provide people with the opportunity to develop partnerships based on their own sexualities, understandings, and agreements. This makes it possible to create what Kenneth R. Haslam MD, founder of the Kinsey Institute’s Polyamory Archive, has called “designer relationships.” You are the designer, along with your partner or partners, and it’s up to you to create a relationship that works and to redesign it when and if appropriate. We invite you to move beyond the binary thinking that deems monogamy and various forms of consensual nonmonogamy to be irreconcilable opposites.

DESIGNER RELATIONSHIPS— BEYOND THE BINARY

*The term **designer relationship** is inclusive. It may encompass:*

- *People who bond emotionally but not sexually*

- *People who choose to be sexually exclusive*
- *People who agree to be nonexclusive*
- *Single people who have occasional lovers or friends with benefits*
- *Multiple partner configurations where long-term bonds exist among all or some*
- *Partnerships in which certain kinky activities take place outside the primary relationship*

The foregoing are just a few examples. The possibilities are limitless, and thinking about a partnership as something people can craft allows for flexibility and change over the span of the relationship and one's life. Relationships can open and close or have varying degrees and kinds of openness as circumstances demand. In the context of a designer relationship, decisions are made mutually, consciously, and deliberately. Agreements are discussed, arrived at, and honored, and when agreements no longer serve, they can be recrafted.

SOME COMPONENTS OF A DESIGNER RELATIONSHIP

Designer relationships entail:

- *Free and enthusiastic choice*
- *Mutuality in defining the relationship and establishing parameters*
- *Permission to consider all forms of relating*
- *Dedication to maintaining radical regard of your partner(s)*
- *Regular testing of the nonexclusive for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and transparency about sexual history*

As we'll discuss in some detail, contemporary conservatives lament what they perceive to be the erosion of "traditional" marriage, but their concerns are misplaced. This panoply of relationship options can also benefit those who choose to be sexually and emotionally exclusive. The benefit lies in the fact that they've been exposed to the available possibilities, have genuinely thought them through, and have chosen what is truly appropriate for their partnership. Even in the context of total exclusivity, people change and evolve. They may experience new desires and interests. Being able to

discuss these feelings freely and fully is likely to make partnerships more durable, enhance feelings of interdependence, and reduce the likelihood of infidelity or other clandestine behavior.

The New Sexual Revolution

We are also in the midst of a second sexual revolution (at least the second such revolution in the past fifty years). A decade ago, it was almost inconceivable that marriage equality would be the law of the land and that a substantial majority of Americans would support it. It also would have been hard to imagine that *Time* would feature a transgender television star on its cover and call the trans movement “America’s next civil rights frontier.”¹ A similar but somewhat less visible shift is taking place in cultural attitudes toward alternative relationship styles.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s was bracketed roughly by the invention of the birth control pill and the HIV/ AIDS crisis of the 1980s. It was a heady time of rapid and dramatic cultural change, including the exploration of relationship alternatives, a topic that was examined in books like *Open Marriage*, *Group Marriage*, and the immensely popular *The Joy of Sex* and *More Joy of Sex*. The AIDS crisis and the generally conservative political culture that characterized the 1980s slowed the rate of change but failed to stop it entirely. Despite the closure of Plato’s Retreat and other renowned 1970s swing clubs, the swinging subculture endured, and other clubs such as New Horizons in the Seattle area remained open throughout. The term *polyamory* (meaning many loves) was coined in the early 1990s, and the movement grew during that decade. By 1997, two influential books on polyamory had appeared — *The Ethical Slut*, by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy and *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits*, by Deborah Anapol.

When Nena O’Neill, coauthor of *Open Marriage*, died in 2006, Margalit Fox opined, in her *New York Times* obituary, that the 1972 book read like “a period piece” with ideas that seemed “quaint” and “naïve.”² Since that obituary appeared, dozens of books on various forms of open relating have been published, from new editions of *The Ethical Slut* and *Polyamory* to Tristan Taormino’s *Opening Up*, Christopher Ryan’s *Sex at Dawn*, Jenny Block’s *Open*, Elizabeth Sheff’s *The Polyamorists Next Door*, and Curtis R. Bergstrand and Jennifer Blevins Sinski’s in-depth sociological study *Swinging in America*. The notoriously censorious Dr. Drew Pinsky recently acknowledged on *The View* that polyamory works for some people, and numerous articles on polyamory and other forms of open relating have appeared in mainstream media outlets since *Partners in Passion’s* publication.

As part of this wave of interest, we were interviewed as experts for a segment on Breakthru Radio/FoxDC in April 2014. The reporter, Sarah Fraser, informed us that approximately forty percent of her New York City “person on the street” subjects thought that open relationships were a valid and viable option, even if not for them personally. At least one of the Fox hosts agreed during the in-studio discussion.³ Eight years after O’Neill’s death, the ideas expressed in *Open Marriage* seem more seminal than quaint.

The current shift has been influenced by a wide variety of cultural factors. In addition to the growing and politically active polyamory community, the swinging and kink communities appear to be gaining many new adherents. Therapists like Esther Perel and Tammy Nelson have been challenging conventional wisdom, exploring the potentially positive transformations that can take place in the aftermath of an affair, and moving the professional discourse away from the knee-jerk assumption that nonmonogamous arrangements are intrinsically

problematic. At the 2014 American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists' (AASECT) annual conference, sessions dealing with nonmonogamy were very well attended.

It seems likely that growing public acceptance of marriage equality is playing a role, as Jay Michaelson suggested in *The Daily Beast*, since pair-bonded but nonexclusive relationships are commonplace in the gay male community.⁴ In one recent study, nearly fifty percent of long-term gay couples were in some form of consensually nonmonogamous relationship.⁵ This fact caught the mainstream public's attention when sex columnist Dan Savage described himself as "monogamish" on *The Colbert Report*.⁶ Based on Savage's comments to Colbert—"Is it cheating if I'm on one end of the guy and my husband's on the other?"—his own arrangement seems to be one that involves the occasional threesome or group encounter but perhaps no outside liaisons, a structure that would be familiar to many in the swinging community.

Designer Relationships—a Field Guide

Now that we've provided a working definition of designer relationships, let's consider some of the relationship styles that fall within the confines of this very broad term. Because it is such an inclusive one, we can't possibly cover every variation. When multiple people are involved there are simply too many possibilities. Thus, we'll focus on the larger categories, with an occasional foray into more intimate details.

It's perhaps easiest to begin by discussing the two basic qualities that are inconsistent with designer relationships: unconsciousness and absence of consent. Many people enter into monogamous relationships without a clear understanding of what they mean by monogamy and what their agreements are. This can also be an issue in

consensually nonmonogamous relationships, but typically open relating demands reflection and discussion because it transgresses cultural norms and because it requires frequent negotiation and renegotiation. Cheating is not limited to monogamous relationships and is probably more common than it should be in open ones. A relationship that involves cheating is not a designer relationship (even though there may be circumstances where cheating is appropriate, and even kind—for example when a caregiver chooses not to disclose outside activities based on deep consideration for a partner’s emotional well-being).

Nonconsensual nonmonogamy can take a wide variety of forms, including: clandestinely getting lap dances, secretly employing sex workers, having affairs, and having same-sex liaisons “on the down low,” to name a few. An additional variation is doubly nonconsensual—secretly dating others and not disclosing one’s relationship status. We like to call these *deficient* forms of nonmonogamy because they are done in secret. The whole dynamic changes when the activity is consensual.

Consciousness and consent are crucial, but beyond that, there’s simply no one-size-fits-all approach to relating. Designer relationships come in many styles.

Single by Choice

There are people who prefer to be solitary, with or without casual sexual partners or “fuck buddies.” There is nothing wrong with enjoying casual sex, with preferring to live alone, or with having no interest in partnered sex. Still, these choices are frowned upon and even stigmatized in the culture at large.

I’m faced with the dilemma that I don’t fit perfectly into either the Lifestyle or Vanilla world. I don’t always have the energy (or stomach) for play, or the

stomach (or energy) for the regular world. I want parts of both, but all of neither. For some mystical, seemingly unattainable hybrid reality is what I yearn. And, frankly, I often doubt its existence. But, then again, this was how I once viewed sex—as some far-off, hidden land populated by divinely anointed, nonhuman super beings—and look at me now. Not to brag, but I can hold my own.

—Daniel Stern, *Swingland: Between the Sheets of the Secretive, Sometimes Messy, but Always Adventurous Swinging Lifestyle*

Single and Polyamorous

This is similar to single by choice but with a stronger emphasis on having emotional connections with various partners. Some people think of polyamory (which we discuss in detail below) as an orientation, so single and polyamorous may also refer to being currently unattached but seeking a multipartner relationship.

Asexual

It's estimated that one percent of the population is asexual, a term that is sometimes defined as meaning "a person who does not experience sexual attraction."⁷ There has been a move to claim this as an orientation in recent years, and many asexual people feel justifiably marginalized in a culture that treats sex as so central (even as it demonizes those who are on the highly sexual end of the spectrum). It is important to distinguish between asexuality and celibacy—making a choice to abstain from sex temporarily or for a lifetime. Also bear in mind that sex is a choice, and asexual people may choose to have sex even in the absence of desire.

The asexual movement (though not asexuality) is a relatively new phenomenon. Perspectives on the orientation and terminologies vary considerably within the community—for example, some who identify as asexual have a rich autoerotic life but don't wish to engage with others, and some may have no interest in genital activity. We expect the movement and the language to change and evolve over time to reflect this variety more fully.

Asexual people may choose to form emotional and affectionate partnerships. Even if there is no sex per se, other forms of physical and emotional intimacy can be fulfilling. As long as the parties involved are satisfied with the arrangement, there's no reason to think of these relationships as being any less valid.

Nonsexual

Like asexual relationships, nonsexual relationships can be emotionally intimate and enduring. One fairly common manifestation of this type of arrangement, and we've had friends and family who fall into the category, is an emotional (and sometimes a domestic) partnership between two people of different orientations. One friend has been in such a relationship for nearly forty years, and both parties have found sexual outlets elsewhere, without sacrificing the emotional intimacy.

Monogamous by Choice

When the terms of a monogamous relationship are discussed and agreed upon and both parties make an informed and considered decision to be exclusive, the relationship is more likely to be dynamic and truly fulfilling for both parties. When monogamy is mutually chosen, many people experience it as a profound expression of love.

Semiconsensual Nonmonogamy

Semiconsensual nonmonogamy is somewhat more efficient than its nonconsensual counterpart because there is at least some measure of transparency, though it lacks the collaborative and mutual dimension that we think is optimal. This form of relating has much in common with other open relationship models, but the accompanying attitude is one of toleration rather than engagement. In this type of arrangement, a partner might say, “I don’t care what you do on your own time, and I don’t want to know about it. Just call when you say you are going to call, and be home in time for dinner.” Semiconsensual nonmonogamy is not an uncommon solution for couples dealing with illness, a commuter relationship, or a major imbalance in sex drive, and it can work for some people.

Although it may work for some, merely tolerating a behavior is not embracing and supporting your partner’s growth or using sexuality as a tool for evolving together. It is an old-fashioned approach that evokes what is or was common in some European societies. Men of a certain class often had mistresses, and wives had no choice but to tolerate the infidelity. Some self-defined “open relationships” in which the policy is “don’t ask, don’t tell” also fall into this category. Of course, there’s no problem if this approach works for you, provided you are making informed safer sex decisions and have arrived at this style of relating in a way that is truly mutual.

Open Relationships

Many people use *open relationship* as a kind of shorthand, so the intended meaning can vary a great deal. The origins of the term go back at least to 1972 and the publication of the O’Neills’ *Open Marriage*. While the book did not focus on nonmonogamy, in one chapter sexual nonexclusivity was presented as an option:

*We are not recommending outside sex, but we are not saying it should be avoided either. The choice is entirely up to you, and can be made only upon your own knowledge of the degree to which you have achieved, within your own marriage, the trust, identity, and open communication necessary to the eradication of jealousy.*⁸

To a significant extent, the O'Neills' way of thinking about relationships helped lay the groundwork for the polyamory movement that emerged almost two decades later, but their vision of open marriage had little to do with sexual nonexclusivity. The brief section devoted to that topic probably accounts for the book's enduring fame. *Open Marriage* helped popularize alternative relationship models that had been percolating in various subcultures for nearly a decade.

The late 1960s and early '70s were an era of major cultural change and experimentation, but attitudes were in some respects considerably more conventional than they are today. Thus, *open marriage* has been replaced by *open relationship*, which is now one of the relationship status options on Facebook. ("It's complicated" is another.)

The problem with the terms *open marriage* and *open relationship* is that they are very broad. If you choose "in an open relationship" as your status on Facebook, your closest friends are likely to know what you mean and understand your arrangements, but the other one thousand may just assume that you sleep with random people. There are numerous ways to have an open relationship. It can mean you're dating and have agreed it's too soon to be exclusive; it can mean you swing; it can mean you date multiple people; or any number of other things. Thus, it is a very generic statement about being nonmonogamous. It's useful as shorthand but no more than that. How you define it more deeply is up to you. As the O'Neills put it: "Open marriage is

called open for that very reason: the options are there for you to take or leave according to your individual decision.”⁹ The great advantage to the term is that it is not limiting.

Monogamish

This neologism has a few different meanings. As we’ve noted, Dan Savage has famously used it to describe his own relationship. It can also mean monogamous with occasional exceptions. Wiktionary defines it as “mostly monogamous, but allowing for occasional infidelities.” (More on “infidelity” and our objections to definitions of this sort later.)¹⁰ We’ve also heard it used to refer to people in dyadic relationships who agree that flirting and limited erotic interactions with others (making out or dirty dancing) are okay, while other, more overtly sexual activity is not. We prefer the way Savage uses it, which implies pair-bonded but open to having interactions with others from time to time.

Friends with Benefits

This form of nonmonogamy seems to be increasingly common among young people. It usually refers to sexual relating without excessive emotional entanglement, and it is often decried for its association with “hookup culture.” Notwithstanding, friendship can involve deep attachments. It’s a truism that friendship is pretty much essential if you want to have an enduring, erotic relationship. Thinking about any long-term lover as a friend with benefits (FWB) is a healthy attitude.

It is not uncommon for a couple’s first nonmonogamous sexual experience to happen with friends. We’ve known people who were at a party where things got a little “crazy” and one thing led to another. Sometimes a conversation with friends about your sex life can lead to a discovery that there’s a realm in which you wish to interact. For some, this

is the preferred form of erotic adventuring, and if you are part of a community that supports sexual exploration, you have a much better chance of meeting potential FWBs. Deliberately setting out to seduce someone who may not be interested and who might even take offense can be very risky. In some cases, it's probably better to leave the seduction in the realm of fantasy.

In contrast to the nonconsensual nonmonogamy of an affair, an FWB relationship can be more nourishing. An affair may provide an opportunity to grow and may even make your sex life with a long-term partner hotter for a while, but in most cases, when an affair gets found out, either the affair or the established relationship will have to end. In an FWB situation, there is transparency and, if you handle it well, no drama. You can feel affection for another person without putting the partnership at risk, and the friendship can take its natural course. You and your FWB may drift apart, you may stop being sexual together while remaining close, or you may have a lasting, uncomplicated erotic relationship. (Of course, this is also true for singles and others who have FWBs.) Being open to this way of relating creates an array of possibilities for developing deep and enduring bonds with others, even when the dyad remains central.

Swinging, or Being “in the Lifestyle”

Swinging generally applies to couples who engage in sex with other people as a recreational activity, though there are many singles in the community as well. Swinging as a social movement dates to the 1970s, with some older antecedents. In the early years, “wife swapping” was commonly used as a synonym. The term *swapping* is still in use, albeit in a more egalitarian way, without the word *wife* as prefix. This highlights the centrality of the couple in the

lifestyle and leads some to see the movement as conventional and even conservative.

In swinging, the emphasis is often on sex, and sometimes this emphasis can be monolithic. For some, sex with others may be fine, but only in the context of an anonymous or near-anonymous situation in which there is no chance that a strong emotional connection will develop. We've even heard of incidents in which one couple avoided speaking to another after a sexual encounter.

Because many swingers are middle to upper-middle class, with families and mainstream careers, they may be closeted about their participation in the lifestyle. While we understand the need that many people feel to conceal this aspect of their lives, the clandestine element can sometimes contribute to behaviors and attitudes that are problematic. Swinging can replicate sex-negative paradigms that are so prevalent in mainstream culture—conventional attitudes about gender roles, homophobia, and a less than fully integrated attitude toward sexuality. For example, same-sex interactions between women are almost expected in some segments of the community, but in much of mainstream swinger culture, similar interactions between men have yet to be accepted.

Many people in the lifestyle keep their lives compartmentalized, revealing their sexual interests only to fellow lifestylers. This compartmentalization can help to engender a “party” mentality as opposed to a more conscious approach. It's no accident that one of the most popular lifestyle-oriented resorts is called Hedonism. We're not against hedonism at all: we have taught at the resort and have argued that conscious hedonism can be a spiritual practice. We're also not against blowing off steam at times, but an excessive focus on partying means that some of the power and beauty of sex will almost certainly be overlooked.

All that said, the swinging world has changed a good deal over the last decade, and based on our experience at

lifestyle events, there's considerably more openness to alternative forms of sexual expression than there was ten years ago. The interest in sacred sexuality has increased significantly; acceptance of various forms of kink has grown; and male homophobia seems to have declined while the number of events that welcome bisexual men has increased. This is purely impressionistic, but attitudes seem to be evolving.

While swinging is typically thought of as being focused on no-strings-attached, recreational sex, the reality is more complex; however, like Dan Savage, swingers typically prioritize the pair-bond to a degree that some polyamorous people do not. Thus, even if couples who identify as swingers have been in a relationship with another couple for years, they may hesitate to define their feelings as "love."

Polyamory

Polyamory is a social movement that emerged in the early 1990s. The term, a neologism that combines the Greek for "many" and the Latin for "love," was coined in 1993. Polyamorous, or "poly," relationships come in a variety of structures, from dating multiple people at the same time, to dyadic domestic arrangements with each person having outside partners, to mono/poly structures where one person is monogamous but supports the other's nonmonogamy, to group domestic partnerships.

Unlike simply identifying your relationship as open or having recreational sex with others, calling yourself polyamorous carries with it at least the implication that you're emotionally involved or willing to be emotionally involved at a deep level with more than one person. Once you move beyond that very broad and general sense of the word, being polyamorous means different things to different people. For some, being poly involves focusing on

relationships as much as or more than sex; this can mean that love is a prerequisite for sex.

Some in the poly community seek to distinguish themselves from swingers, and there are differences between the communities. It seems to us that the biggest differences are cultural and have much to do with the origins of the two groups, their politics, and to some degree their focus.

In contrast to swinging, polyamory has a theoretical basis and carries with it an implicit and sometimes explicit critique of “traditional” monogamy. We’ve always been attracted to this intellectual and theoretical aspect of polyamory. At the same time, some people who identify as poly are married couples who participate in casual, recreational sex, and some people who identify as swingers have long-term relationships with other couples or individuals. Thus, despite the many differences, the two communities have much in common.

While most people and organizations associated with the poly movement are explicit about supporting all consensual relationship styles, in the early years, polyamory was sometimes described as being “consensual, ethical, and responsible nonmonogamy,” a phrase that still appears on Wikipedia.¹¹ We are somewhat troubled by these terms because they can be read as implying that other forms of consensual nonmonogamy are irresponsible or even unethical. Originally these words may have been used in part to distinguish polyamory from swinging, but we prefer to think of them as referring only to cheating, which is usually unethical and often irresponsible.

Swolly

Another term coined by Dr. Ken Haslam to refer to people who straddle the fuzzy border between swinging and polyamory—those who enjoy both casual or recreational sex

and who may have deep emotional and erotic connections with more than one other person.

Polyfidelity

Some think of polyfidelity as a being a subset of polyamory. This is true in some respects, but polyfidelity implies a closed system in which no member will violate the group's agreement to be exclusive, though polyfidelitous groups may shift in their composition and new members may be added after STI testing and group agreement. The term was coined in the 1970s, so it's older than polyamory. Polyfidelity is rooted in the intentional communities and communal living experiments that flourished during that period, but it has even deeper antecedents in nineteenth-century "free love" movements like the Oneida Community.

Kink

We discuss kink in considerable detail in *Partners in Passion*, from our perspective as outsiders who dabble a little. People in the kink community have perhaps an even more varied array of relationship styles, from 24/7 Dominant/submissive arrangements to "Leather Families," which can have complex structures and clearly defined roles. While we won't be addressing kink in depth in this book, it's important to point out that kinky relationship structures are diverse and entail frequent negotiation and definition—for example, a person may be submissive in the context of their primary, dyadic relationship but dominant with all other partners. Regardless of specifics, kinky relationships, when they are done well, are intrinsically designer relationships because they require communication, consent, and intentionality at all stages.

CHAPTER 2

What Is Monogamy?

“DESPITE WIDESPREAD ENDORSEMENT of monogamy as the ideal type of romantic relationship, the construct of monogamy lacks a consistent definition.”¹²

Monogamy is generally a cultural default; it is assumed without being examined. People (and we have done this ourselves) often enter into monogamous relationships without defining it for themselves as individuals or as a couple. This lack of clear understandings often leads to dissatisfaction, both emotional and sexual, with various forms of cheating as an upshot. We'll begin our examination of monogamy by looking to biology and history for guidance.

True Monogamy and Social Monogamy

In scientific terms, true monogamy is the formation of a sexually exclusive lifetime pair-bond. Social monogamy, the formation of a lifetime pair-bond, is found in an estimated three to five percent of mammals and is frequently accompanied by extra-pair copulation, or what's called “cheating” in humans. True monogamy is extremely rare and has only been observed as the typical arrangement in one primate species, the owl monkey.¹³

This ostensibly monogamous primate is very unlike humans; it mates only once a year, when females are in estrus; males have very low sperm counts and presumably low testosterone levels. Nevertheless, there's evidence of solitary males stealing females from mated pairs, so even if nonmonogamy is rare in this species, it still exists. True monogamy is unambiguously the exception, not the rule in the animal kingdom.

Monogamy in Human History

The same goes for human history. Neither social monogamy nor true monogamy was the dominant model until very recently. Even after the development of agriculture, human societies have evidenced a vast array of sexual and social arrangements, few of which have treated lifelong sexual exclusivity between two people as the ideal.

