

Making Peace with Jealousy in Polyamorous Relationships

Love withers under constraint:
its very essence is liberty:
it is compatible neither with
obedience, jealousy, nor fear:
it is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited
where its votaries live
in confidence, equality, and unreserve.

--Percy Byshe Shelley

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Introduction

- Happy poly relationships are attainable if you know how. Without the right skills and a clear understanding of what makes them work, they can seem out of reach when jealousy gets in the way.
- It is no surprise that concerns over jealousy are the biggest obstacle to mutually satisfying open relationships.
- By unmasking jealousy and identifying the sometimes complex underlying emotions present, we can discover its cause and effectively devise a plan to take away its power.

What Jealousy is Really About - Fear

- It is important to recognize what jealousy is really about – **fear**.
 1. Fear of the unknown
 2. Fear of change
 3. Fear of losing power and control
 4. Fear of scarcity
 5. Fear of loss
 6. Fear of abandonment

Highly recommended reading on the subject of fear:
Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway, Susan Jeffers, Ph.D.,
Ballantine Books, Publisher

Who Gets Jealous?

- Almost everyone except perhaps:
 1. Those who are more highly evolved than the rest of us – these folks are rare due to societal conditioning that encourages jealousy and a sense of single ownership and possession of intimate partners.
 2. Those pathologically not in touch with their feelings
 3. Those who haven't gotten into the set of circumstances that set it off in themselves.
 4. It is safe to assume you will be jealous at some point when the circumstances arise that push your particular jealousy button.

Common Components of Jealousy

- In every jealous moment there are more significant underlying emotions than the jealousy itself.
- Jealousy is almost always made up of more than one emotion - which ones are most common?

Anger	Fear	Hurt
Betrayal	Anxiety	Agitation
Sadness	Paranoia	Depression
Loneliness	Envy	Coveting
Powerlessness	Inadequacy	Exclusion

Origins of Jealousy

- Societally Programmed Core Beliefs
 1. If my partner really loved me, they wouldn't want anyone else.
 2. If my partner were happy with me, if I were a good enough partner/lover, my partner would be satisfied with me alone
 3. Love is scarce!
 4. It's just not possible to love more than one.
 5. Note: #1 and 2 are very hard on self-esteem if believed.
- Unresolved Insecurities in Self
 1. Unloveability. Believe I got lucky. With freedom to see others, partner will see how inadequate I am and leave me for another.
 2. Vulnerability. Extraordinarily high need to feel in control.
- Unresolved Insecurities in Relationship
 1. Trust problems
 - From past indiscretions and other incidents of untruthfulness.
 - From skepticism about whether partner has courage to be honest when called for.
 2. Lack of willingness to invest enough time in relationship to keep it strong and healthy while simultaneously spending time conducting other intimate relationships.
 3. Sexual dissatisfaction due to something other than individual variations in level of desire, i.e. same sex partner exploring with others of opposite sex, desire to practice a form of sexual expression like swinging or BDSM that partner has no interest in.
- Evolution and Brain Chemistry
 1. We are complicated creatures, and evolution isn't logical in terms of its affect on our behaviors and emotions. When our ancient ancestors were desperately trying to survive in a harsh environment, sexual jealousy evolved as an unconscious strategy so that we would care enough to stay with partners and continue to conceive offspring, thereby better guaranteeing survival of the species. At the same time we developed the capacity to be attracted to others as a means of further guaranteeing survival - spreading around our reproductive resources was just as important as keeping the partners we already had. For more on this see recommended reading.