In the Western world, monogamy only became the rule during the early Common Era. Jews practiced polygamy until at least 1000 CE in Europe and for considerably longer in other parts of the world. Christianity did not fully reject it until the early modern period, and some African Catholics have supported it in recent years. *First Timothy*, an epistle (traditionally ascribed to Saint Paul but probably written by another early Christian) opposes polygamy for church officials but not others, for reasons of efficiency not morality. Even within the context of medieval and Renaissance Christianity, events like Carnival/Mardi Gras and various other festivals provided a structured and ritualized outlet for extra-pair copulations. During the Reformation, Martin Luther granted exemptions allowing for polygyny (one man and multiple wives).¹⁴ Certain Protestant sects, including the Anabaptists, openly practiced polygyny during the sixteenth century, and while it's disputed, some Protestant elders in Germany may have accepted polygyny involving up to ten wives as late as 1650.¹⁵

Regardless of the history, true monogamy was the ideal in American culture from the Puritan era until the late twentieth century, and the beliefs accompanying this idealization continue to have a profound influence today. True monogamy is still the only model that social conservatives endorse, as is indicated by the slogan “one man, one woman, until death do us part.” This demands not only heterosexuality but also lifelong sexual exclusivity. While in recent years it has been used most often in the context of opposing marriage equality, it is also reflected, perhaps most explicitly, in the Catholic Church’s rejection of divorce.

Monogamy Since 1960

In true monogamy, virginity at marriage is expected, and fidelity until death is assumed; however, even in true monogamy, there is room for ambiguity. For example, some perceive masturbation, experiencing desire for another, or even developing a platonic attachment to another to be the equivalent of cheating. Serial monogamy is similar to true monogamy insofar as it assumes exclusivity over the course of a relationship. This only started to become socially acceptable during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Before that, having sex before marriage was considered immoral at best, especially for women. (Standards were more lax for men, especially men of wealth and power.)

The belief that people should marry as virgins and stay together until death was mostly supplanted by serial monogamy by the 1970s, when both “premarital” sex and divorce had been destigmatized to some degree. Of course, the stigma attached to divorce has by no means disappeared. By now, serial monogamy has been the predominant cultural practice for decades; it is not true monogamy in the biological sense, and it would have scandalized most of our ancestors just a few generations

ago. As with true monogamy, understandings about what it means to be serially monogamous can vary a great deal; for example, dating and being sexual with several people before “settling down” may be perceived as serial monogamy by some and not by others.

According to a 1994 study, twenty percent of men and thirty-one percent of women reported having only one sexual partner over a lifetime. Due to demographic changes, these numbers are undoubtedly considerably lower today. The average number of partners in 2005 (again, self-reported) was four for women and six to eight for men, ages thirty to forty-four.¹⁶ There’s a good deal of evidence that “some sex differences in self-reported sexual behavior reflect responses influenced by normative expectations for men and women,” so these numbers may be somewhat skewed as a result.¹⁷

There’s no denying that true monogamy works for a significant minority of people; as does serial monogamy, perhaps for the majority. At the same time, it’s important to recognize that elevating this relationship structure to the level of an ideal is to ignore the historical and biological evidence. This elevation is an anomaly, a product for the most part of post-Reformation European and American culture.

It bears repeating that we are not advocating nonmonogamy for everyone. Consensual nonmonogamy offers challenges and rewards, and for many these challenges will outweigh the rewards. While there appears to be a correlation between relationship satisfaction and nonmonogamy, there’s no evidence for a causal connection. We don’t expect consensual nonmonogamy to replace serial monogamy as the cultural norm in the foreseeable future; however, we’d encourage those who choose monogamy to learn from those courageous enough to overcome the social stigma and embrace the challenges.

Monogamy Is Not a Monolith

Although monogamy is difficult to define, and cultural understandings have shifted over time, it remains a default mode—a relationship style that is taken as a given, as morally right, as the only healthy option, as a way of being that cannot be examined, let alone questioned. We think this reflexive monogamy can be the source of much heartache, and it is one of the primary reasons that various forms of cheating are so prevalent. For many, compulsory monogamy is an impossible standard to live by, so they cheat, even though they simultaneously believe that cheating is the worst possible thing they can do. This is a uniquely modern and largely American attitude. While adultery is considered to be a sin and has been treated as a crime throughout the Western world, it has also been expected and generally tolerated in European cultures, when engaged in discretely.

WHAT DOES MONOGAMY MEAN TO YOU?

If you can move away from thinking of monogamy as the ideal and recognize it as just one form of human behavior, something that can be chosen, you can arrive at a more specific, genuine, and personal understanding of what choices are right for you.

- *If you are in a relationship, have you discussed what monogamy and nonmonogamy mean to*

you and have you made agreements based on those understandings?

- *If not, how did you decide when to become exclusive?*
- *How much have outside sources—religion, family, and the culture at large—influenced the way you think about monogamy and fidelity?*
- *Is watching porn contrary to what you think is monogamous behavior?*
- *How about masturbating?*
- *Would you be troubled by a partner having a casual sexual encounter with someone else?*
- *How about an emotional attachment?*
- *Are there circumstances in which one might be more troubling to you than the other?*

- *Are there circumstances in which you'd be comfortable with one or the other or both?*

Developing this more nuanced and fluid understanding of relationships will help you recognize that monogamy is not monolithic; it may work for some but not for others, or it may be appropriate at some times and not at others. Once you know this, you can begin a dialogue about what you want and what you think would be best for you. Then, if you choose to be monogamous, you'll be doing so consciously and will be far less likely to experience it as a kind of prison. Similarly, if you choose to explore opening your relationship, you can do so in a way that is honest and mutual and thus avoid the pain that cheating and deception so often inflict.

Four Types of Monogamy

To understand monogamy more comprehensively, it is very useful to break it down into four main components. Our perspective is inspired by Bergstrand and Sinski's outstanding study *Swinging in America* and Ken Haslam's insights, but we have added an additional element. Late-modern monogamy typically combines all four.

1. Sexual
2. Emotional
3. Social
4. Practical

These are core structural components of monogamous arrangements that come into play whether the monogamy is true or serial.

Sexual Monogamy is perhaps the most straightforward and easy category to understand, at least at first glance. It refers to an arrangement that is sexually exclusive, but “exclusive” does not mean the same thing to everyone. For some, exclusivity may preclude desiring another, watching porn, or even masturbating, any of which may be perceived as a betrayal of the monogamous arrangement. For others, exclusivity may be limited to genital intercourse—what’s known as penis-in-vagina, or PIV sex. Unfortunately, many people still define “sex” in this absurdly narrow way, an attitude that frequently leads to risky behavior. We’ve heard people use the phrase “eatin’ ain’t cheatin’” without irony. We have encountered couples who have differing definitions of sexual monogamy, and this can be a source of great conflict. So even in this seemingly unambiguous realm, clear communication and mutual agreements are essential.

I have no deep personal attachment to labeling myself in terms of sexual orientation, nor do I have the sensation of “being” heterosexual or homosexual or anything but a human being who loves and desires other human beings. I have been romantically and sexually involved with people of a variety of biological sexes and social genders over the course of my adult life. When pressed, I am most likely to declare my “sexual identity” as “taken.”

—Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*

Emotional Monogamy is also at least superficially unambiguous. On the surface it would seem to refer to love and to engagement with only one other person on a deep emotional level. This attachment is expected in conventional relationships. Among the nonmonogamous, it's not unusual for people to distinguish between swinging and polyamory by describing swingers as being emotionally monogamous and polyamorous people as loving more than one other person. This is a simplistic distinction, and the reality is considerably more complicated.

In some cases, the feelings of betrayal associated with being cheated on have more to do with emotions than with sex, and the term *emotional affair* is used to describe violations of emotionally monogamous relationships. More importantly, we suspect that if sexual monogamy is an unexamined default, people probably give even less thought to what their emotional understandings are and that emotional affairs are usually betrayals of tacit rather than explicit agreements.

In our own lives, even though we're deeply pair-bonded and think of ourselves as being essentially emotionally monogamous, the limits of that monogamy are flexible and have varied, depending on circumstances. For us, emotional monogamy means drawing the line at attachments that might intrude on our connection with each other, but that has not prevented us from developing attachments and recognizing and acknowledging them. Similarly, couples in the swinging community often develop long-term relationships with other couples, socializing and vacationing together for years and even becoming godparents of each other's children. Of course, sexually monogamous couples may also develop attachments like these.

FLIRTING IS HEALTHY. EMOTIONAL AFFAIRS, NOT SO MUCH

Flirting is okay if it:

- *Makes the other person feel good.*
- *Is an honest expression of appreciation, and not creepy, intrusive, or harassing (e.g., catcalling).*
- *Energizes you and makes you feel good about yourself.*
- *Is in accordance with your relationship agreements.*

You may be having an emotional affair if:

- *You're keeping your interactions secret.*
- *You find yourself disparaging your partner(s) or treating this new person as a confidant.*
- *You're excessively preoccupied with the object of your attention.*

Social Monogamy, as we use it, differs somewhat from the scientific term, which refers to pair-bonding accompanied by opportunistic extra-pair copulations. We are using it to apply to a way of interacting that is closely related to emotional monogamy but that is ultimately about “who you hang out with most of the time,” as Christopher Ryan puts it.¹⁸ We’ll take Ryan’s definition a step further and say that for our purposes, social monogamy assumes the dyad to be a basic and basically indivisible unit.

In its more extreme manifestations, social monogamy can entail the idea that outside interests or relationships of any kind are inherently suspect. For example, in a socially monogamous heterosexual couple, a partner’s friendships with people of the same gender may be perceived as a threat to the dyad, and all or virtually all nonfamilial social activities are engaged in as a couple. For the deeply socially monogamous, taking time apart to pursue a personal interest (as opposed to, e.g., being required to travel for work) may also be perceived as a threat to the relationship.

In its most extreme form, this type of social monogamy is the equivalent of abuse—one partner controls the other’s life and cannot tolerate any outside friendships or interests whatsoever. The mild form, however, is extremely common in contemporary society. For many couples, autonomous pursuits and outside interests are something to be tolerated but not celebrated, because the contemporary monogamous model teaches us that our spouses should be able to meet all of our needs and that by marrying, we’re creating a self-sustaining, self-contained universe.

If you’re in a dyadic relationship, the pull of this kind of social monogamy can be very strong. It’s easy to make another person into everything for you. And in fact, we suspect that much of what people ascribe to “emotional

monogamy” among swingers is better ascribed to this form of social monogamy: It’s not that forming emotional attachments to others is problematic; problems only emerge when attachments aren’t evenly distributed among the people involved. Similarly, some swinging couples will only have “same room” sex with others. This may not be to protect their emotional connection; it may be because the dyadic structure is central for them, even as they’re having sex with other people.

HOW SOCIALLY MONOGAMOUS ARE YOU?

If you’re in a pair-bonded relationship, examine and discuss the ways in which you are socially monogamous and the ways in which you are not.

- *List activities you do alone.*
- *Those you do with others.*
- *Those you would never do separately.*

We’re not condemning the dyad. We’re just making an observation based on experience, and of course, this doesn’t negate the fact that people who swing are engaging in an activity that’s radical, marginal, and contrary to the dominant model. It’s also not to say that swingers who only engage in same-room sex are otherwise entirely socially monogamous, but this particular agreement, which is fairly common, doesn’t seem to exist for the purposes of

perpetuating emotional monogamy. Instead, it seems to be about prioritizing the dyad.

Practical Monogamy refers to domestic arrangements and how people structure their lives—cohabitation, finances, childcare, and other aspects of day-to-day living. The legal system is heavily skewed in favor of practical monogamy, since married couples and nuclear families typically benefit from the tax code, and at the local level, there are often limits imposed on the number of unrelated people who may cohabit. Beyond the legal elements that support practical monogamy, Euro-American culture has gone through dramatic changes in the past few hundred years.

A few generations ago, it was not unusual for extended families to live together in the same household. Today, “failure to launch” syndrome notwithstanding, extended families are relatively rare; aging parents go to assisted living facilities instead of moving in with their children and grandchildren. In 1996, Hillary Clinton wrote that “it takes a village” to raise a child, an observation that was highly controversial at the time. Many of those who oppose marriage equality today excoriated her then for this idea, since it challenged both patriarchy and the false notion that the traditional family is the one of the 1950s—a male breadwinner, a stay-at-home wife, and two or more children. If anything, society is even more atomized in the 2010s, and practical monogamy is imposing increasing pressure on contemporary relationships.

Late-Modern Monogamy combines all four elements—sexual, emotional, social, and practical. Only in the last two hundred to three hundred years did these become the exclusive province of marriage. As we’ve already suggested,

many cultures have provided structured outlets for extra-pair sexual activity. In most societies, marriages were primarily business arrangements; love was not a prerequisite, nor was the expectation that one's spouse had to meet every emotional and social need. In practical terms, extended family and community provided considerably more support than is expected today.

The cultural changes that accompany modernity have imposed enormous pressures on long-term relationships, even as they have liberated women from their former legal status as chattel. Economic shifts over the last few decades have also created complications, since the 1950s ideal is no longer practical for most of us. To the extent that marriage is "in crisis," as media outlets so often assert, it's due in part to the immense expectations that are imposed on it.

Twenty-First-Century Relationships: In Crisis?

Social conservatives have been bemoaning evolving relationship paradigms for decades; if anything, they have grown more vocal since the early 2000s. They blame marriage equality for what they perceive as immoral behavior and even go so far as to contend that the movement is part of a conspiracy to destroy marriage altogether. Their concerns are misplaced. Monogamy isn't in trouble because people of the same gender are getting married or because alternatives are proliferating; it is in trouble because, for many people of all genders, the alternatives are more satisfying, in terms of both personal and relational happiness. Thus, in many cases, late-modern monogamy isn't working. Large numbers of people are experiencing dissatisfaction, as is reflected in divorce, infidelity, and the constant media drumbeat of worry over sexless marriages and declining marriage rates.

The numbers are indeed dramatic. In 1960, seventy-two percent of Americans were married; that fell to fifty-one percent in 2011. The number of cohabiting couples increased from five hundred thousand to 7.5 million over the same time period, a dramatic increase but hardly enough to counterbalance the decline in marriage.¹⁹ For those who do opt for marriage, approximately fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce. An estimated fifteen to twenty percent of marriages are “sexless” (defined as having sex fewer than ten times per year).²⁰ Statistics about infidelity vary a great deal, with one study suggesting that eleven percent of people in long-term relationships will be unfaithful and another saying that twenty to twenty-five percent of married men and ten to fifteen percent of married women will cheat at some point, while popular media and some research estimates suggest the rate of cheating is as high as fifty percent.²¹

STATISTICS ONLY TELL YOU SO MUCH

Statistics are important but should be approached skeptically and with discernment. For example, there are a few obvious issues with the sexless marriage figures. First, some people in these so-called sexless marriages may be perfectly happy with the arrangement and the infrequency of their sexual activity. It's stigmatizing of people with lower or no sex drive to assume that infrequent sex is synonymous with an unhappy relationship. This may be true

in some cases, but it's by no means universal. In addition, numbers do not account for age, health, commuter relationships, and an array of other factors that might contribute to having sex a little less than once a month. That said, there is little doubt that cultural attitudes have changed dramatically over the last century. Despite all the legal and financial incentives that favor marriage; despite all the advertising that celebrates big weddings, nesting, and child-rearing; despite the push for marriage equality, fewer and fewer people see it as desirable, let alone necessary.

The Marriage Crisis from a Different Angle

Notwithstanding the decline in marriage rates and the other statistics that point to widespread dissatisfaction with conventional relationship models, we'd suggest that concerns about a crisis are overblown. For every first marriage that ends in divorce, there's one that lasts. Only one out of five or six marriages are sexless, and only twenty-five to fifty percent of married people cheat. Some of the popular concern about twenty-first-century marriage, especially its erotic component, is rooted in deep-seated negative attitudes toward sex and in entrenched, Victorian attitudes toward motherhood and female sexuality.

Articles bemoaning the state of marital sex seem to emerge in clusters, often in the run-up to Valentine's Day. For example, in 2014, the *New York Times* published two pieces on successive Sundays that focused on this "crisis," albeit from differing perspectives. The first, "Good Enough? That's Great!" by Daniel Jones, editor of the "Modern Love"

column, appeared on February 2nd.²² In this excerpt from his book *Love Illuminated* Jones disparaged couples who seek to maintain or renew their erotic connection by calling them “restorers” and asserting that their efforts are based on “drudgery” or a need for “spice.” He concluded that it is “risky” for couples to do more than settle for staleness and that the prudent course is to be “appreciatively resigned.” We’d suggest that those who choose to be interested in each other, to be curious and engaged, are not seeking to recapture something that has been lost but are instead cultivating relationship skills that many others would benefit from learning. Being “appreciatively resigned” is no sign of wisdom, and remaining emotionally and erotically engaged need not be either “drudgery” or “spice”; it can be a shared adventure.

Jones also discussed the outcry over Ayelet Waldman’s 2005 statement that putting her “marriage ahead of motherhood” was the key to her marital happiness and erotic satisfaction. Waldman recently reiterated her stance, saying: “If you focus all of your emotional passion on your children and you neglect the relationship that brought that family into existence...eventually, things can go really, really wrong.... I have not been a perfect mother, but giving my children a sense of security in their parents’ relationship is something that I feel really proud of.”²³ In Jones’s telling, Waldman comes off as almost freakish, and he describes her marriage as being “extremely rare,” though his assessment, which is based on the letters he received during his years as editor of “Modern Love,” undoubtedly reflects a skewed sample. It would have been more illuminating for Jones to have examined why Waldman’s initial remarks created so much controversy—America’s almost cultish devotion to the child; the persistence of the “Madonna/whore” mentality; and the notion that love is a zero-sum game.

Jones’s piece was followed by a cover story in the February 9, 2014, *New York Times Magazine* by

psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb—titled “Does More Equal Marriage Mean Less Sex.”²⁴ In her article, Gottlieb cited a study published in 2013 claiming that couples in “equal marriages,” where husbands do “what researchers characterize as feminine chores like folding laundry, cooking, or vacuuming” had sex 1.5 fewer times per month than couples whose division of labor was more conventionally gendered. While Gottlieb acknowledged several potential flaws in the study, she relied on anecdotes from her personal life and practice to bolster the idea that relatively equal partnerships are likely to suffer from erotic deficit.

Gottlieb’s article was replete with essentialist ideas about gender—for example that men watch Pornhub and women follow Pinterest. Her thinking about pornography was antiquated and naïve—that it’s all about male pleasure, women being subservient, with no negotiation, female desire, or gender role reversal (the proliferation of feminist porn notwithstanding), and that the “MILF” is a new cultural phenomenon. Some of the biggest porn stars of the 1970s and ‘80s were over thirty-five, even though the term had not yet been invented. As an aside, it’s worth pointing out that the existence of the MILF as an object of erotic fascination may actually be a sign of progress insofar as it recognizes mothers as sexual beings, which is exactly what made Waldman’s comments so scandalous.

The anecdotes from Gottlieb’s practice were similarly superficial. In one case, a woman in her forties and in an “equal” marriage examined her husband’s Internet history and discovered that he had viewed porn involving scenes of domination. The discovery inspired her to express her own desire to be dominated—a fantasy the couple explored. The woman was “surprised by his lack of enthusiasm” and felt rejected as a result. Gottlieb never mentioned the apparent invasion of privacy and how that violation may have affected the exploration (a rather shocking omission for a

therapist). Also unexamined were some potentially deeper issues—how the woman communicated her desire, whether it was received as a criticism, and perhaps more importantly, why the husband was unable to take pleasure in fulfilling his wife’s fantasy. There’s no intrinsic reason that acting out fantasies of domination in the bedroom will have any implications in other aspects of life.

In another anecdote, one of Gottlieb’s clients claimed to “crave” her husband when he returned from the gym, undressed, and got into the shower. The husband replied that he had done just that on the morning of the session and that the wife became irritated when he threw his clothes on the floor. She then complained that he had failed to vacuum “the day before, when she had to work late.” The conversation then turned to the fact that the wife did not find his vacuuming a turn-on.

Gottlieb either ignored or missed what we think is the most pertinent fact—that this client shifted her attention from her desire to her resentment. It’s by no means self-evident that the dynamic has anything to do with gender roles or egalitarianism or that the response would have been any different if the neglected task had been one that is conventionally deemed masculine—taking out the trash or fixing the car. In this incident, resentment, not equality, killed desire.

These articles partake of a generalized cultural anxiety about marriage and long-term relationships that is not entirely misplaced. Esther Perel’s work, which is cited by both writers, highlights the tension that exists between the domestic and the erotic. Twenty-first-century society imposes a very heavy burden on long-term relationships; partners are expected to be lovers, friends, and parents, and it is not easy to balance these demands, especially when work and other obligations are factored in. Still, examples of couples successfully navigating these conflicts are not extremely difficult to find.

Perhaps it's sexier for the media to focus on dissatisfaction and lack of sex. Perhaps it is safer as well. People who have happy sex lives make their relationships a priority. They may explore various forms of open relating or kink, which are typically downplayed or ignored in the "marriage in crisis" genre, or they may be tame and monogamous. What these couples have in common is a dedication to maintaining their erotic connection. The reaction to Ayelet Waldman's statements makes it clear that making the erotic a priority remains a radical act, especially if the person prioritizing is a woman and a mother.

The important point here is not that one relationship style is superior to another but that contemporary monogamy is widely perceived as being in crisis. Changes are undoubtedly taking place, but many of the concerns about the state of long-term relationships are rooted in sex-negativity and an ideology that doesn't allow for a spectrum of possibilities. We'd suggest that Jones's "restorers" are simply trying to develop the skills necessary for staying erotically engaged and sustaining long-term relationships. If this involves some effort, including other partners, incorporating kink, or prioritizing sex over the children, there's nothing wrong with it. It's not about spice; it's about being proactive and figuring out specifically which options work and which do not. There is no single solution, but there's a lot more to being in a relationship than resignation.

Natural or Not: Who Cares?

In June 2014, we wrote an article for *AlterNet* with "Designer Relationships" as the proposed title. The site opted for a more provocative, albeit somewhat misleading headline, "Life-long Sexual Monogamy Just Isn't Natural."²⁵ This revision generated controversy and a great deal of

discussion—thousands of likes on Facebook and hundreds of comments on the AlterNet site, io9.com, and Facebook.

We were surprised by the response to the article—by the sheer numbers, the intensity, and some of the underlying beliefs that were revealed. Apparently the title was a trigger for many—some of whom seemed not to have read the article at all, something that is all too common on the Internet. We never addressed the question of whether monogamy is natural (the word did not appear in the body of the piece). As we've discussed, lifelong monogamy is relatively rare among animals. Be that as it may, few animal models (if any) have much relevance when it comes to human experience, since human relationships are so heavily influenced by culture. The question of naturalness just isn't very interesting to us. Worse still, an excessive focus on what's "natural" can lead to all kinds of bizarre thinking—some of the people who commented on the AlterNet piece were deeply invested in purportedly "natural" models in which dominant males assemble harems, leaving weaker men alone and envious.

We've long argued that the idea that "monogamy is optimal and natural" is one of the ten biggest relationship myths in contemporary culture. Our critique was not of monogamy per se but of a set of biases that pervade our society. Ideas about what is natural are inevitably shaped by culture, and appeals to "nature" are frequently little more than expressions of preconceived ideas, often religious in origin, that are dressed up in scientific jargon. Pop versions of evolutionary psychology offer a quasi-scientific justification for cultural norms, suggesting that beliefs about gender and relationship are evolutionarily determined and that the practices of the modern, Western world are the foreordained outcome of biological processes. The question should not be "Is it natural?" The question should be "Does it work for you?"

My wife is celibate. I am not. I take lovers now and then. She must approve of the lover. We are happily married for eighteen years. I have had four or five lovers over the entire eighteen years. Her only rules?

1. Do not bring drama home.

2. Do not do it in our home.

—David Williams

As to whether monogamy is optimal, it certainly is for some, but that's by no means universally true. The belief that one size really should fit all is still dominant, and the sexually exclusive, pair-bonded, married couple remains both the cultural norm and the cultural ideal. Some of the responses to the AlterNet article made it clear that challenging this cultural norm makes some people very uncomfortable and defensive, and this defensiveness is in no way limited to social conservatives.

Defensiveness, Commentary, and “Bashing”

One way this unease manifested itself was in comments that treated our article as an attack on monogamy in general, or what some called “mono-bashing.” This response came not only from readers who identified as monogamous but also from some who at least claimed to be supporters of the polyamory movement. It was not our intention to bash anyone, and we were very explicit about our belief that monogamy is an entirely valid relationship choice for people, either as a long-term arrangement or as something practiced periodically in the context of a partnership that may be open at times. We limited our criticism to the unexamined way in which monogamy is so often practiced.

It's puzzling that even a mild critique of monogamy as a cultural default generated so much concern-trolling and backlash. The percentage of people in consensually nonmonogamous relationships, while growing, is still small. But the social stigma against these arrangements remains pervasive and strong, as does the social stigma related to seeking sex for pleasure. Coming out is risky for people in consensual nonmonogamous relationships; they have few if any legal protections and may face losing their jobs, their friendships, and custody of their children. At best, they're likely to be judged harshly and their relationships presumed to be dysfunctional. Notwithstanding the fact that polygyny was the norm during the early Christian era, some religious defenders of "traditional marriage" actually seem to be more anxious about polyamory than they are about marriage equality. In fact, marriage equality is often presented as being the first step toward legalizing polyamory, which they argue will destroy the institution of marriage and lead to the collapse of Western civilization.

In reality, most people whose sexual or emotional makeup inspires them to be in whatever form of nonmonogamous designer relationship they choose are not trying to destroy or undermine monogamy. Some are seeking to overcome the stigma; some are seeking legal recognition; many, ourselves included, are encouraging reflection, awareness, and conscious choice, without privileging one form of relationship over another. While there may be a few individuals who are truly contemptuous of monogamous arrangements, to the extent that negative attitudes are expressed, we suspect they're mostly defensive reactions to stigma. In fact, most polyamory organizations are explicit about celebrating consensual relationships, regardless of structure or sexuality.

Who's Afraid of Nonmonogamy?

In the *AlterNet* article, we suggested that the increasing acceptance of consensual nonmonogamy might be salutary for people who choose to be sexually exclusive because the skills developed by those in nonmonogamous relationships are valuable for all. In addition to the value of developing relationship skills whatever one's style, understanding that there are many valid options has the potential to transform monogamy into something that is freely and enthusiastically chosen.

"[W]e both came to realize that we were very fortunate that, in all of the deep profound, fundamental ways, we really, really only wanted each other. So, we thought an open marriage was appropriate for us but it turned out not to be. But then that's what we're all about. We are moving from one position to another in the process of trying to unravel this thing call[ed] life."

—Ruby Dee

Much of the discussion on *AlterNet* and elsewhere reflected deeply held prejudices against open relating of any kind. Despite our sense that there is growing public acceptance of alternative relationships, contemporary society remains strongly *mononormative* (meaning that monogamy is conceived of as normal and anything else is deemed to be deviant or even pathological) and *couplecentric*. These mononormative and couplecentric attitudes are deeply embedded in our legal system, in the psychological literature, and in popular media and culture, even though they are typically unsupported by anything more than conventional wisdom.

Indeed, the shift in attitudes toward marriage equality reveals just how deeply mononormativity is engrained. The advocates of marriage equality won broad public support by invoking monogamous domesticity. Their brilliant strategy

was to present gay and lesbian couples as “the families next door.” This strategy dismayed some advocates of sexual liberation and LGBTQ rights, and while it may be somewhat provocative to say so, *nonmonophobia* seems to trump homophobia, at least in this context.²⁶

While advocates of marriage equality have made a concerted effort to mainstream gay and lesbian relationships, the right, especially the Christian right, has been arguing since the early 2000s that marriage equality is the first phase of an orchestrated conspiracy to destroy the institution of marriage and the nuclear family, which have existed for a “gazillion years” and are “the foundation of civilization” according to none other than Joe the Plumber.²⁷ Much anti-marriage equality propaganda is very explicit about this—playing on a fear that legal recognition of polyamorous arrangements is next and that such recognition will destroy two-person marriage. These ideas were articulated in detail by Stanley Kurtz in a two-part article for the *National Review* in 2006.²⁸

Kurtz accused supporters of marriage equality of having a hidden agenda—the creation of a “post-marriage society.” Kurtz’s conspiracy-minded screeds were a response to a document titled “Beyond Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships.” According to one of its authors, the document “was intended to promote debate within the LGBT community not mainstream America.” It was signed by 250 progressive intellectuals and advocated legal recognition of alternative family structures, including child-grandparent and three-parent households. As one of the signers pointed out (speaking only for herself), the document was not titled “Instead of Marriage,” and it is unlikely it would have attracted many signatories under such a title.²⁹

Nonetheless, “Beyond Marriage” and Kurtz’s characterization of the signers’ motives provided talking points for marriage equality opponents and fodder for even

more paranoid claims that the equality movement's hidden agenda is the creation of a global "Centralized All Powerful State [*sic*]." ³⁰ It has been argued that this strategy was developed in direct response to changes in public attitudes about LGBTQ issues and especially the decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*. ³¹

Thus, cultural attitudes toward consensual nonmonogamy are many years behind cultural attitudes toward marriage equality. As we've already suggested, the stigma against open relating remains strong, and it has been internalized by many who are not monogamous themselves, including millennials. A recent study conducted at the University of Michigan showed that even those in nonmonogamous partnerships evaluated the relationship of a couple described as monogamous more favorably than that of an otherwise identical couple described as consensually nonmonogamous. ³²

The pervasive nature of this stigma illuminates why so many in the swinging community keep their activities secret and why issues related to coming out are frequently discussed within the polyamorous community. We have been mindful of this stigma for years; our primary audience is composed of couples, so we are acutely aware that it was not in our economic interest to embrace consensual nonmonogamy as a valid choice or to feature interviews with people in thriving designer relationships, as we did in *Partners in Passion*. Coming out as being in a designer relationship is an important and courageous act. It's even more courageous if, unlike us, you have children and are part of a community that would condemn you for your relationship style.

Just as the notion that cultural acceptance and legal recognition of nonmonogamous relationships will somehow lead to the destruction of two-person marriage is unsupported by any actual evidence, most ideas about nonmonogamy are based on misconceptions, stereotypes,

and prejudices. They are also unsupported by the available data.

CHAPTER 3

Mononormative Myths

IN *PARTNERS IN PASSION*, we discussed ten of the biggest myths about sexuality and relationships and how this mythology influences virtually everyone in modern (and especially American) society. Many of these myths, such as the need to find a soul mate and live “happily ever after,” are intimately entwined with the prevailing mononormative model. We’ve included most of those myths here with a focus on how they relate to mononormativity, and we’ve added a number of others that reflect widely held cultural prejudices against alternative expressions and stigmatize those who choose any form of nonmonogamy.

Myth #1: Romantic Love Is the Only Foundation for an Enduring Relationship

Until the eighteenth or nineteenth century, love, especially the passionate, romantic variety, was generally seen as being at best a fringe benefit in marriage. In fact, romantic love was often thought of as being an impediment. This is still true in cultures where arranged marriages are prevalent. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* celebrates a mad, passionate, youthful, and unsustainable form of love. The play was written at the dawn of the modern era, at a

transitional moment, at a time when love and marriage were just starting to go together. Even so, *Romeo and Juliet* is ultimately an expression of the belief that romantic love cannot endure and be part of a lasting partnership, and that people should marry for other reasons. This theme is repeated in numerous medieval and Renaissance tales and ballads. Love does not conquer all, and, typically, it is only in death that love prevails. For example, in the English folk ballad “The Ballad of Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor,” Lord Thomas loves the impoverished Ellinor, but his mother chooses another wealthier spouse for him. Ellinor attends the wedding, and Thomas’s bride stabs her in a fit of jealousy. Thomas then kills his bride and himself. Thomas and Ellinor are buried near each other; a rose grows from her grave and a briar from his. The rose and briar grow together until “they entwined like a true lover’s knot/For all true lovers to admire.”³³

There are many versions of this ballad, which dates approximately to Shakespeare’s day but probably has much older origins. Regardless, the basic message is the same: love is beautiful but deadly and is at its core the enemy of marriage.

Much of what many people take to be timeless, universal human truth is in fact very recent in origin. It’s obvious that we can’t go back to a time when love and marriage were seen as bordering on the incompatible, and most of us would not wish to return to a system of arranged marriages, dowries, and the legal disempowerment of women. Still, some of these seemingly alien and ancient beliefs about what constitutes a good relationship may be useful for contemporary readers. If European nobles married in order to perpetuate their social and economic status, people lower on the social ladder typically married for business reasons as well, and this was still true for many of the less wealthy until the twentieth century. For these couples, the glue that held the marriage together was a common project—tending

the farm, running the mill, managing the inn. This sense of common purpose, which was often very explicit for our ancestors, is easily lost when love is in the foreground. Love is often ephemeral; a shared sense of purpose may be less so.

Myth #2: You Need to Find a Soul Mate

In contemporary society, there is a very common superstition that finding one's soul mate (sometimes called a "twin flame") is the key to forming a true pair-bond, and that in the absence of this "other half," no intimate relationship will be fully satisfying. Two very damaging concepts are implicit in this belief: first, that there is a single, ideal partner out there in the world for every individual, and second, that people are incomplete until they find their "other half."

This belief in the soul mate is so pervasive that there are hundreds of books on the market with "soul mate" in the title. The origins of this myth are ancient, dating back at least to ancient Greece (a culture in which monogamy was by no means the norm, let alone the ideal). In its modern and popular form, it promotes the idea that there is one perfect partner for everyone, and that if you are lucky enough to find that person, exclusivity will be effortless. This is an impossible expectation, even for many of those who choose to be exclusive, so it is a prescription for disappointment and relationship dissatisfaction.

Although the origins of the concept are ancient, the modern form is both mononormative and deeply entwined with the idea that romantic love is the foundation on which a relationship should be built. The first known use of the term *soul mate* in English was in Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Letter to a Young Lady" in 1822. Coleridge wrote, "To be happy in Married life...you must

have a Soul-mate.” The term has become increasingly popular since the 1980s.³⁴ Thus, the notion that relationship success is contingent on finding “the one” is to a large extent a modern, indeed a very recent, invention, one that typically creates extremely unrealistic expectations, even as it generates revenue for online dating services. If you believe that there’s someone out there to complete you and you won’t experience true happiness unless you find that person, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment. There is no perfect partner, and it’s a fantasy to think otherwise. In addition, the idea that one person is capable of giving you everything you want, or think you need, is a dangerous illusion, one that will inevitably strain a relationship.

This dangerous illusion has enormous appeal, which is perhaps most dramatically exploited by the \$1.2 billion online dating industry. Eharmony.com used it explicitly to market itself, and most other such services rely on similar messaging. Ironically, in a recent Match.com survey, the vast majority of the company’s customers said they believe in “love at first sight.”³⁵ The algorithms do help weed out people whose interests are incompatible, but they do nothing to address more important and complex relationship issues such as managing conflict. What’s potentially even more damaging is the way the hype around the algorithms fuels the quest for the perfect partner, and the all too common disappointment when a match doesn’t meet expectations.

ONLINE DATING AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The following are some phrases found in online dating profiles. They reflect many of the misguided ideas about relationships that are reinforced by the process of looking for “the one”—online and in the real world.

“Juliet, Juliet, where art thou Juliet? Is there an empty spot in your heart with room for me? Is there an empty spot in your life with room for me? A Fitzwilliam Darcy searching for my Lizzy.”

“Im looking for a man who will love me through my flaws and who can appreciate a real women”

“Looking for my soulmate - R U THE 1 4 ME?”

“I believe that love is two people struggling to become one.”

“Hope to hear from my Prince Charming.”

“...possibly somebody brighter and cleverer or younger at heart than me to stop me becoming a boring old fart.”

“i am looking for a man who will love me the way i am. And who will

think i am the one and the only one in the world for him."

"Looking for someone to make my tummy do that somersault thingy and to assist me in getting my mojo back! The one that will be sitting next to me on a plastic chair in the old folks home."

"i'm trying to find that special someone to hold my hand be my friend and walk with me through completeness."

"My life is not complete. I need to share it."

"I simply want to date one man and leave this site for good...how hard should that be?"

Myth #3: They Lived Happily Ever After

Fairy tales, especially as rendered for modern audiences, also reflect and reiterate our culture's mononormative and couple-centric attitudes. The "fairy tale romance" concludes with "and they lived happily ever after. The end." This is a stock phrase that does not reflect the reality of human relationships. In its original context, happily ever after had nothing to do with romantic love or modern marriage, even if it implicitly celebrated monogamous unions. Before Walt

Disney came along to codify a set of cultural beliefs that had been evolving for a century or so, happily ever after referred to class, status, and economic security, not emotional satisfaction.

Everyone knows that things don't end when you become a couple, decide to move in together, or get married, but we are all exposed to the "happily ever after" message from childhood on and are conditioned to believe it. The truth is that relationships are dynamic, and even the happiest ones change, evolve, and go through difficult periods. Differences are something to celebrate, but if you're buying into "happily ever after," it's not possible to accept and even embrace the inevitable changes, divergences, and ups and downs.

This myth is very closely related to the concept of the soul mate. Both predate the belief that romantic love is the foundation on which long-term relationships should be built. Both are archetypes that exist in similar forms in many different cultures and appeal to deep-seated human yearnings. And both have increased their grip on the modern psyche, in part because they have been amplified and modified in popular culture.

Contemporary Americans are most familiar with the Disney versions of the tales, which gloss over many of the darker, more violent aspects of these stories to make them palatable for mass consumption. Similarly, the modern, Disneyfied renditions tend to create the impression that happily ever after refers to romantic love. In reality, these tales followed two primary formulas. One involves restoration. *Sleeping Beauty* is perhaps the best-known example. In this form of tale, a person of noble background is brought low, forced to suffer, and is then restored to his or her proper station. The other form involves the rise of someone from poverty to wealth, often through marriage to a noble. *Cinderella* is a prime example, though in many of the earliest "rise tales" the hero is male. While the erotic

and kinky content of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has generated revenue and controversy, the underlying story is a twenty-first-century version of the rise tale, which probably has as much to do with its appeal as its erotic dimension.

In both forms of the tale, the original meaning was not relationship-based; it was about one's station, and "they lived happily ever after" was merely a genre convention. In contemporary culture, the meaning of the phrase has morphed and has taken on an altogether different air of finality, one that reinforces the mononormative model to a degree that the original tales did not. Because we have been entrained to celebrate romantic love, we are likely to think of it as the source of happiness. The idea is that once you meet your Prince Charming (there was a prince but no Prince Charming in the original tales), everything will work out wonderfully and all your desires will be fulfilled.

Myth #4: Desiring Someone Else Is a Form of Infidelity

This myth is closely related to the belief that monogamy is natural, evolutionarily determined, optimal, or divinely ordained. (See Myth #5.) It also relates to the myths about soul mates and living happily ever after. Implicit in this idea is the belief that if you truly love someone, feeling attracted to others is both morally wrong and a sign that you have serious problems, both personally and in the relationship. Perhaps even more deeply, it partakes of an idea that began to take shape in the nineteenth century, most fully and forcefully expressed by Freud, which continues to influence us to this day. In this belief system, mature sexuality finds its outlet in a single object of desire, and other forms of desire are either immature or pathological.

The psychology of adultery has been falsified by conventional morals, which assume, in

monogamous countries, that attraction to one person cannot coexist with affection for another. Everybody knows that this is untrue.

—Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals* (1929)

This belief frequently extends into the realm of sexual fantasy. For some, fantasizing about anyone outside the primary relationship is virtually the same as cheating, and much of the moral outrage about pornography is based on a form of this myth. According to self-help superstar Dr. Phil McGraw, “Watching Internet pornography or engaging in cybersex is a short step to cheating.” McGraw goes on to urge his readers to tell their partners to “choose between the pornography or the relationship.”³⁶ While the Internet may encourage certain compulsive behaviors, McGraw’s premise seems to be that directing any sexual energy or desire outside the dyad is the first step down a slippery slope.

For those who choose to be exclusive, whether in couples, closed polyamorous, or polyfidelitous arrangements, allowing and openly acknowledging desire for others can actually nourish your bond. If you like watching porn and can tell your partner(s) about your activity, you can get turned on and then bring that energy into your relationship. It’s often the case that denying and suppressing desire leads to a more generalized lack of interest in sex, especially if what you’re denying is a core part of who you are sexually. If you can embrace your sexuality, including desires that may not be socially acceptable, and bring that passion into your relationship, your shared sex life is likely to be more fulfilling.

Myth #5: Monogamy Is Natural, Evolutionarily Determined, Optimal,

or Divinely Ordained

It may seem paradoxical to combine evolutionary psychology and religious beliefs in a single section, but these ideas have much in common. Both partake of a mindset that treats contemporary culture as an expression of eternal verities, neglecting the fact that societies vary a great deal, and that modern relationships have little in common with the majority of models that have existed throughout human history.

Popularized versions of evolutionary psychology have been enlisted to justify the kind of monogamy practiced in modern America as being evolutionarily determined. According to the crudest form of this narrative, contemporary relationship structures are rooted in the behavior and biology of our Pleistocene ancestors. It holds that men by nature want to spread their seed by having as many partners as possible, and women are looking for a provider, using their sex appeal to ensnare an alpha male. When a child is produced, the bond with the child tames the man, keeps his urges in check, and ties him down to a life of supporting his family. That is, unless and until his old instincts are triggered, usually by some younger, more alluring woman. We've come a long way since Shakespeare's era, when female nature needed to be "tamed."³⁷

It isn't necessary to do an in-depth study of the ethnographic literature to recognize that these ideas about the nature of men and women are a cultural product; in pre-Modern Europe, it was commonly believed that women were wanton and men were "continent." The word *husband* still carries this implication when it refers to the prudent management of resources. Distinguishing between the roles of nature and culture is an extremely complex task. Nonetheless, suggesting that a relationship paradigm—romantic love as the foundation for lifelong monogamy in a

nuclear family—is somehow evolutionarily determined, or even worse, is evolution’s endpoint, is simplistic in the extreme, especially since that model is novel and rare in human history, having become dominant only after the industrial revolution.

“Conservative” religious models of marital relationships partake of a similarly ahistorical worldview and a selective reading of scripture. Polygyny is commonplace in the *Old Testament* and was even divinely mandated in the case of levirate marriage (marriage to a brother’s widow if there was no heir). Onan’s sin lay in his disobeying this divine command, not in masturbating.

Polygyny is also accepted in the *New Testament*. As we’ve discussed, in the early years of the Church it was banned for religious officials but not for all believers, and it was sometimes even permitted into the early modern period. Thus, “traditional” religious beliefs about marriage are not traditional at all. For the most part, they are founded on nineteenth- and twentieth-century conventions—an insular couple, a house full of children, with the man in charge.

Regardless of what our Pleistocene ancestors may have done, regardless of what the Bible says, regardless of cultural practices, and regardless of the controversy over what is natural, there is abundant ethnographic evidence suggesting that humans continue to have a wide variety of relationship structures. There is also abundant evidence to suggest there is some truth to the evolutionary psychologists’ argument that many or most of us are wired for some measure of pair-bonding.³⁸ Designer relationships allow people to consider a broad spectrum of possible relationship styles and craft an approach that suits their circumstances. What works—not what’s supposed to be divinely ordained, natural, or normal—is what’s optimal.

Myth #6: There Is a Right Way to Be Sexual

Partners in Passion focused on both relationships and sexuality, starting from the basic premise that the two are entwined and that maintaining a vibrant erotic connection is central to relationship health. This is true in most cases, but that perspective did not take into account the asexual community and others who may have nonsexual arrangements. In this book we focus more on relationships than on sex, but a belief that there is a right way to be sexual is one of the underpinnings of mononormative ideology—that the only mature, healthy, moral form of sexual activity involves one other person with whom you are in love and to whom you are in some way “committed.”

Not only does this perspective fail to take into account the great diversity in human sexual expression, it replicates older, religiously based ideas in secular terms. According to the religious model, sex is profane and sinful unless it's done in the context of marriage (and for some versions, only with the possibility that procreation will ensue). The secular model substitutes immature or unhealthy for “sinful,” but the basic idea is the same: having sex is basically wrong, except in certain limited contexts that make it right.

It is not easy to break free from these deeply held and often unconscious cultural biases. Casual sex is widely stigmatized, even by some within the polyamorous community. Our background is in Tantra, and we've encountered people in the field who have very strong beliefs about right and wrong ways to interact; for some it's the idea that prolonged, ritualized, Tantric-style sex is sacred, whereas the quickie after a couple of drinks is not spiritual. Some groups that have been influenced by the Tantric approach insist that certain types of clitoral stimulation are superior. Others suggest that female ejaculatory orgasms

are the ultimate sexual experience and that nonejaculatory orgasms are the male ideal.