Common Kinds of Jealousy

<p>Possessive</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much more common in monogamous couples than amongst intentionally polyamorous. • Green eyed monster variety. • Occurs when a relationship is characterized by commitment without trust. • Sanctioned by society – watch for signs in commercials, popular music, TV and movies. Until the early 1970s, a man who found his wife in bed with a lover and killed them both was not guilty of murder in the State of Texas. • Jealous person says things like, “You are <u>mine</u>, and I’ll <u>make you pay</u> if I ever catch you with someone else.”
<p>Exclusion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common in poly relationships, especially when one partner has other loves and the other does not • Triggered when one feels they are being left out or deprived of equal time and attention • Typically there is a desire to be included at all times in all activities • Jealous person says things like , “How come you have all the fun.?”
<p>Competition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common in poly • Jealous person compares themselves to another love and becomes convinced that they are inadequate. Can cause them to act out in hostile and non-loving ways. • Triggered in response to fear that whatever made the relationship “special” is being shared with or surpassed by another. • Implications surrounding need to be “most special” and concern about losing that status • Need constant reassurance, but relief is usually temporary. • Jealous person says things like, “You think I’m not good enough.”
<p>Fear</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most basic type, most common in poly • Concern that partner will leave them for someone else. • Imagines rejection, loneliness and scarcity. • Rational mind knows partner could fall in love with someone else if the relationship is an open one, but jealousy is not rational. • Part of monogamous mindset • Jealous person says things like, “What if my lover finds someone else better?” • Read “Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway” by Susan Jeffers, Ph.D. for an all-around excellent primer on fear and how to control it rather than letting it control you.

If YOU are the jealous one: What Works

- Do your part to be sure the relationship is basically healthy and sound and that you are a competent communicator. Do not expect your relationship(s) to be happy while failing to prioritize the resolution of any troublesome issues, especially those involving trust.
- When emotions are strong and you are very upset, leaping into action makes matters worse. Take time to calm down, and remember that even if jealous feelings at times seem unbearable, they will likely pass with some time and effort, so don't despair. Reach out to the local poly community - you'll make valuable friends that way and gain support in the process. Other sources of support are partner(s), friends, and/or a poly-friendly therapist.
- Temper tantrums, guilt trips and martyrdom make things worse. Remember, the goal is to become comfortable with cheerfully accommodating of your love's other love relationships, or renegotiate your boundaries as to how much is too much if you cannot. You will want the same from them.
- Remember the "ripple effect." Emotional pain and drama that effects your partner's happiness can also create worries, resentment and stress for your partner's other love(s). If we are truly about "loving more", then we must do our part to always act with love and good will and make sure everyone "wins."
- Avoid blaming – it's counterproductive! (Does not mean you cannot calmly express the importance of your partner acknowledging responsibility for any contributions they make to the problem.)
- A good manner of communicating effectively is called non-violent communication ("NVC"). Read the book "Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. Visit the website: <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com>
- Identify emotions being felt and under what circumstances they arise. Diary these - it helps!
- Develop a sense of what percentage of jealousy each emotion is responsible for. Demystifying the exact components serves to help get a grip when emotions feel overwhelming.
- To put things in perspective, visualize your jealousy triggers. Talk about triggers with your partner (s) and their other love(s) and ask for assistance in managing them.
- Jealousy will bring your darker shadow side (deep seated fears) into the light and illuminate disowned, unloved fragments of personality. Growth/resolution of these fears becomes mandatory if you are to stop feeling threatened, assuming your partner's commitment to your relationship is not in question.
- Sometimes specific reassurance from your partner about their commitment to the relationship, how they feel about you and your importance to them can make jealousy much more manageable if not resolve it. Be direct and ask for what you need from your partner to be OK with the situation.
- Consider the Phobia Model of managing jealousy, i.e. desensitization by pushing the boundary of what is tolerable in manageable increments, always checking in promptly afterward with self and partner.
- Be willing to meet all new and potential partners – with a good faith effort and a little benefit of the doubt, it becomes difficult to demonize someone who clearly means well and demonstrates respect for your relationship. (OTOH, be wary of those who don't want to meet you. This is not jealousy but healthy caution. Insist that your partner find out more about why they are opposed.)
- Remember to love yourself. If you can't, solve the problem by reading self-help books on self esteem and seeing a therapist until the issue is resolved. Likewise for other unresolved emotional issues. The drama will keep popping up otherwise, and you'll like you and be happier in the end regardless of how the relationship works out - it's an investment in the quality of your own life!
- Have courage, be patient and forgive yourself and everyone else. Solve conflict creatively - if one method fails, try another, and yet another, until you find something that works for all concerned.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!