The list of attitudes about right and wrong ways to have sex is long; you can probably think of your own examples, but we'd like to offer several more. Suggesting that people in long-term relationships should schedule their erotic encounters, something we've long advocated, is a surprisingly controversial idea. Many believe that sex should be spontaneous and that planning for it is somehow "unromantic." Similarly, the emphasis on simultaneous orgasm that remains a mainstay of beliefs about heterosexual intercourse is nothing if not a dogma about the right way to have sex. The idea that if you're having sex less than once a month, you're in a sexless marriage and something must be wrong is yet another example. While that may be true for some people, it should be clear by now that such is not necessarily the case.

Another persistent belief holds that genital intercourse is the paramount sexual act or that other acts aren't really sex at all. Some people still think of oral and anal intercourse as unnatural or degrading. Given the stereotype about men being reluctant to perform cunnilingus while women want it, we were surprised to discover that there have been discussions on several blogs among women who feel varying degrees of discomfort about receiving it. There are many—some influenced by Freud, others by religion, and still others whose ideas were shaped by more generalized cultural factors—who still view masturbation as either entirely unacceptable or as a poor substitute for intercourse. We've heard claims that vibrators are "addictive" and therefore shouldn't be used. The list of misguided beliefs could go on and on. The wrong way to have sex is to have sex that leaves you with negative feelings about yourself, involves an abuse of power, inflicts harm on others (and this includes being reckless or deceptive about health and safer sex considerations), or is in any way nonconsensual.

If we can move past the idea that there are right and wrong ways to be sexual (with the caveats about harm and consent) and recognize that if we express our sexuality honestly and openly whether alone, in the context of a long-term partnership, in a casual encounter, or in a group, we will be having (or not having) sex in a way that is right because it is authentically ours. In the words of Lou Reed, “no kinds of love are better than others,” a lyric that should serve as a motto for those in designer relationships.

CHAPTER 4

Misconceptions about Consensual Nonmonogamy

JUST AS THERE ARE many mononormative myths, there are numerous misconceptions about the nature of more open approaches. As with the myths, these misconceptions are rooted in conventional wisdom and stereotype, and are typically unsupported by data. They relate to almost every aspect of nonmonogamous relationships—from their role in the culture at large, to the ability of nonmonogamous people to form meaningful bonds, to their gender dynamics and their impact on children.

Misconception #1: Consensual Nonmonogamy Threatens the Institution of Marriage

We've already touched on the social conservative claim that endorsing any relationship structure other than "traditional" monogamy is an attack on "the institution of marriage." Extreme supporters of this belief go so far as to assert that there's a conspiracy afoot among advocates of marriage equality, the polyamorous movement, and other advocates of sexual freedom to destroy marriage for the purpose of establishing a world government. Another conspiracy theory that has been circulated links supporters of marriage

equality to Islamists and supporters of Sharia law in what Joseph Farah of *WorldNetDaily* called a game of “patty cake politics between the Gay Mafia and the Muslim Mafia.” According to Farah, “There is little question the legal acceptance of same-sex marriage will open the door to the legalization of polygamy. It’s inevitable.... Who benefits? Those who practice polygamy as part of their religion—Muslims.”³⁹

It would be easy to dismiss the ideas of Farah and others of his ilk as fringe and paranoid, and there is a whiff of panic behind the vehemence and hateful language. It is true that Farah and others who think in such conspiratorial terms are extremists, but Farah’s site is a very popular one; at the time of writing, it is ranked 498th in the United States (alexa.com), with an average monthly traffic of 1.6 million (siteencyclopedia.com). It’s fairly safe to assume that many Americans share similar attitudes.

Thus, the belief that consensually nonmonogamous relationships are a threat to marriage is common. There is of course no basis for this belief. Even if the conspiracy theorists were right, and there was a concerted effort among marriage equality supporters, polyamorists, and Islamist polygamists, the assumption that legitimizing alternative relationship styles poses a threat to monogamy makes no more sense than arguing that learning a foreign language is subversive and un-American. Beyond that, there’s the data. American marriage rates are declining, but they have been declining for decades. There’s some controversy over divorce rates and whether they have declined or just “flattened” since the 1970s, but even those who argue that rates have merely flattened note that the baby boomers are the ones getting divorced and that rates are lower among younger people.⁴⁰

Similarly, the Supreme Court recognized marriage equality, just as this book was going to press. To date, no state has legalized group marriage, and we don’t expect any

to do so in the foreseeable future. A federal district judge in Utah did overturn a ban on polygamous living arrangements, much to the dismay of both Christian conservatives and some Mormon scholars, but that decision is about living arrangements not about “legalizing” polygamous marriage, as some characterizations imply. It’s worth pointing out that the “marriage in crisis” genre long predates the rise of marriage equality; Stephanie Coontz’s *The Way We Never Were* (1993) was written in part to address that very genre, more than a decade before Massachusetts became the first equality state.

On an individual level, this view that nonmonogamy is a threat to the integrity of marriage plays itself out in somewhat subtler ways and is reflected in the very common assumption that opening a relationship is a sign that the relationship is troubled or that it will lead to a breakup. As a friend’s therapist said when the possibility of opening the marriage came up in a session, “You know you’re playing with fire.” This is a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic perception of a threat; *your* choosing to be nonmonogamous jeopardizes *your* marriage. Even if there were data to support this, and there does not appear to be, the therapist erred. She made a blanket judgment. The wiser response would have been to examine whether the decision was mutual, the specifics of what inspired it, and the steps the couple might have been taking to keep their connection strong as they explored opening their relationship.

Recognizing that open relationships work for some doesn’t threaten anyone else’s relationship; it won’t discourage anyone from choosing to be exclusive or from forming pair-bonds. We expect the majority will do just that and that dyadic and exclusive relationships will remain the predominant model. While we’d like to see people in those dyadic and exclusive relationships thinking their decisions through more carefully than they often do, we’re not

encouraging them to do anything that feels wrong. The simple answer to those who object to nonmonogamy is “Then be monogamous.”

Misconception #2: Consensually Nonmonogamous People Are at Higher Risk for Contracting STIs

Another common misconception about consensual nonmonogamy is that it places people at a significantly higher risk for STIs. While there’s an element of truth to the notion that increasing the number of one’s sexual partners increases risk, that’s only one factor in the equation. To the extent that the issue has been studied, it appears that people in consensually nonmonogamous relationships are typically more responsible in their sexual activities and safer sex practices than ostensibly monogamous cheaters or single people.

In polyamorous culture, transparency about STI status and regular testing are almost mandatory. Among swingers, who may be more likely to engage in casual or anonymous encounters, condom use for genital and anal sex are almost universal, and concerns about STIs are widespread.⁴¹ While unprotected oral sex seems to be a common practice at swing clubs, the culture at large has been insufficiently conscious about the risks involved in that activity, since the focus for the last thirty years has been on HIV, which is rarely transmitted orally.

Clandestine behavior is often very risky; there is generally no discussion about safer sex and no conscious, informed decision making regarding what precautions to take. This means that the risks are higher than they are when everything is out in the open. In a recent study published in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, researchers found that those engaging in nonconsensual nonmonogamy

are considerably more likely to have unprotected sex. Cheaters used condoms for oral and anal sex at a rate twenty-seven to thirty-five percent lower than did those in open relationships and had a sixty-four percent higher rate of using drugs and alcohol during their extracurricular encounters.⁴²

This is not to deny the fact that limiting oneself to a single partner and remaining sexually exclusive is one way to decrease risk, provided you both *are* exclusive. At the same time, the only kind of sex that is entirely risk-free is no sex at all. Next on the list is self-pleasuring, followed by total exclusivity between first-time sexual partners, and then total exclusivity between partners who have been thoroughly tested—though in the last two cases there remains a risk of sexually transmitting an infection that can be acquired nonsexually: hepatitis and Lyme disease, for example.

For most people, the no-sex option is simply unrealistic. Thus, there is an element of risk in any sexual encounter. This is true even if you use barriers, since they sometimes fail. Certain infections can be transmitted even when barriers—male or female condoms, dental dams, plastic wrap, and gloves—are used. The term *safer sex*, as opposed to safe sex, which was current a couple of decades ago, is a way of acknowledging that using protection is not a guarantee.

There are definitely risks involved in having a nonexclusive relationship, and some of them are serious—HIV, drug-resistant gonorrhea, and HPV. Of course, there is an element of risk in everything we do, including sleeping, and humans are very bad at assessing risk. Driving is probably the most dangerous activity that most of us do on a regular basis. It's far riskier than sex; the vast majority of us take measures to manage the risk—from wearing seatbelts to using turn signals. When people get into car accidents, they generally don't think they're being

punished, unless they were intoxicated or did something reckless.

Sex is a great deal more complicated, since virtually all of us have grown up with the sex-negative attitudes that permeate our culture. It's thus almost impossible to silence the little inner voice that warns us about being punished for our sexual activities. The idea that contracting an STI is punishment is still being advanced by many on the religious right (the same goes for pregnancy), and a religiously based textbook that's widely used in charter schools claims that STIs are caused by "a lack of morality and righteousness."⁴³

Advocates of abstinence-only education are astute enough to couch their arguments in secular terms, but the idea that contracting an STI is punishment is implicit in their rhetoric about purity and virginity, especially in the comparisons they make between sexually active teenagers (girls in particular) and dirty chocolate, used tape, chewed gum, cups of spit, and roses with no petals.⁴⁴

People will have sex regardless of the risks. It's much wiser to take reasonable measures to reduce the risks than it is to wish them away or to ignore them. A significant percentage of people in monogamous relationships will cheat. Moreover, people in serially monogamous relationships will often abandon safer sex practices prior to getting tested, if they get tested at all.⁴⁵

Thus, while there's ample room for additional research in this area, the evidence so far suggests that nonconsensually nonmonogamous people are prone to engage in riskier sexual activity than others. In addition to using condoms less frequently and being more likely to use drugs and alcohol, monogamous cheaters are less likely to discuss STI status with their affair partners, and much less likely to disclose the clandestine relationship to their mates. In contrast, consensually nonmonogamous relationships are less risky, at least to the extent that partners are significantly more likely to practice safer sex and open

communication.⁴⁶ We'll discuss safer sex in more depth in Chapter 7: Ethical Considerations in Designer Relationships.

Misconception #3: People Who Choose to Be in Alternative Relationships Are Incapable of Intimacy

We've been critical of conservative, religious ideology, but this very common misconception has little to do with religious belief systems. Emotional intimacy, after all, is not really a component of the conservative Christian model. One man, one woman, until death do us part says nothing about how that one man and one woman will relate. It reflects a belief system that emphasizes patriarchy and the preservation of the male dominant role, not emotional connection. The idea that nonmonogamy conflicts with having mature intimate relationships is rooted in modern mononormative psychology and the Freudian idea that mature eroticism should be directed toward a single object.

I am bisexual, polyamorous, happily married and dating several other partners. My marriage has been open from the beginning with a goal to pay attention and communicate openly with each other. Living and loving this way allows me the freedom to be exactly who I am and to connect with all of my partners from that authentic place.

—Shervon Laurice, MS, LCPC, LPC

There's really no scientific basis for these notions. Freud's ideas reflect his cultural moment and were based on anecdote not data. The available data, which is admittedly limited, points in a very different direction.

Research on swingers suggests that they value their marriages and the companionship the marital relationship provides. Most swingers feel that being in the lifestyle has improved their relationships, while only a tiny minority (1.7 percent) believe that swinging was damaging to them. In addition, forty-nine percent of the individuals who were satisfied with their relationship prior to swinging viewed the decision to swing as beneficial. Overall, lifestylers seem to see their lives as happier and more exciting than the general public. There is simply no evidence to suggest that swinging is associated with relationship unhappiness. If anything, people in consensually nonmonogamous relationships seem to be happier than their peers in monogamous ones.⁴⁷

We have presented at swinger events, we have interviewed swingers, and we have friends who identify as being in the lifestyle. Many of these people describe their sexual adventuring as something that enhances their emotional connection. This has been our own experience as well. In a designer relationship, even the difficult, troubling, or unpleasant experiences can help build intimacy. Contrary to the almost universal idea that nonmonogamy and “going deep” are antithetical, conversations that are open, honest, and transparent about outside sexual encounters can provide an opportunity to deepen your connection.

Misconception #4: Cheating and Consensual Nonmonogamy Are Similar

This misconception is extremely difficult to combat and is entirely contingent upon the mononormative model. If you believe that there are only two options—exclusivity or deception—it’s hard to imagine that other possibilities exist. Being in a nonmonogamous designer relationship bears no

resemblance to cheating in an ostensibly monogamous one. And cheating in an open relationship is still cheating (and yes, it happens).

The rate of cheating is around forty percent among college students who are supposedly monogamous.⁴⁸ Infidelity is a major factor in divorce. Between twenty-five and fifty percent of divorced people cite it as the cause, and in one 1983 study, fifty percent of divorced people stated that their partner had been unfaithful.⁴⁹ There's no data for consensual nonmonogamy, but at least on an intuitive level, it makes sense that people who acknowledge their sexual interest in others and accept extra-dyadic encounters are considerably less likely to conceal their activities from their partners, and of course concealment is impossible if all partners are present when the activity is taking place.

The idea that consensual nonmonogamy and cheating have anything at all in common is rooted not only in mononormativity but also in even older ideas that marriage is a proprietary relationship. Even though we've moved beyond the notion that women are chattel, this ideology continues to influence the way most people think. The persistence of this proprietary thinking became clear when we presented at a college several years ago. During the Q&A, questions about open relationships started coming our way, even though this was not a focus of our talk.

CONFUSED MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF CONSENSUAL NONMONOGAMY

Media coverage of consensual nonmonogamy often imposes a mononormative model—faithful

or cheating—on relationships that are founded on a different set of premises.

- *“Call them cheaters, swingers, or ‘whatever couples’—the bottom line is these couples buck monogamy for a more open approach to their relationship.”⁵⁰*
- *“Cheat without Cheating: Find Out If an Open Relationship Is Right for You.”⁵¹*
- *“Is Your Sex Life Dwindling? Save Your Relationship by Letting Your Guy Cheat. Wait, WHAT?”⁵²*
- *“Chris Brown is ‘really into’ his wannabe model girlfriend but reportedly can’t commit... Karrueche Tran is ‘fully aware’ that her bad boy lover is cheating with his ‘world-famous ex’... A ‘source close to the situation’ tells them: ‘Karrueche...has told friends they have an open relationship.’”⁵³*

The discussion soon revealed that most of the students reflexively accepted the dominant relationship paradigm, as much as they seemed to be looking for an alternative. One of them asked, "Then it's okay for you to step out on your partner?" We did our best to explain that the "faithful/stepping out" dichotomy is a false one. The concept that one can have multiple lovers while remaining faithful is baffling to many. Even when journalists try to present alternative relationship styles in relatively favorable terms, they frequently lapse into language that casts open and consensual nonmonogamy as a form of "cheating."

This confusion is not surprising. The public sees infidelity as a serious problem and a social evil. In recent years, polls have repeatedly shown that Americans view married men or women having affairs as immoral. Indeed, this view is almost a national consensus, while only seven percent said it is morally acceptable in a recent Gallup poll. In the same poll, ten percent deemed human cloning to be morally acceptable, and eleven percent did not object to polygamy. While the definition of infidelity seems to be expanding to include viewing visually erotic material, thirty-one percent considered pornography morally acceptable. (The poll was silent as to how many people acknowledged either having had affairs or having watched pornography. There's undoubtedly a gap between expressed moral views and actual behavior.)⁵⁴ This excessive, almost dogmatic, attitude toward infidelity is largely an American phenomenon.

We don't advocate having affairs, and betraying your partner in this way is potentially damaging. Deception, dishonesty, or betrayal will harm a relationship, but the source of the problem may not be the sexual activity so much as the breach of trust. The way in which our society has constructed monogamy encourages clandestine and dishonest behavior.

Designer relationships are based on egalitarianism and mutuality, not on proprietary thinking. From this

perspective, if people decide they will have multiple partners, the approach is the antithesis of cheating. In the conventionally monogamous model, each party owns the other (a modern variation on the more antiquated view of woman as property). In designer relationships, each party voluntarily owes the other transparency, some measure of emotional loyalty, and a determination to abide by agreements.

Misconception #5: Designer Relationships Perpetuate Male Dominance at the Expense of Women

This is a surprisingly common misconception. As we've discussed, it is advanced as part of the anti-marriage equality propaganda suggesting that "polygamy is next on the agenda." When used in this context, *polygamy* actually refers to *polygyny*, and the underlying assumption is that these arrangements by their nature oppress women. While it's certainly true that old-fashioned polygyny typically supports male dominance and patriarchy, the same cannot be said about designer relationships. It's more than a little ironic that advocates of "traditional" marriage would use women's rights as justification, since the traditional marriage they celebrate is rooted in patriarchal ideology.

The misconception isn't limited to social conservatives, however. Similar ideas were expressed in a number of the *AlterNet* comments. Several people wrote that legitimizing designer relationships would lead to the ascendance of what one called a "lion's pride" model, in which "alpha" males benefit by collecting the majority of desirable females at the expense of the "betas." This notion seems to draw on evolutionary psychology, albeit in a somewhat tortured way; the "alpha" and "beta" construct is based in large part on a

simplistic reading of contested research on wolves that has few implications, if any, for humans.⁵⁵

While there can be no denying that polygyny as commonly practiced has tended to oppress women and bolster male dominance, the same can be said about monogamous marriage. For most of European history, women in monogamous marriages were the property of their husbands and were utterly without individual rights. No one in the United States was convicted of marital rape until 1973, and it did not become a crime in every American state until 1993. There are still barriers to prosecution in many states. As recently as 2008, noted social conservative and marriage equality opponent Phyllis Schlafly argued against treating marital rape as a crime because, as she put it, “I think that when you get married you have consented to sex.”⁵⁶

Modern stereotypes about female sexuality also contribute to the assumption that nonmonogamous designer relationships are equivalent to polygyny. We’ve already pointed out that in the pre-Modern period, female sexuality was believed to be wanton. This changed dramatically during the Victorian era, when it began to be assumed that women were by nature modest, chaste, and monogamous. Of course, blanket assumptions about “male” and “female” sexuality leave the individual out of the equation; your own personal sexuality and relationship preference are what really matter. Egalitarianism, mutuality, and consent are the foundations of designer relationships, and this is in stark contrast to older, patriarchal models.

In fact, designer or polyamorous relationships come in a wide variety of configurations (and embracing so-called beta qualities, nerdiness or geekery, for example, is common in the poly world). While a substantial number of inexperienced couples begin to open their relationships by looking for a “unicorn” (a single bisexual woman), this quest is frequently the subject of mockery in polyamorous circles,

and swingers joke about it too. This is probably due to the fact that having a threesome with two women is a very common male fantasy, and at least impressionistically, men are often the first to propose opening a relationship. It's worth pointing out that for those who do find a unicorn, the reality of a male-female-female threesome seldom fits the phallogocentric fantasy.

RELATIONSHIP ANARCHY: A RADICAL APPROACH TO POLYAMORY

I practice relationship anarchy—where each relationship has the ability to grow organically into whatever the best arrangement for it is, without being hampered by artificial definitions or constraints. Thus, for me the line between friendship, romance, chosen family, etc. is very fluid.

This works for me because it means that I can have a wide social net that can grow and shrink with the level of energy that I have available at any given period of my life and the people in my life don't feel stifled by the need to fit into some kind of definitional structure. What matters is that we care about each other and

will provide what we can for each other, and we can set boundaries ourselves.

I love that I can give the energy to people in my life that is proportional to what I have available and those in my life don't feel slighted if there's less at any given period of time. We know that we care about each other, and that's what matters. It is freeing to be able to renegotiate things as life moves along. And in general, it's wonderful to know that I have SO many people in my life who think highly of me—this isn't limited to what's traditionally seen as romantic relationships; I have close friendships that are just as meaningful (or often more meaningful) than romantic ones, and the relationship structure I have can ascribe that importance to them without constraint.

—Puck

Unicorns aside, the available research suggests that the most common form of polyamorous living arrangement is an open couple.⁵⁷ Our conversations with swingers suggest that women often feel empowered and liberated, even when it was a male partner who first proposed exploring the lifestyle—and again, the available studies support this impression. It’s a truism in the swinging community that women are in charge, at least when it comes to sexual activity.⁵⁸

A recent study of over five hundred polyamorous people age fifty-five and over compared this group to a sample of over seven hundred people in the same age range from the 2012 General Social Survey, an annual survey that “aims to gather data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes.”⁵⁹ The polyamorous group reported better health, greater general happiness, and was far more likely to have had an HIV test than the general public. Among all married and among female married respondents, the polyamorous trended toward being happier in their marriages than those in the general population, but the differences fell short of statistical significance. Married polyamorous men, however, were slightly less happy in their marriages than the GSS sample. The overall effect was an equalizing of marital happiness for both genders. This is a subject the authors have targeted for further research, but it suggests that designer relationships are a step forward for women and for gender equality.⁶⁰

THE BENEFITS OF CONSENSUAL NONMONOGAMY

We suspect that there are many potential advantages to nonmonogamous relationship structures—psychological, emotional, and what some would define as spiritual. In many cases, there are educational and economic advantages as well. In a multiparent household, both intellectual and financial resources can be pooled to benefit all involved. On an individual level, while all relationships present challenges, designer relationships provide an array of opportunities for growth and self-discovery that are not available to people who are reflexively living the cultural norm. The study we referenced that shows an equalizing of marital happiness in open couples concludes: “Across all age categories, in all types of relationships, the nonexclusive sample generally outscored the relevant comparison group of the general population on sexual frequency, number of sexual partners, and self-reported health and personal happiness. These findings were especially significant for the portion of the sample that identified as other than currently legally married. This apparent prophylactic effect, if confirmed in future research, represents a very important finding for the health and well-being of millions of unpartnered older adults.” It seems likely that these findings have implications for people of all ages.

Misconception #6: Monogamy Is Better for Children

There is a cult of the child in twenty-first-century America. Evidence for the power of this cult is everywhere. The reaction to Ayelet Waldman's statement that the secret to her erotically satisfying relationship was that she put her "marriage ahead of motherhood" is just one of many such examples. Concerns about child welfare are so overwhelming that putting children at risk can be invoked as a kind of talisman in a wide variety of situations, even when there's no evidence to support the claim that children are in jeopardy.

In a recent speech at Catholic University, Senator Marco Rubio (a declared Republican candidate for President in 2016) claimed that "thousands of years of human history have shown that the ideal setting for children to grow up is with a mother and father."⁶¹ Rubio's direct target was marriage equality, but this argument is frequently raised in the context of multipartner relationships. The argument is nonsense. Human history has shown us no such thing. Children have grown up in a wide variety of circumstances, and there's simply no way to determine what's "ideal."