If YOUR PARTNER is the jealous one: What Works

- Do your part to be sure the relationship is basically healthy and sound. Do not expect your poly relationships to be happy while failing to prioritize the resolution of any troublesome issues, especially those involving trust. See a poly-friendly therapist or consult one by telephone - many offer this service!
- If you value the relationship, DO NOT take any partner(s) for granted. Give everyone as much love and affection and attention as they desire and you can provide. Recognize them for the unique and special contributions they bring to your life and tell them what special qualities you admire about them.
- Beware of the blinding effects of NRE. DO NOT allow it to cause you to lose sight of the extra importance of being attentive to existing partners during this time. Check in with your partner about how they are feeling while you are together. Even if they seem OK, extra love and attention during this time can't hurt and can help if trouble is encountered later. Romantic gestures like asking them out on a date, bringing them flowers, giving them a sensuous massage, whatever will be a treat for them and bonding for both of you can be highly effective at avoiding and/or resolving jealousy over a new lover.
- Let your jealous partner know you're there for them. Make yourself available to listen while they express hurt. Try to validate how they feel, even if you don't agree with everything they say.
- Be generous with hugs, encouragement and affection.
- Avoid dismissing partner's feelings. Always remember that jealousy is not rational – don't tell your partner they are being silly and expect them to largely if not completely resolve their jealousy by invoking their rational mind.
- Again, learn nonviolent communication. (See reference on page 5 and in bibliography).
- If your partner is willing to learn from jealousy and grow, honor their courage.
- Solid trust is indispensable - be reliable! Come home when say you will - this is no time to indulge in passive-aggressive controlling and/or control-resisting behaviors. If you say you won't have sex without discussing it with your love first, don't! How you demonstrate your trustworthiness is crucial and can make or break a poly relationship. Don't violate agreements - renegotiate them if you can't abide by them. Don't agree to *anything* just to appease your partner unless you are willing to stick with it. If you screw up, admit it promptly and affirm that you won't let it happen again.
- Draw the line at verbal abuse; avoid reciprocation.
- Though stalling about giving permission is understandable in the face of fear, you are entitled to set reasonable limits on any "foot dragging" your partner does.
- Take a look inside yourself. Are you pushing their buttons needlessly? Do you often affirm your partner's value in your life? Do you sufficiently prioritize the relationship over other obligations and activities? Which is more important, your relationship or the bowling league?
- Your emotional intelligence matters, too, as do your communication skills. If you have any doubts about these, start now to educate yourself. Read relationship self-help books - 75% of the skills necessary to keep a monogamous relationship healthy are essential to poly relating. See a therapist, either with your partner or on your own, if doing so seems like a good idea - it can speed up the process
- If you find yourself attracting highly jealous partners, ask yourself why? What does a partner's jealousy do for you? Does it perhaps make you feel powerful? Desirable? Secure? Do you enjoy having the upper hand? If you find you have a part in the jealousy crisis, own up to it.
- Assess potential for violence – jealous rages can be lethal. Be sure you can count on your partner's self-control. (Such folks tend to avoid poly, but there can be exceptions.)

Triad Dynamics or When You're the Hinge in a V

- New relationships can dramatically alter power dynamics.
- Resist the urge to compete; competitiveness creates struggles for control.
- If you have two lovers, bend over backward to avoid power struggles by making sure both lovers get plenty of time and attention
- If a lover abuses power, both of the others should call them on it Try to avoid appearing to gang up. Be careful and cooperative about each other's feelings and needs, it's easy for one person to feel like the odd person out.
- No need for anyone to feel powerless, there is enough love for everyone.

What to Keep in Mind

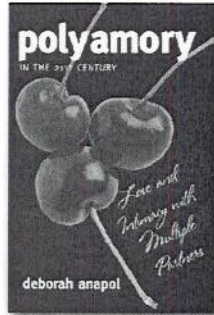
- Remember that we don't get to have everything our own way, but neither do we have to grin and bear it while our partner gets everything their way. Compromise!
- Seek to maintain an environment where it is as safe to be honest with each other as possible.
- If you're having trouble communicating in a loving way, suggest calling in a neutral third party or a therapist.
- If you don't have good communications skills, make it a priority to acquire them, this is a tool it's hard to do without.
- Remember that jealousy is complicated and often is resolved only after trying various strategies and assessing the results.
- To avoid jealousy, strive to be the most emotionally healthy person you can be; confront internal insecurities and learn to love yourself if you don't already.
- Always act as lovingly as possible with everyone's best interests at heart.