While some research suggests that children from single parent and broken homes generally fare less well than those raised in more stable environments, this may be more related to economics than family structure per se. Children from wealthier broken homes are more severely affected by divorce than children from less privileged backgrounds, possibly due to the change in economic status that often accompanies it.⁶² Wealthy people can afford to subcontract out some of their parenting to nannies, au pairs, etc., so many of the best outcomes actually involve the presence of more than just a mother and father in the household. In addition, the credible studies on same-sex families suggest that there's little difference in outcome, and a recent study

even indicated that children raised by two mothers do better than those raised by a mother and father.⁶³

When it comes to multiparent households, there has been very little research on the subject, but the most recent paper addressing the issue concludes that “monogamy and consensual nonmonogamy provide similar outcomes for children in these types of families.”⁶⁴ The authors of the study also point out that the benefits and potential problems of nonmonogamous relationships also exist for children in monogamous ones. Elisabeth Sheff makes very similar observations in her study of polyamorous families, *The Polyamorists Next Door*.

In light of the fact that childrearing was a communal activity for most of human history, there’s some reason to think that polyamorous arrangements might provide children with a more stable and nurturing environment than the nuclear family, since they become part of an expanded, emotionally intimate social network, and the burdens of childcare may be more widely distributed. There can be no doubt that parents’ emotional and relationship satisfaction has an impact on child development and well-being. As we’ve noted, there appears to be a correlation between consensual nonmonogamy and higher levels of relationship satisfaction, so its not unreasonable to infer that many children from nonmonogamous homes would feel more secure than their counterparts from monogamous ones. While we’re not arguing that nonmonogamy is necessarily superior, it may be so; at worst, there is no evidence that it’s in any way inferior to the monogamous nuclear family structure.

Misconception #7: People in Nonmonogamous Relationships Have

a Higher Rate of Separation and Divorce

Because mononormative beliefs have such a strong hold on the popular imagination, it's almost universally assumed that nonmonogamous relationships are inherently troubled, that the decision to be open is itself an indicator of a serious problem. There's no solid evidence to support this claim. In fact, the available evidence, both anecdotal and statistical, suggests otherwise: we've encountered several swinging couples who credit the decision to open up—sometimes made after many years of marriage—with saving or revitalizing their relationships.

Moreover, as we've already observed, there's considerable evidence that people in nonmonogamous designer relationships have a higher level of relationship satisfaction than the general public. In a study of swingers conducted in 2000, 78.5 percent described themselves as being "very happy" in their marriages, as opposed to sixty-four percent in the general population. In addition:

62.6 percent of swingers found that swinging improved their marriages/relationships, 35.6 percent said their relationships stayed about the same, and only 1.7 percent said they became less happy. Even among those who said their marriages were "very happy" prior to swinging, nearly half (49.7 percent) said they became happier. Among those with the most unhappy marriages 90.4 percent said their relationship became happier after swinging. It appears that, at least among the sample of swingers used in this research, swinging tends to improve the perceived quality of the couples' marriages regardless of how satisfying it was before swinging.

These results were consistent across genders.⁶⁵

In a more recent study, nearly 49.6 percent of men and 53.7 percent of women said it was “true” or “mostly true” that “swinging strengthened my marriage.” An additional 22.3 percent of men and 22.4 percent of women said the statement was “somewhat true.”⁶⁶ With regard to swinging, at least, it’s overwhelmingly clear that most people who participate feel that nonmonogamy enhances their relationship, at least to some degree, and that they may be substantially more happily married than the general public.

Although there are numerous unsubstantiated claims on the Internet that divorce rates among swingers are lower than for the general public, there does not appear to be any reliable recent research on divorce rates and nonmonogamous relationships. There are abundant anecdotes on both sides, but the argument that consensually nonmonogamous marriages are somewhat less likely to end in divorce makes intuitive sense, given the significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction reported in multiple studies. And as we’ll suggest in discussing the next misconception, focusing on divorce or breakup as a sign of relationship “failure” is a mistake. Satisfaction or happiness within a relationship strikes us as being a more valid measure of success.

Misconception #8: The End of a Relationship Represents a “Failure”

While this is not strictly speaking a misconception about nonmonogamous relating, it’s a misguided notion that’s rooted in mononormative thinking. We live in a world that’s fixated on success and failure, and for the most part people think about relationships in these terms. Because marriage is supposed to be a lifetime arrangement, a breakup or divorce is characterized as a failure—both of the relationship and of the people involved. It’s true that divorces are often contentious and painful and that the end of a relationship

(or a major change in an emotional attachment) is something to be mourned. Characterizing an ending or a change as a failure, however, strikes us as being a very limited and limiting way of thinking. The mindset behind designer relationships makes it possible to think about these changes in a more positive light and may even make it easier to uncouple or end a partnership in a way that is less likely to involve a complete severing of ties, while minimizing the rancor that so often accompanies a separation.

Because the mononormative mindset still treats lifelong exclusivity as an ideal, even if few can attain it, the end of a relationship means one has fallen short of this ideal. And if a relationship has fallen short, the temptation to blame the other for the “failure” is strong. Similarly, popular ideas about love—especially the notion that hate is its opposite—can lead to conflict, something that is often abetted by the legal system. This is an all-or-nothing attitude, and it’s one that virtually everyone in contemporary society has imbibed since childhood. Of course, not all breakups are rancorous, but people who seek to part amicably are often viewed with suspicion; this is true notwithstanding the increasing popularity of mediation as an alternative to more adversarial ways of divorcing, as a recent, notorious celebrity breakup suggests.

In early 2014, Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin announced their impending separation, or “conscious uncoupling,” as they called it. (There were accompanying rumors that theirs had been an open relationship.) Much of the popular reaction was harsh, with a hostility that went beyond the typical *schadenfreude*-laced reactions to celebrity breakups. Paltrow and Martin had branded themselves and their relationship as “golden,” as if they were a twenty-first-century answer to Prince Charles and Lady Diana. (Of course, Charles and Diana didn’t live happily ever after either.) In the wake of the announcement,

Paltrow made a number of tone-deaf public statements that seem to have been motivated in large part by a desire to protect her brand, make the best of a bad situation, and preserve her golden public image, even if the marital component was tarnished.

In part, people were reacting to the New Agey ideas that seem to underlie conscious uncoupling, but the concept is salutary. If a relationship must end, it is far better to separate with some kind of friendship intact, to avoid battling over custody and finances, than it is to part as enemies. At the same time, the ability to uncouple consciously requires more maturity, self-awareness, and financial resources than many people can muster.

It's easy to project fantasies onto celebrities who have carefully crafted personae. Among the most powerful of these fantasies is the need to believe in the "happily ever after" myth. And if people can't live happily ever after, it's widely assumed that they should sever all ties with at best a measure of equanimity, but the bitter breakups always make for juicier headlines. See "Celebrity Exes at War," for example.⁶⁷

The designer relationship paradigm stresses a more conscious approach to all aspects of a relationship, through all its stages. This entails being aware that any relationship has its own trajectory and that flexibility is essential. We are not suggesting that designer relationships never end badly, that people don't feel hurt, angry, or betrayed. But there is some evidence that people in nonmonogamous relationships are more tolerant of changes, so change does not mean failure; it can be treated as a shift, and whether children are involved or not, there is a greater possibility of having an enduring friendship with a former sexual partner.⁶⁸ We have seen the same pattern among swingers: former play partners often become long-term friends.

CHAPTER 5

Relationship Skills for Everyone

BY NOW IT SHOULD be clear that we don't think any two relationships are alike. We discourage people from comparing themselves and their relationships to others, and we recognize that there's no single structural paradigm that's intrinsically superior. What works for some people will be disastrous for others. Notwithstanding this perspective, there are certain skills and attitudes that are valuable to develop regardless of your personal preferences. This means approaching your relationship with awareness and intention; it means being conscious; it means recognizing relationships as processes in which we dedicate and rededicate ourselves to one another. Relationships are not static—they are not one-time commitments that we can expect to last a lifetime.

To return to Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin—we think there's a great deal of validity to the general idea that when relationships must end, it's better to end them consciously and with as much mutual respect and goodwill as possible. But “conscious uncoupling” isn't sufficient. It's better to be conscious from the start. We won't refer to this as conscious coupling, since that's too limiting and excludes people in nondyadic arrangements, but being aware of what works for you as an individual and as part of a relationship is a reality-based alternative to the myth of happily ever after.

If people can mutually recognize and agree that relationships require ongoing care and attention in order to flourish, they are more likely to remain together and happily so. While this requires flexibility, equanimity, and active engagement (rather than commitment), these are skills that can be developed. There's nothing New Agey about this approach, and there's no need to wait for an irreparable rupture before becoming conscious. It's far better to bring consciousness to your relationship from this moment on.

Know Yourself Sexually and Relationally

Since time immemorial, in societies around the world, self-knowledge has been seen as a very important, if not the paramount, value in human life. This was true even in cultures that differed immensely from our own and in which individualism, as we know it, would have been a thoroughly alien concept. In the Taoist tradition, for example, it is said, "He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened."⁶⁹ A similar belief was inscribed on the Oracle at Delphi and expressed by many Greek philosophers, and variants on the saying "Unless you know yourself, you cannot know God" have been current in various branches of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for many centuries.

Knowing yourself sexually is a process. This is true not only because we change and grow, and what is intensely pleasurable and exciting at twenty may not have the same appeal at forty, but also because even the most self-aware person can never attain complete self-knowledge. While you may know what turns you on and may be able to articulate some of the reasons for that response, there will always be a certain element of mystery in the realm of sexuality. Thus, this search for sexual self-knowledge may seem quixotic, and perhaps it is, but the quest is what matters most.

Knowing yourself relationally is also a process, and the sooner you begin, the better. Just as sexuality changes and evolves over time, so too can relationship styles evolve and experience may deepen self-awareness. Many people only discover that they're better suited to being in open relationships after they've become disillusioned with monogamy; others come to think of polyamory as an orientation. It may take time for people who do not experience sexual desire to develop a sense of asexual identity; people who enjoy anonymous encounters may have difficulty recognizing and acknowledging these desires to themselves because casual sex is so stigmatized in our society.

Love Is Profound Interest

People generally think of love and hate as polar opposites. There's also a common platitude that "the opposite of love is fear." In some respects these emotions are more similar than they are different. All three are intense and demand substantial mental energy. Most people devote more attention to the ones they love and those they despise or fear than to those about whom they feel neutral. Thus, in a very significant way, it is more accurate to say that indifference, not hate or fear, is the opposite of love.

Displaying profound interest is an ongoing process that requires some effort. The first step is to cultivate the ability to pay attention. As any experienced meditator knows, the capacity for sustained attention will fluctuate. Similarly, your capacity to be profoundly interested in your partner or partners will vary from time to time and situation to situation. It would be impossible, and undesirable, to be profoundly interested all the time and during every interaction. As with meditation, the fluctuations are to be expected; the value lies in making the effort and communicating your interest as best you can.

To frame this concept in somewhat more conventional and clinical terms, the couples therapist John Gottman uses the phrase “turning toward.” According to Gottman, you should “be aware of bids for connection and turn toward them. The small moments of everyday life are the building blocks of relationship.”⁷⁰ Every effort to display profound interest is at once a bid for connection and an act of turning toward. This can be as simple as taking a few minutes to listen, even if you’d rather be doing something else. Consistently turning toward and receiving and acknowledging bids for connection whenever possible will create a positive feedback loop that reinforces the mutuality of your profound interest.

The nature of designer relationships is such that people are compelled to exercise profound interest in each other to a greater degree than those who approach things less consciously. Regardless of how many people are involved, having an awareness that a relationship is dynamic and ever evolving means that you have to devote a great deal of care and attention to the relationship itself and to your partner(s). It’s much harder to be neglectful if you’re thinking regularly about the relationship and what it means.

View Every Relationship as a Co-creation

Relationships are co-creations: it is always helpful to bear this in mind, in good times and in difficult ones. When things are going well, this awareness will serve to nurture your connection. If you can remember that you are not operating in isolation when you encounter difficulties, you may be able to look at your partner(s) and whatever you are facing with more compassion and less reproach. Thinking this way is likely to make it easier to navigate the challenges and generally leads to a happier and more balanced way of

being. Thus, we encourage you to view your relationship as an entity unto itself.

This concept of co-creation can be a very valuable one. If you are jointly creating this new entity, this relationship, then it is something that you can nurture and build, something that will thrive based on the quality of your attention. Another way to think of this is to view your relationship as a process, an artistic project.

The path we have taken is not for everybody, and we do not intend to be role models for alternative lifestyles. I believe our marriage is unique, as is everyone else's.... When it's successful, each person plays an equal and instrumental part in creating something that neither could even aspire to on their own.

—Christopher Block, quoted in Jenny Block, *Open*

People often talk about the need to work on their relationships. This statement typically indicates that the relationship has been in crisis for some time. Research suggests that people are dissatisfied for up to six years before they seek counseling.⁷¹ As we see it, the concept that one has to work on a relationship carries with it a not-so-subtle message that relationships are drudgery. Relationships are not jobs and should not be drudgery, so we encourage people to use different language. One way of reframing the idea of work is to think about your relationship in the language of business or art. If you apply the term *joint venture* (or even better, *joint adventure*) to your partnership, you are likely to get a good return on your investment.

We also like the term *collaboration*, though it has its roots in “labor,” which is synonymous with work. Despite this etymology, collaboration is usually used in the context of creative and artistic undertakings. Approaching your life

and your love as a creative process will help you discover more joy and pleasure in all your interactions.

Both of these linguistic modifications have the added benefit of implying mutuality and sharing. Changing terms may seem like a small thing, but words matter. In fact, they matter a lot, and mutuality, perhaps more than any other single element, is crucial for keeping relationships vital.

Take Pleasure in Serving Each Other

There's a popular misconception that relationships are primarily about getting emotional and sexual needs met and that people should look to their partners to meet those needs. This is a particularly common belief among the pair-bonded, and it has been fueled by the self-help industry and the mass media. The origins of this emphasis on getting needs met in a relationship are more deeply embedded in Western, and especially American, culture, with its tradition of individualism and the very common belief that the purpose of life is self-fulfillment. At its worst, this kind of individualism treats existence as a zero-sum game in which there are winners and losers. Even in its milder forms, this emphasis on the individual tends to encourage us to forget that human beings are social animals, and that the individual can only flourish in a context of relatedness and interdependence. We deceive ourselves about our need for others at our peril.

In some situations, people are forced to forget themselves and focus on others. Multiple studies suggest that altruism and altruistic behavior make people happier.⁷² While this research generally relates to the workplace and not the domestic sphere, it's reasonable to infer that if you are less concerned about your own needs and more focused on how you can support your partner(s), you are likely to be taken outside yourself and may well experience more relationship satisfaction.

Nevertheless, there is a place for selfishness. Many people feel deeply disempowered, believe that they have spent their entire lives in service to others, and take the view that they have never gotten their needs met. This feeling can be intense, and it frequently manifests itself in those who have devoted their lives to childrearing or have had to put themselves aside for any number of other reasons. We are not advocating self-abnegation or anything resembling self-martyring. This is about a mutually rewarding give-and-give (not give-and-take). If one person is doing all the giving, things will probably go awry very quickly, but if everyone can decide to take pleasure in giving, the effect is likely to be synergistic.

Connect First—Talk Later

It is good to be able to express your desires in a kind and supportive way that encourages your partner(s) to do whatever is possible to meet them. Becoming skilled at nonverbal communication, using nonverbal tools to nurture your connection, is equally if not more important. There's a large body of research that shows we respond to an array of nonverbal cues at a level below conscious awareness.

Multiple senses are involved in reading nonverbal cues. People often consciously or semiconsciously take note of tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, breathing patterns, skin tone, and gestures. Although they involve the voice, laughing and crying are nonverbal expressions of emotion. These are only a few of the most obvious forms of nonverbal communication. We can convey emotion through touch as well, and there are even more subtle cues that are communicated at a level that is entirely unconscious. It is well known that smell is important to sexual attraction. Subtle changes in scent can indicate changes in emotional state. Thus, nonverbal cues affect us on multiple levels. By contrast, most verbal expressions (except spontaneous

eruptions in immediate response to an intense stimulus) are mediated by our intellect.

There is nothing wrong with the intellect, and many great relationships involve great conversation. There is much that can only be conveyed verbally, but the spoken word has its limitations. Because verbalizing—including writing and speaking in sign language—involves rational thought, it can frequently create distance. In the context of disagreements, this rational component of speaking is likely to be a polarizing factor that puts each partner in a frame of mind in which being “right” is more important than being connected.

Although falling in love is a process that operates on multiple levels, we’d suggest that verbalizing is less important than some other elements. In the early stages of a relationship, you probably spent a good deal of time in silence, simply gazing into each other’s eyes. Yes, you got to know each other by talking, but consider the possibility that instead of gazing at each other because you were falling in love, you were actually falling in love because you were gazing at each other. You can make the conscious choice to keep this element in your relationship (or to reintroduce it) no matter how long you have been together. By doing so, you will be reevoking the intensity of that first infatuation, reminding yourselves of the emotional and erotic charge you felt at the time.

Eye-gazing is a simple and profound technique that can bring you into harmony both physiologically and emotionally. If you are experiencing some disruption in your bond or are feeling an argument brewing, you can take a time-out and gaze into your partner’s eyes. This will help bring you into balance, feel less polarized, and make it much easier to discuss whatever is at issue. There are ways that people in multiple partner relationships can make use of the technique, though the logistics are a little more complicated.

We also strongly encourage you to use a mirror and eye-gaze as a solo practice. People seldom look at themselves with love and reverence, and doing so can build self-esteem and confidence. You are treating yourself as you own beloved when you do this, and whether you're partnered or not, this is something that can be life-changing.

EYE-GAZING FOR TWO

Eye-gazing involves standing about two feet apart while facing each other and maintaining eye contact. We suggest that you focus on your partner's left eye with your right eye. Allow the muscles around your eyes to relax, and blink gently when you need to. To silence any mental chatter, focus on the act of gazing and keep your attention on your right eye. Find a time to do this daily. Three to five minutes of gazing is optimal, but it may take some practice before you can maintain it for that long. If you feel awkward at first, it's OK to take breaks. It's OK to laugh too. Regular eye-gazing will enhance your ability to connect nonverbally. Once you've made this a habit, you can use it as a tool for defusing conflict.

Intimacy Is a Balancing Act

We've heard it said that intimacy means "into-me-see" and that the eye-gazing practice is a way of seeing in. In our view, eye-gazing should function as a kind of meditation, a technique for creating harmony, and a way of reinforcing

loving feelings. Defining intimacy as seeing into another is at once superficial and a reflection of a deep and prevalent cultural misunderstanding about what it means to be intimate. Nonetheless, it is partly redeemed by the fact that it deemphasizes verbal communication, which many modern relationship experts have mistaken for intimacy.

EYE-GAZING FOR MORE THAN TWO

A round-robin group practice can also bring on a more balanced and harmonious state, although in a triad or other odd numbered group, the person who is not gazing will have to find another way to participate; the best method is probably to stand beside a pair that's gazing and focus on both. You may wish to stand in a circle and take turns until all members of the group have exchanged gazes.

Another method is to eye-gaze collectively. To do this, gather around a lighted candle, and gaze at the flame while squinting slightly. This will create the illusion that rays of light are emanating from the candle, and you can imagine that these rays are connecting everyone. Of course, couples can do this too.

There is both less and more to being intimate than seeing into someone. For starters, there is no way you can truly see into another. Your view will inevitably be incomplete and shaded by your own perceptions and prejudices. Attempting to see and understand a beloved's inner world is valid and has its place, just as communicating verbally has its place, but the effort is better understood as an imaginative act. Trying to see into someone is a step toward building empathy, but it is not the only factor, or even the primary factor, when it comes to creating intimacy. It's more productive to think about intimacy in a relationship as a process that involves some very careful balancing, something that evolves with time and cannot be forced. True intimacy requires having the skill to be at once separate and connected and to tolerate the paradoxical demands of striking this balance.

Some forms of intimacy can be stifling. As Esther Perel has wisely explained, notions of intimacy used to be founded on respect, and relationship success was understood as being contingent on a shared sense of purpose and project. Perel makes a strong case that the exalting of intimacy is a new development in human society, emerging in conjunction with the modern idea that romantic love should be the basis for marriage. This modern form of intimacy, with its focus on verbal expression and tendency to be intrusive, is likely to suck the erotic energy out of a relationship. This is a major pitfall for couples, but it applies to any form of domestic living arrangement.

When it comes to sex, we suspect that most people crave novelty, at least to some degree, whether or not they're in an exclusive relationship and whether or not they freely admit it. Part of novelty's allure has to do with the mysterious nature of someone new and the excitement associated with exploring that person's unfamiliar physical and mental territory. Seduction involves both mystery and the promise of at least partial disclosure. Although every

“other”—even someone with whom you’ve spent many years—remains fundamentally opaque and mysterious, it’s easy to forget this.

While it is said that familiarity breeds contempt, we suspect that it more frequently breeds boredom and lack of interest, which are the real antitheses of love. The mysterious element is often negated by the intrusive demands of “into-me-see.” Instead of denying the mystery, we suggest that you celebrate it.

Don’t Confuse Privacy with Secrecy

You don’t have to share everything. Retaining some measure of personal privacy, both physical and mental, is not wrong, is not a rejection, is not a refusal to connect. We all need our solitude and our private realm, even though we live in a culture that demands ever-increasing self-disclosure. In many societies that are less materially well off, there is little personal privacy, and people often have no wish for the kind of intimacy that is celebrated by many in American society. In the pre-Internet era, individual privacy became very important in the Western world, but today many forms of privacy are mere memories, even as the demands for relationship intimacy seem to be increasing. Maintaining a realm of personal inner space is important for anyone who wants to lead a balanced life.

We like to distinguish between what’s private and what’s secret. Some measure of personal privacy is important no matter how intimate you are. Defining that realm of privacy is highly individual. There’s no formula for it, and it will undoubtedly change over time in any relationship. The distinction between privacy and secrecy is not always obvious. Recognizing it, and being honest with yourself about which is which, requires a high degree of self-awareness and some vigilance. When behaviors start to feel compulsive or you repeatedly find yourself trying to hide

them from the people closest to you, you're probably no longer just keeping something private.

It may seem self-contradictory for us to define love as profound interest, to suggest that a collaborative attitude is a key to having a fulfilling relationship, and to advocate open discussion of sex, including fantasies, while at the same time suggesting that there's a need for a private realm, that too much intimacy can be stifling. The apparent conflict is a consequence of the way people have been trained to think, not a consequence of what we're advocating. The essential point is that there's a need to balance these aspects of relationship for things to work well. It's crucial to maintain a mutually respectful attitude, to develop a shared sense of adventure and exploration, to take pleasure in giving pleasure, and to find ways to connect, while being comfortable with the reality that we all need to turn inward at times. Indeed, we suspect that some of the behavior that gets labeled "sex addiction" (and the secrecy that so often accompanies it) reflects a rather desperate and counterproductive response to the excessive demands for intimacy that our culture imposes.

Trust

The concept of trust is complex. In many cases, trust begins with an intuition. This is an operation of a component of consciousness that makes snap judgments about dominance and danger. We typically make instant assessments of dominance based on nonverbal cues, facial structure in particular; our gut instincts about trustworthiness are determined largely by the expression of the person we're encountering—smiles suggesting safety and trustworthiness, and frowns suggesting danger.

These initial impressions may have evolutionary value as a survival mechanism; however, they can be entirely unreliable if the person is deliberately being deceptive or

ingratiating, or due to any number of other factors that can cloud our judgment. The ability to make snap judgments is essential for day-to-day functioning, but excessive reliance on intuition can lead to all kinds of trouble. Thus, an initial feeling that someone is trustworthy differs a great deal from the kind of trust that is developed and nurtured in the context of a long-term relationship.

An initial sense of trustworthiness undoubtedly plays a role in attraction and in the selection of casual partners, but most of us have trusted the wrong person—in dating, friendship, or business—at least once and probably many times. True trust building begins when the intuitive sense that a person is trustworthy is borne out through a series of interactions. While the intuitive sense may continue to be a factor, this more enduring form of trust evolves out of experience. For some, this can begin to build fairly rapidly, and if so, it's probably best to be cautious. For others, especially those who have experienced deep betrayal, it can be a very slow process. If you've ever cared for an animal that has been mistreated, you know how much time and effort it takes to instill a feeling of security in your pet. The same is true for many human beings.

Playing Games Does Not Build Trust

Unfortunately, many of our cultural constructs around dating and sexuality do very little to encourage trust building. This is especially true when it comes to heterosexual courtship. Popular books, including *The Rules*, *The Game*, and *The Art of Seduction* (which counsels readers to “choose the right victim”), among many others, profit from treating courtship, dating, and seduction as a game. They play on stereotypes and are rooted in gender essentialism and mononormativity: women should want to attract a man who's a keeper and need to manipulate him into nesting; men just want sex and should use guile to lure

women into bed—it's only fair, after all, because women want to trick men into settling down. While some of the stratagems described in these books may get some people laid or engaged, their emphasis on gaining an advantage over an adversary creates an obstacle to building trust from the very outset.

More generally, this way of thinking about sexual relationships denies women the fullness of their sexuality and desire. It reinforces the idea, fairly common among men, that males have to beg, borrow, or steal in order to get laid. It also plays into the ideas about “alpha” and “beta” males we've discussed. These ideas are implicit or explicit in some of the male-oriented dating books and are gaining a good deal of currency on the Internet, in what's known as the “manosphere.”

Applying the designer relationship model to courtship means not playing games. Game playing and manipulation may be accepted (but should not be acceptable) in high school, when people are struggling to find appropriate ways to relate to the objects of their attraction, but many adults continue to engage in this kind of behavior. It shouldn't be surprising that so many people are left wondering what has gone wrong in their relationships when they have done so little to build trust and persist in thinking of their partners as objects to be manipulated.

Building trust is not really all that complicated, leaving aside situations of past betrayal or where personal history has created obstacles. All it takes is honesty—a basic determination to be truthful and forthright—tempered with kindness. It also involves being reliable—calling when you say you're going to call, showing up on time, taking responsibility if you make a mistake. There may be a little bit of self-sacrifice involved, especially if you are chronically late, for example, but taking these steps will demonstrate that you are “radically taking the other person into account.”⁷³

Sexual Trust

Having frank conversations about your sexual interests, tastes, and history—including any history of STIs—is also crucial for building trust. Some people find it difficult to talk about past lovers. It's worth moving beyond limitations like these, which are based on old-fashioned ways of thinking about sex—that it's proprietary, only for marriage, and only to be shared with one person in your entire life. Of course, it's never a good idea to be excessively effusive or wistful when describing past experiences. But talking openly in ways that are mutually supportive will not only make it possible for you to experience more sexual pleasure, it will also build trust and intimacy.

There are some additional ground rules for building sexual trust, and this is particularly important in nonexclusive relationships. It is a good idea to establish boundaries and hard rules, even though they may change over time. As you gain more experience, you may find that you can make judgments in the moment. As you start out, however, rules will be more important, and we recommend that you talk them through, agree on them, and stick to them.

Having rules is a way of insuring your emotional alignment while establishing a foundation for exploring more freely. This is because the recognition that a partner knows the boundaries and respects them will be reinforced over time, and having this awareness deepens trust. If you follow the rules at the beginning, you will be creating the conditions for being more flexible in the future.

Your sexuality is shaped by an array of forces, many of which function entirely or almost entirely at an unconscious level. Being truly open and connected involves taking significant emotional risks. When people start exploring new ways of being sexual, more open ways of relating, or even just sharing long-held fantasies, unexpected things can

happen; all sorts of repressed or unrecognized material can emerge. There may be feelings of urgency, the sense that a previously unknown or unacknowledged desire needs to be met and needs to be met now. At the same time, expressing these newly discovered desires (or ones that have been buried for years) can lead to feelings of vulnerability. Rules make it much easier to manage both the urgency and the vulnerability.

While we don't believe in radical or promiscuous honesty (speaking your truth without regard for how it will be received or the appropriateness of the time and place), in the context of sexuality being honest is essential. If you are exploring together, you must be truthful and kind. Being transparent will reiterate that you are worthy of being trusted, that you are not like that former lover who was deceitful, and that your explorations are truly a joint venture.

GROUND RULES FOR CREATING SEXUAL TRUST

The details of these rules may vary a good deal, but some basic elements should be in place for everyone (in addition to safer sex agreements). These elements include:

- I will be as honest with you as I can.*
- I will strive to express myself kindly.*

- *I will not shame you for your fantasies or sexual desires and will never use them against you, even if we encounter difficulties or our relationship ends.*
- *I will not push you to engage in activities that do not feel right to you.*
- *I will always look for some sexual common ground, even if what you're proposing seems unappealing or odd.*
- *I will check in with you first.*

Keep Kindness as Your Touchstone

Striving to be kind, especially when things are not going well, is essential for maintaining an atmosphere of love and caring. Bearing in mind the importance of kindness, even when you are feeling angry or upset, can serve as a check on any impulse to be brutally honest (more on honesty in the next section). If you keep kindness as your touchstone, it is far more likely that your partner(s) will be able to receive your words, even if what you are expressing is difficult and perhaps not entirely welcome.

Negative comments and rhetorical questions about a partner that are categorical, whether general or sexual, may be truthful expressions of emotion and the reality of the person who is making the statement, but they are almost

always counterproductive. Words such as “always” and “never” are particularly toxic. When comments are absolute and unkind, the person on the receiving end is likely to feel both harshly judged and utterly disempowered. In addition, if you give feedback framed in a way that suggests you anticipate failure, failure is what you will get. Instead, express yourself in a manner that conveys confidence that the person can do what you ask. If you can do this, you are much more likely to get the desired response than if you criticize or point out inadequacies.

Similarly, being kind involves developing discretion and discernment about when to speak. Avoid saying anything even vaguely critical during or immediately after sex. Don't have intense conversations on an empty stomach, while one of you is driving, or if you've consumed any intoxicants. Finally, don't go to bed angry. It may not be humanly possible to have perfect timing, but it is kindness in action to hold your tongue when speaking is inappropriate. Have those difficult conversations at a time, in a place, and in a way that will minimize their potential to cause pain.

It's also important not to assume that just because your intentions are kind, your words and actions are being received that way. Pay attention to the response. If the conversation stops, slows down, or body language and facial expression are indicative of distress, you may have misspoken and expressed your feelings in an injurious way. The mere belief that you did not intend to hurt does not absolve you of responsibility if your words caused pain, so it is important to distinguish between your intention and the actual impact of what you say. When in doubt, check in and ask.

Similarly, it's easy to react to expressions of strong emotions like anger as if they were personal attacks or signs of serious problems. If you are prone to reacting this way, you may need to remind yourself that it's just an emotion, and it will pass. It's also helpful to have a conversation

about how these incidents make you feel, though not in the midst of an argument. This can help the more volatile partner be more mindful and also serve as an opportunity for you to reassure each other and rededicate yourselves to being as kind as you can. It's inevitable that you will have arguments, and some of them may be heated. In these situations, kindness means taking care that you are expressing anger or frustration as specifically as is possible and are not engaging in personal attacks.

THERE'S A TIME AND PLACE FOR THOSE DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS

Schedule conversations about difficult topics, and keep your appointments.

- *Designate a neutral space other than your bedroom for discussing loaded subjects.*
- *Eye-gaze for at least three minutes before you start.*
- *Agree to stay on topic and refrain from blindsiding or bringing up unrelated grievances.*
- *One of the benefits of the therapeutic approach is that it*

creates this kind of container for emotionally charged conversation. It's valuable to try to create this kind of container at home, even though you won't be in the presence of a neutral third party. Being kind is not an abstraction. It is all about making choices that demonstrate your esteem and send the message that even if you are furious about something, your anger in no way diminishes your regard.

Be Honest in Moderation

The idea that it's important to be honest with your partner may seem simple. In fact, the subject of honesty is more complicated than it appears. Chronic dishonesty is almost always a sign of serious problems in a relationship, but honesty takes many forms, and it is not always healthy or helpful.

It *is* very important to be honest, but the way you go about it is crucial. It's not unusual for people to use the statement "I'm just being honest" as a justification for emotional battery. In intimate relationships, total honesty is not always the best policy, since total honesty is often brutal. Being forthright in a way that is helpful requires some skill.

Honesty tempered by prudence is a healthier approach. We are not suggesting that you suppress or deny all your feelings; nor do we want you to think that if something important to you or the relationship comes up, you should squelch it. But having no discernment about how hurtful words can be is not productive. For this reason, when you want to express something, it is wise to take stock of your motives before speaking.

There is a widespread tendency to associate honesty with negative statements. The expression *to tell you the truth* often seems to be employed in the context of confessing to something, saying words someone may not want to hear, or giving criticism. Remember that being honest also includes the positive. There's no need to be parsimonious with praise.

Finally, it's perhaps most important to be honest with yourself; this is not easy and indeed may be impossible. Having a sense of self is a survival mechanism, and it is easy to engage in protective self-deception when some behavior or trait does not align with this sense. It is worth resisting this tendency to self-deceive to the fullest extent possible. Doing so will make it easier to exercise discretion in your honesty with others.

IS HONESTY APPROPRIATE?

Before you decide whether it's appropriate to "speak your truth," ask yourself:

- *Is it true?*
- *Is this an appropriate time?*

- *Is it necessary?*
- *Is it kind?*
- *Is it helpful?*
- *What makes me feel the need to express it?*

Engage Empathically

People tend to associate empathy with negative emotional states—being able to put yourself in the place or feel the emotions of a person who is in pain. In reality, empathy has a much broader meaning, encompassing the full spectrum of human emotion and experience.

Developing and displaying your capacity for empathy is one of the keys to true intimacy. It can also be profoundly healing, both in very broad terms and in terms of dealing with the inevitable conflicts that will emerge in any long-term relationship. Although the word *healing* has been so overused that it can border on being meaningless, bringing a healthy dose of empathy into your relationship can be very helpful in repairing past hurts and preventing future ones.

Some psychoanalysts have rejected the Freudian model in which the analyst remains neutral and detached, suggesting instead that the key to successful therapy lies in maintaining a stance of “*sustained empathic inquiry*—an attitude...that consistently seeks to comprehend the meaning of the patient’s expressions from a perspective within rather than outside the patient’s frame of reference.”⁷⁴ Bringing a similar attitude to your intimate relationships can be beneficial (though you should never

think of yourself as a partner's therapist) and is one way of expressing profound interest.

To say that empathy is very important is not to imply that you should abandon your emotional boundaries or that you should always seek to feel what your partners are feeling. In fact, some recent research suggests that empathy can be damaging when it involves an excessive taking on of others' negative emotions.⁷⁵ When people talk about picking up on someone else's energy, they are often describing the experience of feeling flooded due to the intensity of the emotion involved. It's one thing to do your best to see and feel things from another person's perspective; allowing yourself to be swept away because your own emotions are being triggered is potentially damaging, especially if it becomes a pattern. There may be times when you have to protect yourself, but that does not negate the value of cultivating your capacity to be empathic.

There is a significant difference between empathy and *compassion*—a word that is widely used and perhaps more comfortable for many people. Compassion is more akin to sympathy. Where compassion implies a certain standing apart, to a degree that can sometimes seem patronizing, empathy is more engaged and egalitarian, since it entails an effort not just to feel sorry for the other person but also to experience (or imagine) what the other person is going through. In addition, unlike empathy, compassion is linked to suffering as opposed to the full spectrum of emotion. As we've noted, compassion has its place. The distance it provides can make it easier to prevent the flooding that sometimes accompanies the empathic response to intensely negative experiences and emotions.

STEPS FOR CULTIVATING EMPATHY IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

- *Trust that your partner only seeks to have emotions recognized and understood.*
- *Try to gain an intellectual understanding of the feelings.*
- *Ask questions with genuine interest, but avoid badgering or cross-examination.*
- *Try to move beyond your intellect, and imagine, physically or emotionally, how you would feel in a similar situation.*
- *If you are having difficulty experiencing empathy, acknowledge it and don't give up. Convey your determination to continue until you really get it.*

- *Once you experience an empathic response, acknowledge it by saying something like “Now I see what you’ve been going through, and I would feel that way too.”*
- *If an apology is called for, apologize.*
- *Mutually agree to take steps to avoid similar negative interactions.*

Compersion: Empathy on Steroids

Compersion is a term that was coined by members of Kerista, a group that was founded in 1956 and that evolved into a polyfidelitous commune in California that existed from 1971 to 1991.⁷⁶ The term is now widely used in polyamorous circles, typically to refer to experiencing pleasure when a partner is enjoying sex with someone else. It is also applied to other circumstances in which jealousy would be the expected response. Our definition is somewhat more expansive and is not limited to sexual situations or those that would inspire jealousy. People who have refined their compersion skills can perform a kind of alchemy, transforming what might otherwise be a negative emotional reaction into a celebratory one.⁷⁷

Empathy and compersion are closely related, and compersion can be considered a specific form of empathy—we like to say it’s empathy on steroids. Compersion involves

taking pleasure in a partner's pleasure, whatever the source. This can include a new interest or activity in which you have no desire to participate. It can also involve getting turned on by a partner's arousal. There is ample research showing that people respond with similar emotions when they observe emotional reactions in others, though the exact neurological processes that produce this response are poorly understood. Whatever the nature of the biological mechanisms, it seems likely that we all have some innate capacity to experience compersion. This capacity can be refined and developed.

To give you a more concrete understanding, think of the satisfaction that some people take in cooking for others, even if they don't eat the food themselves. For some, this is a profound pleasure. We also like what Diana Adams, lawyer and polyamory activist, has to say about this transformative emotion: "Compersion can be cultivated. By doing so, you are tapping into joy for your partners' joy, growth, adventure—even if you're not invited. For example, if a partner gets a dream job faraway for the summer, I miss him, but I am more excited for him."

Be Flexible

Humans are creatures of habit, and in many respects there is nothing wrong with behaving habitually. Most of us would not be able to function without some form of daily routine, and doing things like getting regular exercise generally requires developing a consistent pattern of activity. Habits are often labeled "bad," so much so that addictions are referred to as "habits." Of course, most habits are not addictions at all; they're simply the way we're accustomed to doing things—and frequently we're accustomed to acting in certain ways because it is actually optimal to do so. What habits share with addictions is that they can be very hard to alter.

The tendency to behave habitually can sometimes be a problem in the context of relationships and sexuality. In life, it may not matter much to others if your habit means you either go to the gym before 9:30 a.m. or you skip it that day, but if you're in the habit of having sex in the morning, and one of you is put on a midnight-to-8:00 a.m. shift, your sex life is going to suffer unless you can alter your pattern and adapt to the new schedule.

Of course, this is a rather crude example, but the more flexible we can be, the better equipped we will be to handle disruptions with ease and grace. There are many changes that take place over the course of a long-term relationship. Children, aging, and illness are the most obvious among them, but the changes are frequently subtler. In any relationship, you are likely to experience varying degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction over time. Unless the trend is one of steadily diminished interest and satisfaction, it is much healthier to realize that these changes are just fluctuations and to be flexible enough to accept and roll with them.

Being flexible also applies to your beliefs about yourself and your self-definition. Even if you have a strong sense of self, there's great value in recognizing that identities are not ironclad. Flexibility is liberating; it can open you to delights and possibilities that may not entirely match your self-image.

Create a Statement of Purpose

We encourage you to write a mission statement or statement of purpose. If you're not in a relationship, you can write one that outlines your desires for one and/or the kind of single life you wish to have. In *Partners in Passion*, we suggested creating an erotic statement of purpose prior to engaging in any form of sexual adventuring. This can be very valuable for people who are already in a partnership

and are considering a more open approach. What we're suggesting here is similar, but we're applying it to the relationship as a whole. We still recommend a more sexually focused statement for those who are considering opening up.

Some people write their own nuptial vows and treat the wedding ceremony as an opportunity to explore their intentions and objectives. We think creating a statement of purpose is a very good idea for people embarking on what they intend to be a long-term relationship. The exact timing for creating such a document will vary depending on individual circumstances, but if you're thinking about cohabitating, it's wise to create one before moving in together.

For polyamorous people who have a hierarchical structure with primary, secondary, and tertiary partners, it may be too cumbersome to create one statement for each relationship. At a minimum, we think it's worth doing for the primary one. This is not the same as a marriage contract or a mere exchange of wedding vows; it's more proactive and affirming, an opportunity to outline your desires, hopes, and intentions, both short and long-term.

This idea is rooted in a practice that is fairly common in some BDSM circles, especially in the context of master or mistress/servant relationships. BDSM stands for "bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism"; the term also incorporates DS (dominance and submission) and SM (slave and master/mistress). BDSM contracts outlining the rights and obligations of each party can be far more explicit and detailed than any vanilla prenuptial agreement. Contracts have their uses.

As we've mentioned, we think that polyamorous arrangements are unlikely to receive full legal recognition in the United States anytime soon. This is because, in contrast to marriage equality, the entire legal infrastructure around marriage is based on a two-party model. Thus, the 2013

federal court ruling in Utah did not endorse polygamous marriage, as some headlines implied—it only dealt with restrictions on cohabitation. While they will not confer the same rights as a marriage contract, domestic partnership agreements can provide protections for people in polyamorous households. Similarly, prenuptial agreements can sometimes save people from the heartache of a bitterly contested divorce, provided these agreements are fairly and equitably negotiated.

Despite their usefulness, contracts are legal documents that are based to some degree on an adversarial as opposed to a collaborative model. While there are, of course, collaboration agreements and partnership contracts, they are still documents that are predicated on an exchange, on calculating how benefits and burdens are allocated, with the potential for litigation in the event of a breach. These characteristics are less than conducive to fostering a sense of mutuality and shared purpose.

Composing a statement of purpose together can be far more valuable than signing a contract. It can help to reinforce the sense that your relationship is collaborative and co-created. Be clear, and try to be specific about your intentions and aspirations. Instead of thinking of this as a negotiation, think of it as an exchange of ideas, hopes, and desires for the future, while keeping in mind that you are seeking common ground, areas where your sense of purpose is shared or congruent. Remember that your purposes may change over time, and you can craft and recraft your understandings to suit your circumstances, so think of it as a work in progress, something that can be modified and amended.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN CRAFTING A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As you create your statement of purpose, it should be helpful to answer some or all of the following questions:

- *What do we love about the relationship as it exists now?*
- *Which of these qualities would we like to enhance?*
- *What are our shared values?*
- *What are our goals for the long term?*
- *How will we know that we are acting in accordance with our ideals?*
- *What are our concerns or sources of anxiety as we move forward?*
- *How can we be sure that these concerns or any others that may emerge are not neglected?*

- *What steps will we take to recognize and manage discrepancies, feelings of being out of balance, and individual interests or desires that are not shared?*

CHAPTER 6

For Couples and Others

WHILE WE HAVE BEEN critical of the couplecentric attitude that is so prevalent in our culture, we are a couple ourselves and recognize that most readers are likely to be pair-bonded and may be looking to become more sexually adventurous and open. Even among people who identify as polyamorous, dyadic structures and living arrangements are still more common than alternatives, so the following sections will be couple-oriented. Nonetheless, we hope that people who have other relationship styles will find something of value in this discussion.

We'll begin with the observation that relationships in which the partners have shared adventures of any kind together seem to be richer, more enduring, and satisfying than relationships in which adventure plays little or no role.⁷⁸ This is because adventuring strengthens and deepens bonds and provides a kind of reservoir of common experience that can feed the relationship for years in the form of memory. This is also one of the primary reasons that people tend to have more sex when on vacation—the change of scenery and departure from the everyday provide an erotic boost.

In long-term relationships, the erotic intensity almost always changes with time; many people experience these changes as a decline in or even a loss of passion. One of the most effective ways to stay passionate is to explore your

sexuality consciously, to start pushing your boundaries a little, and to become sexual adventurers together.

Sexual Adventuring to Bring You Closer

Sexual adventuring, as we define it, is a shared undertaking with a clear set of purposes—generally, to build self-awareness, deepen your knowledge of your partner sexually, find new sources of pleasure, and bring you closer. As we'll explain, the more specific purposes are for you to determine together. This approach to sex has been central to our relationship since our first date, and we are convinced that it has kept things vibrant for us.

It's up to you to define sexual adventuring for yourselves. Adventuring may or may not include other people; it may or may not include various forms of kinky interactions; it may include things that look entirely "vanilla" to people in alternative sexual communities; or it may involve things that would shock your neighbors. It's about expanding your boundaries together, mutually exploring new sexual possibilities, while respecting each others' limits, and building intimacy and trust by thinking of each other as comrades on an exciting journey.

Deliberately exploring and expanding your sexuality together will place you in situations that are optimal for growth. When this is done well and intelligently, it can strengthen your partnership and build deeper, more enduring trust, especially since trust is not only built but also earned.

This is not to suggest that things will always go smoothly or that nothing will ever go wrong, but having the repeated experience of navigating challenging circumstances with kindness and mutual respect will make these disruptions and missteps seem less consequential. Trust is like putting money in the bank. You can draw on it when things go awry.