Conclusion

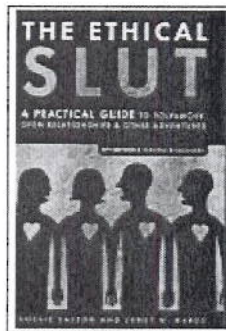
- Closing quote: "Jealousy is all the fun you *think* they had." - Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*.
- Non-monogamy requires being willing to stretch, tolerate certain amounts of discomfort, risk-taking and uncertainty, especially in the beginning.
- Jealousy can feel paralyzing at the outset, usually the balance of pain and pleasure gradually shifts until the enhanced satisfaction and joy far outweighs the anxieties and insecurities.
- Remember that there is no shame in being jealous, no nobility in a lack of it. We are what we are.
- Reach out for support often. Attend community events regularly to be around people who share your points of view and avoid feeling isolated.
- Remember to let the winds of Heaven dance between you. The more self-sufficient you are in being able to be happy as an individual, the more comfortable you are likely to be with sharing a partner with others.

Anita's Recommended Reading on Jealousy in the Context of Polyamorous Relationships

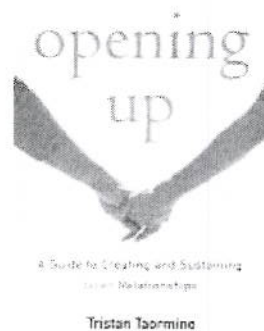
1. *Polyamory in the 21st Century*, Deborah Anapol, Ph.D. Excellent chapter on understanding jealousy in the context of polyamorous relationships and how to unravel it.



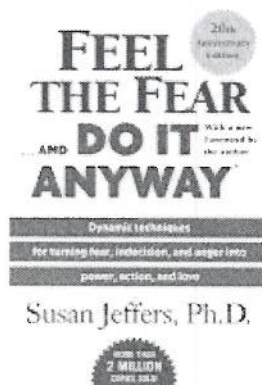
2. *The Ethical Slut (2nd Ed.): A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures*, Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy - Includes an excellent discussion of jealousy.



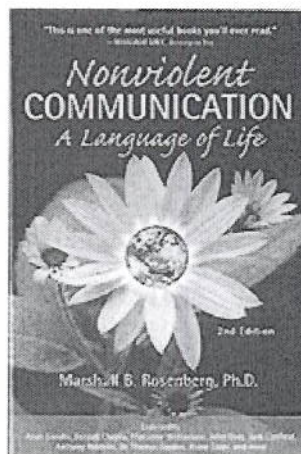
3. *Opening Up*, Tristan Taormino Tristan and I worked together on portions of this book, and see the origins of jealousy somewhat differently. She sees it as coming primarily from social conditioning, and what we have learned we can unlearn. I see it as also related to the quality of our self esteem, the quality of our existing relationship(s), and our brain chemistry's evolutionary development over the millenia. The book is terrific, including her chapter on jealousy.



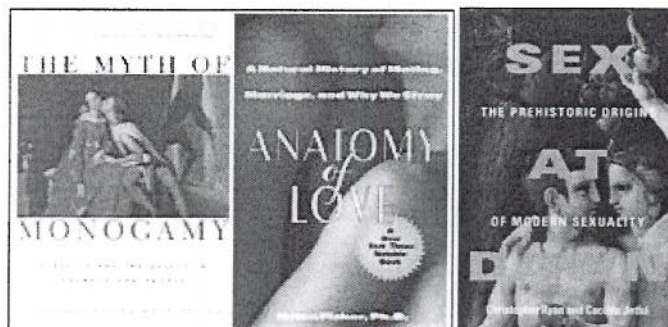
4. ***Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway***, Susan Jeffers, Ph.D (Not specifically on jealousy, but still very helpful as a coping strategy.) Based on a course taught at the New School for Social Research, this book offers readers a clear-cut plan for action that, when followed, should help them unlearn their misconceptions about of fear and replace them with attitudes of strength and conviction.