Better yet, when there is deep and abiding trust, even the missteps can enrich your relationship; the conversations about what didn't quite work are often opportunities to grow together. And if you can laugh at the missteps, you'll be even better off.

Sexual adventuring carries some risks (both physical and emotional), but so does everything else in life. Ultimately, being a sexual adventurer means living authentically and having the opportunity to experience what the more conventional among us will never know. Skilled sexual adventurers are like mountaineers, roped together for their mutual protection, not bound but connected, functioning as a team, trading off between leading and following when necessary, and finding new routes to the high peaks of pleasure.

Erotic Imagination, Fantasy, and Erotica

People may feel that they are reasonably adventurous without recognizing the subtle ways in which they limit themselves. Being creative and coming up with new ideas can keep you from getting into a sexual rut, something that can happen all too easily in long-term relationships.

In addition to being titillating, how-to books and instructional films can help you develop skills, which is great—but becoming a masterful lover involves far more than just knowing which strokes to use. It requires being tuned in to each other as well as creativity and imagination. There's no roadmap. Being creative and imaginative ultimately involves being able to use whatever is at hand to enhance the erotic dimension of your lives. There are numerous ways to stimulate your sexual creativity.

Many start with fantasy when seeking to become more erotically creative. Fantasies can involve: scenarios, elaborate stories, specific activities, and of course particular

people. People fantasize in a variety of ways. Some rely on actual experiences, perhaps with some embellishment; others prefer imaginary scenes. Whatever the nature of your inner erotic life, fantasizing is an act of imagination, and it will keep you sexually engaged and vital. We've been surprised to learn that some people just don't fantasize and don't know that they can make an active choice to do so as means to increase libido.

For some, the erotic element in fantasy is rooted in the story; with the right elements, it will be a turn-on. (This may or may not involve actual role play.) Using this type of narrative fantasy, even something as simple and clichéd as seducing the cable guy, can function as a tool for staying focused on the erotic and curtailing intrusive thoughts and outside distractions. It may seem strange and perhaps counterintuitive, but using a narrative as an erotic enhancer is similar to meditation. The same can be said about eye-gazing (See sidebars in chapter 5.) Both give the mind a task, allowing the person to become immersed in the experience, without being either distracted or overwhelmed. Some claim that fantasizing keeps people from being present. This is true if it is being used to escape or tune out, but if used skillfully, fantasy can actually make it easier to be present during sex. If you find it helpful to have a story and a role to play, just make sure you're being the best cable guy or sexy nurse ever.

Engaging in this kind of narrative fantasy and role play is also very valuable because it can remind us that sex is powerful and profound and also profoundly silly. Playing a repairperson may feel forced and goofy, especially if you're not very handy, but that is perfectly fine. Enacting (as opposed to acting out) a fantasy doesn't demand that you go to deep, dark places and explore forbidden, repressed desires. There's ample room for childlike enjoyment. Fantasy can be a goof, and goofiness can be a turn-on.

If you don't feel ready to invent your own fantasies, you can try reading an excerpt of erotica aloud or watching a sexy movie. If you're comfortable with porn, that's fine, but less explicit material can also be a turn-on. Discuss what you found interesting and exciting, and then explore playing out a scene that you agree was erotic. This creates an added buffer, since you are not responsible for the story, and although you do have to acknowledge finding it erotic, it's the product of someone else's imagination, not yours. This makes it less personal, and you may feel less vulnerable in using it as sexual fuel. More and more high-quality porn is being made, and there are many excellent anthologies of contemporary erotica available. Check out the offerings from Cleis Press, one of the leading publishers of erotic fiction.

More about Fantasy: Partnered and Solo

Fantasizing is an act of imagination and creativity, but most people think of sexual fantasy as essentially private. Thus, fantasizing is usually deemed to be a solo rather than a partnered activity, but if you start by creating a fantasy together, it can feel more inclusive than one of you laying out a whole scenario. Of course, one of you will have to initiate, but that could be as simple as saying something like "I've always wondered what it would be like to have sex with a stranger." With this as a foundation, you can develop a whole scenario whereby you play out that fantasy in a way that works for both of you. Where you go from this basic idea is entirely up to you. It might involve just a blindfold and your mutual willingness to pretend that it's an anonymous encounter, or it could be considerably more elaborate.

There is a slight but important distinction to make in this context. Partnered fantasies are co-created, and this

happens during conversations about sex and specifically about what turns you on. We're not talking about a fantasy in which you have cast your partner in a role to suit your own desires. That's still a solo fantasy. Partnered fantasies evolve in two primary ways. It is perhaps easiest when you discover that you share an interest through talking about personal fantasies.

If your inner sexual lives are quite different, you will have to find a common element that you can focus on so that you can play it out together. Let's return to the scenario of sex with a stranger to make this concrete: maybe one of you doesn't find the idea of sex with a stranger particularly appealing but finds exhibitionism exciting. In these circumstances, you may be able to include aspects of both fantasies in your scenario by dressing in provocative, revealing attire, and perhaps displaying affection a little more publicly than you otherwise would, and bringing the blindfold in once you're alone.

Make a mutual decision about how far to go when exploring your fantasies. Are you going to restrict yourselves to role play? Will you include other props or toys? Will you do things that are somewhat bold? Will you interact with other people? Will you move from the realm of fantasy into the realm of reality and physically act them out (e.g. actually have sex with a stranger)? There are some whose fantasies are primarily about things that they would actually like to do, or have done in the past. Conversely, there are those who fantasize about things they would never want to do or experience in real life; rape fantasies are probably the most obvious and common example. Many people engage in both types of fantasizing. Skilled fantasy players are able to construct and enact elaborate scenarios that can have the complexity of a theatrical production.

From Behind Closed Doors to Out in the Open

Perhaps the most advanced form of monogamous sexual adventuring can involve bringing your erotic life out of the privacy of your home. People often start with social nudism, something that remains a taboo in the United States, even though it is commonplace and widely accepted in much of Europe. There are nudist resorts and nude beaches all over the country, and while some of these places are very popular with people in alternative sexual lifestyles and may cater to them, the general emphasis is on social nudity (and in many cases the resorts are family friendly). Open sexual activity is almost universally frowned upon in nudist resorts and on nude beaches (where it's also illegal).

Contrary to what you might think if you've never experienced it, there is something about being with a group of naked people that lowers social barriers, makes conversation easier, and creates a feeling of camaraderie. Anecdotally, at least, the biggest hurdle for most people is that first moment of being naked around a group of strangers, but the discomfort tends to fade rapidly. While the environment at most nudist resorts is friendly, rather than erotically charged, these are great places for shedding your clothes and some of your inhibitions and perhaps for opening new avenues of conversation.

If you're comfortable with social nudity, a slightly more adventurous step would be to take a couples sensual massage class or a sexuality workshop. These workshops can range from mildly erotic, with most or all of the explicit, hands-on work done in private, to more advanced intensives in which you may be in a room full of people giving each other erotic massages. Choose carefully, based on your comfort level. Err on the side of the milder when you're starting out, since pushing too far could produce emotional backlash and regret.

First Steps toward Opening Your Relationship

By now you should have an understanding of some approaches to open relating and some of the considerations involved. For many couples, the most important issue is emotional. So let's consider how you can have sexual interactions with others in a way that not only maintains but nurtures your connection.

It's our general feeling that the best way to keep focused on your primary bond, especially in the early stages, is to explore together. For this reason, the approach we propose will slant slightly toward the model that exists within the swinging community, and for heterosexual couples, going to a swing club can be a way to start moving into more advanced forms of sexual adventuring. This is not for everyone, and you should only take our suggestions to the extent that they resonate with you; you may feel that attending a polyamory or kink event is a better fit, or you may feel that being in an environment where people are openly having sex would make you too uncomfortable. If this is the case, follow your instincts, and ignore our specific ideas. The following general principles should still apply.

The most important general principle is **DON'T RUSH!** It is far better to attend an event or a party and to go home thinking, *Wow, there's so much more I could have done!* than it is to wake up the next morning feeling some emotional backlash, tension between you, or a sense that you've gone too far. Almost equally important is agreeing that you will explore at a rate that is comfortable for whichever one of you is the more hesitant, and that the partner who's eager for more will not pressure the other or insist on anything. It's okay to say, *"Even though I would have liked to play with other people, I'm really glad you were so eager to go to the party with me, and I'm comfortable with where you are."* It's not okay to say

something along the lines of “Why wouldn’t you let me try to join that scene?” or even worse, something like “I wish you weren’t so inhibited.” Remember that you’re collaborators or “partners in crime.” No one wins; no one loses; and there’s always next time.

If you decide to go to a swing club together, you should research the clubs in your vicinity, and find one that seems congenial—that is, if you live in an area where you can choose from more than one. Of course, you can’t really know what any club is like until you’ve been there, so there’s no guarantee that it will be the kind of environment you imagined. There’s a good deal of variety, both in the clubs and in individual aesthetics, so it’s best to go in with no expectations.

You may decide that you want to start with an “off-premise” event (meaning that no oral or genital sex takes place in a public setting). Attending this kind of event will enable you to flirt, get a little risqué, or make out with others. You will also be able to watch others flirting, exposing some skin, and generally behaving in a more openly erotic way than what you’d expect to see in a regular bar or nightclub. Some couples go to off-premise clubs and parties, enjoy them immensely, and bring the erotic energy home to unleash on each other. Others find this type of event to be off-putting. You probably won’t know until you’ve tried it.

The first time I saw someone have sex right in front of me, I was mesmerized, awestruck, turned on. It was really cool. The 400th time, it’s still cool.

—Tristan Taormino, *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*

A next and somewhat bigger step would be to attend an “on-premise” club (meaning that people will have genital interactions at the venue). Most of these clubs have both

public and private areas where sex takes place, but there's no obligation to participate. You can simply watch; you can go to a private room as a couple; or you can interact with each other in public, without having to engage with others. There's much to be learned from observing people having sex in a more open and public way than is familiar to most of us. This is true whether you opt to be sexual together in the presence of others or not. It's probably safe to say that relatively few modern Westerners have been present when others are actually having sex. It can be an incredibly profound and liberating experience to share erotic space with more than one other person.

Interacting with Others

There is a significant physical and psychological difference between sharing erotic space with others, including having sex in the same room, and making the decision to interact physically. Similarly, notwithstanding what we've said about how limiting it is to think of genital intercourse as sex and anything else as something less, there's a significant physical and psychological difference between caressing and other lighter forms of erotic play and having genital contact. Beyond that, some in the swinging community make a distinction between people who draw the line at oral sex and those who have genital intercourse with others. The terms *soft swap* and *full swap* are commonly used. Although there may be some regional variations, soft swap usually refers to all sexual activity excluding anal and vaginal sex, and full swap usually pertains to PIV but may also include anal sex. As much as we don't like the way these terms rely on the sexist and misleading "wife swapping" paradigm, they do reflect the reality that having genital intercourse with someone other than a primary partner, perhaps in the presence of that partner, is a very big step for many people.

In fact, every step on this path is a pretty big one. By opening up just a little, you're moving into unknown

territory and relating in ways that are not commonly accepted in our society. There's no obligation to go to the limit, and if you find yourself approaching an edge, be careful to push very gently, if you push at all. And, of course, if you discover that something is not for you, there's no obligation to go forward. If you decide to interact with others, remember to take it slow, and do your utmost to nurture your connection with each other. Keep your statement of purpose in mind, and if one of you has any misgivings, or your activities don't seem to be enriching your relationship, then it's probably wise to pause and reassess. While we have met a few couples who decided to open their relationships at a time of crisis and rediscovered their love and desire for each other in the process, this is the exception not the rule. If you're having significant problems, it is probably not the time to interact with others. It's generally best to start when you're feeling a high level of satisfaction.

EXAMPLES OF AGREEMENTS FOR INTERACTING WITH OTHERS

- *Making out and touching are okay.*
- *Oral sex is okay, but not PIV.*
- *Genital contact is okay, but no open-mouth kissing.*

- *No ejaculation, male or female, inside the mouth.*
- *Interactions with others must take place in the same room.*
- *Interactions with others must take place in separate rooms.*
- *Same-sex encounters are okay, but opposite-sex encounters are not.*
- *Barriers are required for all forms of potentially risky sex.*

When you are playing with others—whether it’s an individual, a couple, or a group of people—make a plan; decide on your limits in advance; and stick to them. Keep your agreements in mind, and do everything possible to stay on the same page emotionally. Make frequent eye contact and find additional ways to stay connected. Check in with each other verbally during any activity at the first hint of discomfort. Sometimes this is all the reassurance that’s needed.

If one of you is feeling overwhelmed or distressed, extricate yourselves politely, and if something has triggered anger or jealousy, try to postpone discussing the issue if possible. Our rule is that you should avoid intense conversations while you’re in the heat of erotic excitement or immediately thereafter. This is even more important when multiple people are involved, since everyone present is in a very open and vulnerable state. We’ve found that

next-day conversations usually provide valuable insights and generate deeper feelings of solidarity, even when they're about something that didn't work well or that was uncomfortable.

Dealing with Jealousy

Some people open their relationships naturally and feel little or no jealousy. For others, jealousy can be an enormous issue. To some degree, the extent to which you experience turmoil may be a function of your personal makeup and history, but your feelings may reflect how skillfully you are exploring openness. Whatever the case, jealousy is a real, legitimate, and understandable emotion. Thus, it is necessary to develop the skills to manage these feelings.

If you experience jealousy, you don't need to justify it. Nor is the feeling solely a personal problem. It is something that exists within the relationship, so it needs to be addressed. We've noticed a widespread tendency to say or imply that if you feel jealous, it is because you have personal issues and your buttons are being pushed. This is a kind of willful blindness to the fact that feelings of jealousy are relational. If you're basically in good mental health and you feel that your partner is being inconsiderate or acting in ways that may be hurting you, there is usually a relationship dynamic that should be examined. To think otherwise is naïve and potentially harmful.

There are countless subtle emotional factors and interpersonal dynamics that can provoke feelings of jealousy, so sometimes an activity that always seemed problem-free may suddenly feel uncomfortable. You should always have the right to express your feelings of discomfort and jealousy if they emerge, and it's best to pay attention to these feelings and address them together. This can be a powerful way to build intimacy. Examining when and why

something may have gone awry for you can be a way to understand each other more deeply.

Polyamory activist Anita Wagner Illig has observed that jealousy often stems from buying into the conventional relationship model that we've examined so critically here. According to Wagner Illig, commitment without trust is one of the most common sources, if not the primary source, of jealousy. Building trust may not eliminate jealousy altogether, but it can certainly transform what some experience as a "green-eyed monster" into a mild, transient twinge. It may also be helpful to be a little more specific about jealousy and think about it as a group of different emotions, or as a single emotion that takes somewhat different forms.

Envy is the mildest form of jealousy, if it's jealousy at all. Envy involves the feeling that, for example, "She's having more fun than I am, and that's not fair!" This can be inconsequential and fleeting, but if one of you experiences it on a regular basis, it may be a warning sign that things are a little out of balance. If one partner is consistently left behind while another is having a blast, you probably need to step back, think about it, and discuss the dynamic that is at work.

Possessive jealousy is the form of jealousy that is probably most common in the conventional monogamous world. It's also perhaps the most adolescent. It has been the trigger for many a barroom brawl, or worse. This form of jealousy is often disconnected from the reality of a relationship, and may have nothing to do with trust (although such is by no means always the case). It is jealousy of the "you better not look at my boyfriend, or I'll beat you up" variety, and is rooted in the proprietary model of relationship and in deep-seated personal insecurities. If

you're prone to feeling this type of jealousy, now probably isn't the time to explore open relating.

Abandonment jealousy, which is triggered by the fear of being left, is also common. This feeling can emerge in response to an array of stimuli and need not have to do with sex or intimacy with another person. In its mild form, abandonment jealousy can stem from a concern that something—a job, a hobby, or another person—is taking more of your partner's time and attention than you would like. This can feel like abandonment and therefore seem threatening and distressing. Your partner is not actually leaving but is instead allocating emotional energy in a way that results in your getting less attention.

In its more severe form, abandonment jealousy is triggered by the reality that the person *is* leaving. In this situation, the one feeling jealous is intuiting that a connection with another person or a passion for something else signals that the relationship is severely eroded and at risk of breaking entirely. There is, of course, a vast middle ground, but whether the cause is circumstantial and minor (increased responsibilities at work, the demands of childrearing, etc.) or it is more significant (dissatisfaction with the relationship or infatuation with a new lover), abandonment jealousy needs to be addressed with kindness, honesty, and awareness. Sometimes just expressing the feelings and knowing they've been heard and understood is all it takes to alleviate them. Thus, if a partner is feeling abandonment jealousy, it can be very helpful to listen carefully and acknowledge how your behavior may have contributed.

Jealousy and the Importance of Feeling Special

We all want to feel special to our beloveds, and in mainstream society the need to feel special is often related

to sex and the desire of many people to believe that they are “the one” for someone else. This usually means forswearing having sex with anyone but that “one.” It’s fine to break out of the box of conventional monogamy, but it’s also important to recognize that there are some sound psychological reasons both for the convention and for the role that jealousy has played in literature since long before modern ideas about love and marriage became the cultural norm.

In order to keep your bond strong, you have to find a way to reassure your partner about the value of your connection and to do so on a regular basis. You can be fucking twenty people, and that can be fine as long as you maintain this sense of specialness. The same is true for polyamorous people in triads or group relationships. If the bonds are to remain strong, there has to be something that the members do among themselves that reinforces the specialness of each connection. If you can constantly assure your partner that the connection has special value, it will make it much easier to manage any feelings of jealousy that may emerge.

Compersion and Jealousy

While compersion is not exactly the opposite of jealousy, it can function as an antidote. Taking pleasure in the pleasurable experiences of others can be a kind of kink. There’s an element of compersion in some cuckold fantasies—typically a cuckold is a man who gets turned on by his wife’s extra-dyadic sexual activities, but the fetish can exist beyond the confines of marriage and conventional gender roles. Humiliation is central to cuckoldry as a fetish, so if compersion is involved, it is usually secondary and may only be relevant to the extent that it reiterates the cuckolded partner’s inadequacy.

Cuckoldry aside, we suspect that compersion is an important element in many open relationships, especially for those in the swinging community who engage in same-room sex with other people. For many, the experience of seeing a partner enjoying sex with another person is an enormous turn-on and a source of pride and satisfaction. People can also experience feelings of compersion when hearing about a partner's sexual experiences with another (without the quality of fetish that undergirds the cuckold fantasy).

We can't guarantee that you'll feel compersion just because you've decided to explore a more open way of relating. It may not be a feeling that is available to everyone, but if you continually build trust and reinforce your connection with each other, even as you explore being sexual with other people, you'll create the conditions in which compersion is possible.

Kink

We'd be remiss not to return to the subject of kink, however briefly. We're not deeply involved but have dabbled in it and have many friends who are dedicated kinksters. Some couples looking to have sexual adventures or explore more open forms of relating find that kink is good entry point and one that can deepen intimacy.

As with nonmonogamy, the idea that participating in BDSM or other forms of kinky behavior can create more intimacy may seem counterintuitive. We certainly first approached kink with this prejudice, but a recent study shows that even when scenes went badly some couples still reported feeling greater intimacy, and when scenes went well couples reported feeling greater intimacy and had reduced levels of cortisol, a major stress hormone.⁷⁹

Lady Christie and I have been co-heading an authority-based structured household in New York for 13 years. Our focus is on building healthy long-term relationships based on consensual authority exchange. Besides our household members, we have several polyamorous and play-partner relationships. We thrive on the various relationship dynamics we have with our wonderful partners.

—Eric Pride

Doing BDSM well requires presence, awareness, communication, and attunement—all of which are building blocks for intimacy. Many players have in-depth discussions in which a scene is mutually developed and ground rules for an interaction or even a relationship are established through a process of negotiation, something that can lead to a sense of shared purpose and mutuality. Much BDSM play is prolonged, lasting far longer than conventional sexual encounters, so presence, awareness, and attunement have to be sustained. Many scenes conclude with a period of aftercare in which the bottom (the person in the submissive or receiving role) is pampered and attended to for as long as is necessary to return to a more normal state of consciousness. This too can lead to a very deep sense of connection and bonding, and it takes basking in the afterglow to an entirely different level.

Sex, Aging, and Designer Relationships

Most people remain sexually active after their reproductive years have ended. Even between the ages of seventy-five and eighty-five, 38.9 percent of men and 16.8 percent of women continue to be sexually active with a partner, according to a study published in the *British Medical Journal*. The discrepancy between men and women is a function of

the generally shorter life expectancy for men, and when adjusted for whether people had partners, the difference was not statistically significant.⁸⁰ Notwithstanding this fact, the idea of older people as sexually active is a source of mockery in many segments of popular culture. Even in this era of an increasingly aging population, it's still a controversial and unsettling topic for many.

For some, major life changes may call for changes in relationship agreements, and the beauty of the designer relationship concept is that it allows for multiple redefinitions and adaptations to circumstances. We know people who have taken a break from open relating during the early menopause, andropause, and empty nest years in order to focus on each other. We also know people who have opened their relationships at approximately the same point in the life cycle because the empty nest freed them to experiment and rediscover each other through opening up.

The aging process itself can lead to greater sexual fluidity, and curiosity about same-sex interactions sometimes emerges in middle age or even later. Various forms of open relating may be more common among the elderly than most would suspect. One small study found that over fifty percent of long-term, happy couples practiced some form of consensual nonmonogamy; several of these couples had opened their relationships while in their fifties.⁸¹ Although the sample size was small and all the participants were able-bodied, the findings suggest that open arrangements also make a good deal of sense in the context of aging and physical decline: other people can assist when systems fail. For example, sighted people can help the blind, and those who retain erectile function can substitute for those who do not. This is yet another example of the ways in which flexibility and a collaborative attitude can enrich your relationship, even very late in life.

CHAPTER 7

Ethical Considerations in Designer Relationships

YOU MAY RECALL THAT polyamory is sometimes defined as being “ethical and responsible nonmonogamy.” We’d suggest that designer relationships of any kind should be accompanied by a keen awareness of ethical considerations and a sense of responsibility toward oneself and one’s partner(s). This is true regardless of whether you’re dealing with a casual partner or someone you’ve been with for years.

Safer Sex

There are definitely risks involved in having a nonexclusive relationship, and some of them are serious. Remember that research shows that people who cheat on their partners are more likely to behave irresponsibly when it comes to safer sex. If you’re open sexually, it’s your responsibility to educate yourself about the risks and to make informed decisions about how you will protect yourself and your partners.