5. ***Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*** by Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD. This book is a complete presentation of the process of NVC. Enjoy powerful and satisfying relationships in all areas of your life with this complete presentation. Now in its 2nd edition with a new chapter on Self-Empathy.



6. ***The Myth of Monogamy*** By David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton ; ***The Anatomy of Love*** by Helen Fischer; ***Sex at Dawn, The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*** by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha



Compersion For Beginners

By Koko Taylor

Pub. Oct. 20, 2008, on tangomag.com

Amidst a crowded dance floor, a slender blonde woman leaned over to whisper in my ear. "You're a very attractive couple," she purred. I smiled at her—an ego boost is always nice—and continued dancing with my boyfriend. The man with her gave me a high-five and kept flashing smiles my way. Was he trying to hit on me? It could not have been anymore clear: I was there *with* my boyfriend.

For the next half hour every time I looked up, I felt one of them trying to make eye contact with me. When we left the bar my boyfriend asked if I'd noticed the couple. "I think they were trying to hit on me," he said.

"No, they were hitting on me," I replied. Then it dawned on us: they were hitting on us as a couple. That's funny, we both thought. And then he looked at me and said, "I don't want to share you with anyone."

"Neither do I," I replied. Exclusivity with one partner is where I'm comfortable in a romantic relationship.

The model for romance in our culture is so dominated by the monogamous male-female relationship that most people subscribe to it without stopping to consider the alternatives. But not everyone is uncomfortable with sharing his or her partner.

People in open relationships often feel joy or pleasure when their partner has romantic adventures with other people. This feeling is sometimes called compersion. The Keristan Commune, a now defunct San Francisco-based polyamorous community, gets credit for coining the term, which is often defined as the opposite of jealousy. The word compersion is widely used in poly circles, but anyone in a non-monogamous relationship can experience joy from a partner's other love interests.

When Shara Smith started dating Brian Downes, he was already in a relationship with someone else and he wanted to be careful about respecting Stephanie, his first partner. "He wanted to take all the right steps, and that made me more attracted to him," said Shara, who describes compersion as a "positive emotional reaction to a lover's other relationship."

"I love to watch his face light up when she calls because I know how much he cares about her." Shara doesn't view other partners as competition. "Every relationship is unique and nobody can replace me, because they are not me."

"It's like a parent watching their children spread their wings and fly," says Anita Wagner, of the joy she feels when someone makes her partner happy. Anita is a polyamory skills educator and advocate who decided to go the non-monogamous route in her 40s, after two marriages and divorces. "I like the openness and honesty polyamory offers. I'd rather share my partner openly than be cheated on."

Openly sharing love is the essence of compersion. After a dinner with her partner Tom, his new girlfriend Mary and Mary's husband Clint, Anita said she "couldn't help feeling happy for [Tom's]

happiness. I could see how appreciative he was that I had gone out my way to put Mary at ease and signal my approval. His happiness at being free to develop a relationship with Mary was so warm and his love for me so evident."

Birgitte Phillipides, president of Polyamorous NYC, feels "glorious and wonderful" seeing someone fulfill the desires of her partner. Recently the spouse of one of Birgitte's partners told Birgitte she loved her in a platonic way. "It doesn't get much better than that in this relationship style," she says.

Shara, Anita and Birgitte's happiness seems to defy the well-known adage, "you can't have your cake and eat it too." Wouldn't these types of relationships create jealousy ^[3] and insecurity?

"It does require a fair amount of emotional intelligence and maturity," says Anita. Her path from monogamy to experiencing compersion in open relationships took some "emotional stretching."

"If I'm feeling jealous, it's probably because I'm not getting some of my needs met, and that is usually because I haven't asked for it or created the environment to receive it," says Birgitte. She feels that being open about her jealousy is the first and most important step to getting past it.

All three women stated directly or indirectly that you can avoid or overcome jealousy and insecurity by making sure that everyone's needs are met and that all partners are equally happy. Achieving that balance seems essential for people in open relationships to experience compersion.

These women are unapologetically happy with their non-monogamous relationships, and compersion appears to be a cherished benefit of this lifestyle. For these women, love is not a zero-sum game; it can be shared and enjoyed across multiple people in non-traditional formats.