The risks are real, so making conscious decisions about your safer sex practices is essential. At the same time, being excessively concerned about sexual risk can easily turn into sex-negativity, a mindset in which infection is

transformed into punishment and concern about risk becomes a receptacle for fears that are not proportionate to reality. We're not experts in public health or epidemiology, so we encourage you to know the risks involved in given behaviors, which is crucial for making sound decisions about what chances you're willing to take.

Regular testing is essential for all sexual adventurers, and if you have multiple partners, it's wise to do it more than once a year. This should include a full panel: HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes 1 and 2 (type 1 is very common and is known as oral herpes; type 2 is known as genital herpes, but both can be contracted orally or genitally), human papilloma virus (there's currently no HPV test for men), and hepatitis B and C. An HIV test alone is not sufficient. At the time of writing, there is growing concern about drug-resistant gonorrhea, which can be transmitted to either partner during fellatio.

While it may be emotionally easier to remain unaware, regular testing not only enables you to know your status, share it with prospective partners, and thereby reduce the chance of exposing them; it also ensures that if you do have an STI, you can get prompt treatment and minimize the negative impacts of that infection. We know people who test semiannually, others who do so quarterly, and people in the adult film industry who do so even more frequently. Your decision about how often to test may depend on how frequently you interact with others, but of course, there may be a time lag between exposure and a positive test, so clean test results are not a one hundred percent guarantee of safety.

If you are in your fertile years, practicing safer sex includes avoiding unwanted pregnancies and making informed and intelligent decisions about birth control. While the pill is probably the most reliable method, it can have a negative impact on libido and pose other health risks. Other forms of contraception—intrauterine devices (IUDs),

diaphragms, cervical caps, etc.—have their individual advantages and disadvantages. When used properly, condoms are very effective, and unlike other methods, provide protection against most STIs. The decision about what method works for you is highly personal, and it may be appropriate to use two methods rather than one. For example, if you don't want to use condoms in your private interactions, the pill or an IUD may be an appropriate choice, even though you use condoms when you're playing in a group. In fact, many couples use condoms whenever they play together in a group setting, and condom use is required at some clubs and parties, regardless of whether the people interacting are fluid-bonded or not.

Make Your Safer Sex Decisions and Stick to Them

Different communities and cultures have different standards for what level of safer sex practices they use. Even within communities, the standards may vary, and they may not always be clearly articulated. Some people insist on barriers for all activities that involve contact with genitals; others are willing to risk engaging in hand jobs, digital penetration, or oral sex without barriers. This seems to be a very common compromise, though a risky one. Some polyfidelitous groups dispense with protection after everyone has been tested, and most people who are in long-term dyadic relationships are fluid-bonded, unless infection precludes it.

If you are exploring interacting with other people, and you decide to use the most stringent possible safer sex protocols (barriers for all potentially risky contacts, including manual and oral sex) your choice will generally be accepted. Deciding which specific trade-offs you want to make is complicated. Just make this decision with as complete an understanding as possible of the risks involved, both for yourself and for your partners. If you are uncomfortable with

an activity, don't just do it either to please the other person or because you're really turned on. This is why it's essential to have the safer sex conversations well before any encounter begins and excitement impairs your judgment.

SAFER SEX—THINK OF OTHERS TOO

Remember that your responsibility is not only to protect yourself but to also minimize those risks for others. When you're playing in a group setting, safer sex practices should go beyond the mere use of barriers. Even when there's been full disclosure of test status, take precautions. Wear gloves and change them before interacting with anyone else; if you're not wearing gloves, wash or use hand sanitizer before touching a new person, a doorknob, or anything else. If you're not using barriers for oral sex, use mouthwash before changing partners. Remember to consider everyone else in the room.

Safer Sex—It's Not Just for Kids

In recent years, studies have shown that the rate of STIs is increasing among those over forty-five.⁸² People are living longer and are remaining sexual as they age. In addition to the increasing rate of infection among older people, there's evidence that the rate of condom use is lower than in the general population. This may be because many people in

this group came of age before the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, were in long-term relationships that have ended in recent years, and never got into the habit of using protection. It may also reflect a sense that there's no need to be concerned about STIs later in life. This is very unwise; reaching age forty-five doesn't mean you can forgo safer sex practices or be exempt from regular testing.

Fluid Bonding

The term *fluid bonding* is often used in the poly community. It refers to people who have chosen to forgo protection in their sexual encounters, after testing. There is an important emotional and symbolic component to the decision to stop using barriers and become fluid-bonded. You may be having sex with multiple people, but if there are certain activities you reserve for only one person (or a closed group), it may create a sense that unprotected sex is something different and special, something you don't do with others. This can reinforce your feeling of connection and intimacy with each other.

Sexual Responsibility

In many ways, having a discussion about safer sex is only the beginning when it comes to sexual safety—or perhaps *sexual responsibility* is a better term. It's undeniable that sexuality can be risky and unruly, and people often behave irresponsibly. In one form or another, the unruly nature of human sexuality is one of the great themes in literature. It is part of what makes sex interesting, and it would probably be impossible to completely control the chaotic aspect of human sexuality. None of us are as rational or in control as we would like to think. Nevertheless, it is possible and desirable to do your best to be responsible, even as you

embrace the wild, passionate, and unpredictable in your sexual adventures.

Sexual responsibility requires self-awareness, clarity in your communication, and a determination to abide by your agreements. It means honoring each other's emotions, and those of the people with whom you interact, treating them with respect and consideration, even if it is a onetime encounter. It also means knowing and abiding by the standards of any community you choose to enter.

Sexual responsibility also entails doing your best to ensure that your actions are in harmony with your basic values. If they are not, it is irresponsible to expose others to them. If you consider transparency to be a basic value, to keep secrets from your partner is to violate your own integrity, and to make the person with whom you're engaging complicit in this is self-betrayal. There may not be immediate and obvious repercussions to such missteps, and if indeed they are missteps, there is room for correction or more self-awareness in the future. But if this happens repeatedly, your actions are likely to come back to haunt you. Honesty is especially important if you are going to live outside the sexual rules of mainstream society. Being honest begins with being honest with yourself. This is not easy.

Mindfulness and Respect

Another aspect of sexual responsibility is respect for others—their boundaries, their health, and their emotional well-being. This means not only treating them with respect during your interactions; it also means honoring their wishes, starting with the assumption that what you do is private and confidential, in the absence of a specific statement to the contrary. Some people can face serious consequences in their everyday lives should their private actions be made public, so don't kiss and tell. All these rules apply regardless of the person with whom you're

interacting. This includes, perhaps above all, sex workers, a group of people who are scorned by mainstream society. If any of your adventures involve paying for erotic interactions or entertainment, remember that you are a participant, and treat the person you are paying as an equal and a professional.

Sexual adventuring calls for a high level of mindfulness. If you care passionately about sex, why not pay attention and strive to live in accordance with your highest ideals? In mainstream society, sex and money are probably the two most common motivators that cause people to violate their own ethical standards. Most people who are motivated primarily by greed are probably not all that ethical to begin with, but countless others—even those with generally high levels of integrity—have betrayed and even destroyed themselves for sexual reasons. Part of the problem is that society's standards are unrealistic for most of us, and even those who would like to live in accordance with them are very hard pressed to do so. In addition, self-deception and impulsivity make it easy to lose one's way. Behaving more honorably when it comes to sex can serve as a template for behaving honorably in all aspects of life.

Afterword

WE HOPE THAT READING *Designer Relationships* has been rewarding for you, whether you're already in a designer relationship, are interested in exploring alternatives, or are merely curious about the range of possibilities. We also hope that you have found useful tools for creating the relationship that works for you.

We're living in a time of rapid and radical cultural evolution, following on the heels of the second sexual revolution that we described in chapter 1. Society is moving away from constricting and limiting beliefs about love, marriage, and the right way to relate. This evolution is filled with immensely liberating possibilities. Fully embracing the concept that "no kinds of love are better than others" not only allows us to forge our own relationships on our own terms; it frees us from the judgment of others and opens us to being kinder and more loving to everyone we encounter—in both sexual and nonsexual contexts. It also frees us from the dissatisfaction and heartache that so often accompany the attempt to live according to unrealistic models that are imposed from without.

We like to distinguish between morality and ethics. Morality implies acting in accordance with custom. By contrast, behaving ethically implies acting in accordance with one's own values, following one's inner compass. Designer relationships (whatever their structure) are intrinsically ethical in nature. While they can be immensely challenging, they call on us to go deep, to connect, to grow, to be truer to ourselves than we would if we were just doing what everybody else does.

Remember to treat your relationships as creative processes. Discover the loving style that is right for you. This is something that doesn't depend on finding the perfect partner; instead it means meeting your partners where they are. It involves being awake, not inhabiting a dream world of soul mates and happily ever afters. We see this as a spiritual practice, one that involves developing skills and honing them over time. There's no direct path; you will make mistakes; you will sometimes fall short. We certainly have and will continue to do so, but if you stay with it, you will be rewarded.

The Buddha is reputed to have said that "good fellowship" is the essence of the spiritual life. Our society is atomized and individualistic, and it's easy to forget that we're not isolated, that relationship and connection are a refuge. Whether you identify as single by choice, monogamous, polyamorous, or anything else, if you can remember that we're relational creatures and treat your relationships as something to cherish, you will never feel quite so alone.

In some respects, it's easier to be a "moral" person, to accept the received wisdom about right and wrong ways to relate, than it is to make ethical choices based on the truth of your experiences. But we'd suggest that even if you end up living in a way that matches the cultural norm, the benefits of questioning that norm and then choosing it are much greater than simply falling into it because you've been told it's righteous. Similarly, if you choose to step outside the norm and you do it consciously, because it's the right choice for you, your experiences will be far richer than if you are merely rebelling. Whatever your choices, the decision to be authentic and truly honest is a courageous one. And we honor you for having that courage.

Designer Relationships: Resource Guide

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, there has been an explosion in the availability of material on alternative relationships. The change has been very rapid, almost outpacing changes in the Internet environment, so we can't personally vouch for everything listed here. In addition, we've tried to provide a variety of perspectives, including some that don't resonate with us, so we're not necessarily endorsing every book or website that's listed. The resources that follow should be more than enough for you to get started exploring the topic in depth so that you can make your own judgments. The slant here is somewhat toward nonmonogamous relating, but there should be something of value for everyone, regardless of personal style.

BOOKS

Kink

Dark Eros: The Imagination of Sadism, Thomas Moore
(Spring, rev. ed., 1998).

Playing Well with Others: Your Field Guide to Discovering, Exploring and Navigating the Kink, Leather and BDSM Communities, Lee Harrington and Mollena Williams
(Greenery Press, 2012).

The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play, and the Erotic Edge, Tristan Taormino, ed. (Cleis Press, 2012).

When Someone You Love Is Kinky, Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (Greenery Press, 2000).

Wild Side Sex: The Book of Kink: Educational, Sensual, and Entertaining Essays, Midori (Daedelus Publishing, 2006).

Relationships—Designer

Eight Things I Wish I'd Known About Polyamory Before I Tried It and Frakked It Up, Cunning Minx (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures, Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (Celestial Arts, 2nd ed., 2009).

The Jealousy Workbook: Exercises and Insights for Managing Open Relationships, Kathy Labriola (Greenery Press, 2013).

Love in Abundance: A Counselor's Advice on Open Relationships, Kathy Labriola (Greenery Press, 2010).

More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory, Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert (Thorntree Press, 2014).

Open: Love, Sex, and Life in an Open Marriage, Jenny Block (Seal Press, 2009).

Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples, George and Nena O'Neill (M. Evans and Co., 1984).

Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships, Tristan Taormino (Cleis Press, 2008).

Pagan Polyamory: Becoming a Tribe of Hearts, Raven Kaldera (Llewellyn, 2005).

The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families, Elisabeth Sheff (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Relationships, Deborah M. Anapol (Intinet Resource Center, 1997).

Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá (Harper Perennial, 2011).

Swinging in America: Love, Sex, and Marriage in the 21st Century, Curtis R. Bergstrand and Jennifer Blevins Sinski (Praeger, 2010).

Swingland: Between the Sheets of the Secretive, Sometimes Messy, but Always Adventurous Swinging Lifestyle, Daniel Stern (Touchstone, 2013).

Relationships—General

Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence, Esther Perel (Harper Perennial, 2007).

The New Monogamy: Redefining Your Relationship After Infidelity, Tammy Nelson, PhD. (New Harbinger Publications, 2013).

Partners in Passion: A Guide to Great Sex, Emotional Intimacy, and Long-Term Love, Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson (Cleis Press, 2014).

Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships, David Schnarch (W.W. Norton, reprint, 2009).

The Relationship Handbook: A Simple Guide to More Satisfying Relationships, George S. Pransky (Pransky and Associates, 2001).

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Nation's Foremost Relationship Expert, John Gottman and Nan Silver (Three Rivers Press, 2000).

Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage: America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship, John Gottman, Julie Schwartz Gottman, and Joan Declaire (Three Rivers Press, reprint, 2007).

DATING AND SOCIAL NETWORK WEBSITES

The Internet has become central to building community and has helped many people find partners. Bear in mind, however, that many of these sites are owned by a handful of media conglomerates and that, in addition to helping you

meet people, the sites are likely to be collecting your data for commercial purposes.

www.blendr.com—Social network site and app. Often used for hooking up

www.craigslist.com—The “Casual Encounters” section of this site is popular for hookups

www.facebook.com—Numerous interest groups for the nonmonogamous and the curious

www.FetLife.com—The kinky answer to Facebook.

www.fling.com—Free, sexually oriented dating site for singles and swingers

www.gotinder.com—Tinder, an app for meeting people that dispenses with in-depth profiles and matching algorithms.

www.lifestylelounge.com—One of the many popular swingers’ dating sites

www.okcupid.com—An open relationship-friendly dating site.

www.Swinglifestyle.com—Bills itself as “the largest swingers’ site in the world” and has very extensive event listings

EVENTS

This list includes film festivals, meet-and-greets, conferences, and weekend retreats. FetLife is probably your best resource for kink events. There are an increasing number of local groups that rely on MeetUp.com, so check their listings for gatherings in your area.

www.beyondthebedroomevents.com—An organization in Denver and Boulder, Colorado, that hosts seminars and an annual conference

www.beyondthelove.org—Annual polyamory conference in Columbus, Ohio

www.brevent.org—Black Rose, Washington, DC, long-running kink event

www.brimstonenj.com—Brimstone, New Jersey, kink-oriented hotel takeover

www.catalystcon.com—Catalyst, East and West Coast conferences aimed at “sparking communication in sexuality, activism and acceptance”

www.cinekink.com—CineKink, New York/touring kink-oriented erotic film festival

www.darkodyssey.com—Dark Odyssey, pansexual events in Maryland, Washington, DC, and San Francisco

www.frenchconnectionevents.com—New Orleans, long-running swingers’ convention

www.nasca.com—North American Swing Club Association, convention listings

www.openloveny.com—Open Love New York hosts Poly Cocktails, a monthly meet-and-greet. There are spinoffs in Chicago, Houston, and other cities

www.playgroundconf.com Annual sexuality conference in Toronto, Canada—diverse, inclusive, varied subject matter including nonmonogamy and kink

www.pleasuresalon.com—Pleasure Salon, New York and other cities, monthly social gathering open to all alternative sexual communities

pbf.polyaustin.org—Poly Big Fun, Bastrop, Texas, polyamory retreat sponsored by Poly Austin

www.polycamp.org—Poly Camp Northwest, WA, all ages polyamory event

www.polypalooza.com—Weekend conference hosted by the San Diego Polyamory Family featuring many prominent educators and activists

www.sexualfreedomsummit.org—The Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance’s Annual Conference, focuses on sexual freedom as a human right from a variety of different perspectives

www.swingstock.com—Swingstock, Minnesota, outdoor swinger event

www.takeabiteoftheapple.com—TABOTA, swinger events in Canada

www.turtlehillevents.org—The Free Spirit Sacred Sexuality Beltane Gathering, Maryland, Pagan-oriented

GENERAL OPEN RELATING AND KINK RESOURCES

www.alfredpress.com—Coordinated by Raven Kaldera and Christina “slavette” Parker, “a writers’ cooperative that publishes books on alternative relationship structures and alternative sexual lifestyles including polyamory, Dominant/ submissive and Master/slave power dynamic relationships, transgender relationships, and sacred sexuality”

www.blackandpoly.org (also on Facebook)—Interest in alternative relationship styles is often perceived as being the province of the white and economically privileged, but the movement is becoming increasingly diverse

www.erotication.com—An extensive and diverse assortment of online sexuality resources and instructional materials—from kink to dealing with sexual trauma to group sex techniques and everything in between

www.kinseyinstitute.org/library/haslam.html—The Kinsey Institute’s Polyamory Collection, established by Kenneth R. Haslam, MD

www.lovemore.com—Loving More, founded in 1985, is the oldest polyamory organization in the country; they offer two annual conferences

www.openingup.net—Tristan Taormino’s site includes listings and resources for all forms of nonmonogamy

<http://polyevents.blogspot.nl>—Dutch site listing events around the world, with links to other resources

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Polygeezers/>—A Yahoo group for older people exploring open relationships

<http://polyinthemedia.blogspot.com>—A site for keeping track of all things polyamorous in the media

www.tes.org—Founded in 1971, the New York-based Eulenspiegel Society is “the oldest and largest BDSM support and education group in the country”

RETREAT CENTERS AND RESORTS

The resorts and websites listed here include spiritually oriented retreat centers that offer the occasional Tantra workshop (but that may not be particularly sex-positive), clothing-optional resorts and spas, nudist and naturist organizations, and “lifestyle”-oriented all-inclusive facilities.

www.aanr.com—American Association for Nude Recreation, membership organization with links to clubs and clothing-optional events, limited listings of nude beaches

www.breitenbush.com—Breitenbush Hot Springs, Oregon, retreat center that offers couples massage and workshops on relationships and Tantra

www.calienteresorts.com—Lifestyle-friendly, clothing-optional resorts in Tampa, Florida, and the Dominican Republic

www.desireresorts.com—Desire, couples only, lifestyle-oriented resort in Mexico

www.eomega.org—Omega Institute, New Age retreat center in Rhinebeck, New York, offers some workshops on sexuality, relationships, and Tantra

www.esalen.org—Esalen, Big Sur, California, retreat and workshop center, the birthplace of the New Age movement

www.harbin.org—Harbin Hot Springs, clothing-optional retreat and workshop center in Northern California

www.hedonism.com—Hedonism II, Jamaica, venerable lifestyle-friendly resort with a clothing-optional area, for

singles as well as couples
www.hedonorth.com—Canadian summer resort for swinging couples.
www.naturist.com—The Naturist Society, membership organization offers resources, guides to nude beaches, and information on nude recreation

SAFER SEX RESOURCES

www.ashastd.org—American Social Health Association
www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.gmhc.org—Gay Men’s Health Crisis
www.plannedparenthood.org—Planned Parenthood
www.stdtestexpress.com—Commercial STI Testing Service

SEX AND DISABILITY INFORMATION

www.sexualhealth.com/disabilities-chronic-conditions/

SEX-POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONS/DIRECTORIES—PROFESSIONAL, POLITICAL, EDUCATIONAL

www.aasect.org—American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists
www.biresource.org—Bisexual Resource Center
www.bisexual.org—American Institute of Bisexuality
www.bizone.org/bap/—Bisexuality-Aware Professionals
www.ncsfreedom.org/—National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF); see their resource page for kink-aware professionals
www.polychromatic.com/pfp/main.php—Poly-Friendly Professionals
www.sexandculture.org—Center for Sex and Culture

www.sexuality.org—Society for Human Sexuality

www.sstarnet.org—Society for Sex Therapy and Research

www.woodhullalliance.org—Woodhull Sexual Freedom
Alliance

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in introductory classes. We've learned from all of you; our conversations and your questions have inspired us and opened us up to new ways of thinking. We hope this book will do the same for others.

Notes

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- 14 Mary Elizabeth Plummer, "The Much Married Michael Kramer: Evangelical Clergy and Bigamy in Ernestine Saxony 1522-1542," in Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer and Robin Barnes, *Ideas and Cultural Margins in Early Modern Germany: Essays in Honor of H.C. Erik Middelort* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 99-116.
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About the Authors

MARK A. MICHAELS and PATRICIA JOHNSON are a devoted married couple. They have been creative collaborators—teaching and writing about relationships, sexuality, and Tantra together—since 1999. Internationally known and widely quoted as experts, Michaels and Johnson are the authors of *Designer Relationships* and *Partners in Passion* (Cleis Press), as well as *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality* (Llewellyn). Their books have garnered numerous awards: *Independent Publishing* (IPPY), *Fore-Word Reviews/INDIEFAB*, and *USA Book News' Best Books*, among others. They are also the creators of the COVR Award-winning meditation CD set *Ananda Nidra: Blissful Sleep*.

Michaels and Johnson have taught throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe, and Australia. They have been featured on television and radio and in numerous publications, including *The Village Voice*, *Metro*, *Latina*, *Ebony*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Jane*, *Rockstar*, *Breathe*, *Redbook*, *Opening Up*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Tantric Sex*, and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Enhancing Sexual Desire*.

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Contemporary relationships are in a state of rapid evolution. These changes can and should empower people with the freedom to develop partnerships based on their personal sexualities, understandings, and agreements.

Designer relationships may encompass: people who bond emotionally but not sexually; people who agree to be non-exclusive; single people who have occasional lovers or friends with benefits; multiple partner configurations where long-term bonds exist among all or some. In a designer relationship, decisions are made mutually, consciously, and deliberately for a common good.

Bestselling authors and national relationship experts Patricia Johnson and Mark A. Michaels are exemplars of this life choice, and have studied polyamory for over 20 years. *Designer Relationships* explains exactly how you and your loved ones can design your own life of relationships that work best for your family and fulfill your needs.

“Mark and Patricia give practical advice and ground rules for trust, empathy and intimacy for a collaborative non-monogamous relationship. We all need a book like this that integrates good tips and techniques and the words to define what we want from a partner; the freedom to choose. Written by a couple who really love one another and are committed to their work, this book comes at the perfect time.”

—Dr. Tammy Nelson, Author of *The New Monogamy* and *Getting the Sex You Want*

“A guidebook for these changing times and what is now available to anyone with a computer, a modicum of curiosity, and the willingness to take a risk and explore.”

—Ken Haslam, founder, Polyamory Archives of the Kinsey Institute

Michaels and Johnson are the authors of *Partners in Passion*, *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality*.

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