Hello and welcome! This booklet is meant to facilitate conversation between polyamorous clients and their therapists. There are many false arguments in the general public, even amongst therapists, that make polyamory look illegitimate and even pathological. It is time to examine these in a deeper way in order to better serve the growing polyamorous community locally and worldwide.

*Polyamory is a healthy and legitimate lovestyle.*
First, some definitions.

Consensual Nonmonogamy/Ethical Nonmonogamy:
While this encompasses everything from ‘swinging’ to ‘hierarchical polyamory’ to ‘relationship anarchy’, the basic premise is: every partner is aware of every other, and everyone is ok with this.

Polyamory:
This form of consensual nonmonogamy has love underpinning its relationships, not lust.

Serial monogamy:
The practice of jumping practically instantly from one monogamous relationship to another, possibly even overlapping them with a sexual or emotional affair during the transition.

Compersion:
Taking joy in another person’s joy. That feeling of delight in watching a frisky puppy playing or kids unwrapping birthday presents. Polyamorous people get these feelings from hearing stories about or witnessing how happy their partner is made by someone else.

New Relationship Energy:
The honeymoon phase of meeting someone, where you are full of excitement over having met someone so special and feel head over heels, not seeing things realistically yet.

Polysaturation:
A point where you realize you no longer have enough time, money, or energy to take on more partners.
False Argument: Only insecurely attached people take part in polyamory...

People in healthy polyamorous relationships are able to securely attach to multiple people and emotionally handle when a partner is absent not just absent, but with another person. There is indeed an entire text on this topic: *Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy* (2020) by Jessica Fern. There are definitely people with insecure attachments in this lifestyle, as well as secure attachments - just as in monogamy. Fern makes it clear that secure attachment can be learned, and polyamory teaches secure attachments. In monogamy, it is easy to confuse “being the one and only” and having the trappings of a shared house, children, etc. with having a secure, deep, intimate relationship. Polyamory teaches the reality of what intimacy and connection really is, because one does not have those status symbols to confuse with actual attachment and closeness. One of the best aspects of poly is it doesn’t just have self-help books, but through poly meetups, one will find an actual personal growth culture! It is far too often that monogamy takes love and relationships practically for granted, putting in work only when there’s something wrong, but poly feeds on growth work. People in poly realize that consensual nonmonogamy is practically impossible without intense, dedicated work on oneself and their relationship. It takes a lot of emotional maturity and partner connection to handle your partner dating someone else.

False Argument: ...they avoid real commitment and intimacy by having multiple superficial relationships.

Superficial relationships are possible in poly just as much as in monogamy or serial monogamy. However, when a person does not share a household with you and has other dating options, the only thing that is going to keep them in place as your partner is intense intimacy and commitment to working on the relationship.

False Argument: People in polyamory confuse the boundaries of friendship and love/partnership.

People in polyamory largely define both friendships and romantic relationships, and have both. To say that a person involved in consensual nonmonogamy is unable to distinguish what is friendship and what is love is to say something akin to a person who has had multiple romantic partners across their life span is unable to distinguish friendship and love. Finding “the one and only” is a myth for most people, as most people fall in love multiple times across their lifetime. Sometimes even monogamous people will fall in love with multiple people simultaneously, but will choose not to act on those feelings and partner only with one person. People in polyamory are only different in that
they believe they can fall in love with, and successfully date, more than one person at a time simultaneously instead of consecutively. Most people who are polyamorous have the same boundaries in place that a monogamous person would when it comes to treatment of friends, coworkers, family, and so forth. They are not lacking in boundaries.

**False argument: Only people who have a love or sex addiction take part in polyamory.**

The lifestyle may initially attract people with such concerns, but they will soon find out that eventually polysaturation occurs. Even they can only have so many partners at once, and cannot feed that addiction any longer in any practical way. When love or sex addiction occurs in a poly relationship, partners may not feel as threatened by it and the issue can be dealt with without blame towards anyone, hits to self esteem of any parties, or secrecy/denial, because sexual and emotional attraction to others is not taboo. This makes recovery so much more possible and so much less painful for all parties. When such an addiction occurs in monogamy, it is likely to show itself as infidelity and issues such as blame, inadequacy, trust, boundaries, injured self-esteem, etc. may be the terrible result, making the addicted person hesitant to get help.

**False argument: Only people who love drama and constant love relationship turnover are interested in being polyamorous.**

Actually, there are many long-term poly relationships. There is an infuriating societal issue where, when a poly relationship fails, family and friends point to polyamory as the problem, whereas when a monogamous relationship fails, no one says, “Monogamy is just not right.” Monogamy fails just as poly fails, and not because either polyamory or monogamy is flawed, but because people are people within those structures. Eventually polysaturation will occur for a person and they will be in several long-term relationships, rather than always playing the field for new partners. Many people buy homes together and become spiritually married through the Unitarian Universalist Church. There have been stories of poly people starting household corporations together as a legal stand-in for marriage, where assets and abilities are tied but can also be separated in case of “divorce.
False Argument: Polyamory is only for people who are terrified to be alone.

The same people can be serial monogamists or those who stay in abusive monogamous relationships. They can also desperately fill every moment with friendships. This is an issue to be addressed in therapy, whether you’re monogamous or polyamorous, but until the matter is resolved, it’s better to fill every moment with deeper, more dedicated poly love relationships than superficial outings with fair-weather friends. A person who cannot stand being alone won’t really find more solace in poly when they find they have time alone coupled with the challenge of managing emotions while their partner is out on a date. Poly is not for people who cannot self-soothe while alone.

False Argument: Polyamory is only for people who don’t know what they want in life and can’t settle down.

Again, there are many long-term, “settled down” poly relationships. But people in poly often do know themselves better, and their partners better, simply because of all the deep heart-to-hearts that polyamory requires about love and life needs. Polyamorous people often have a strong growth mindset and are intelligent, complicated people who want more out of life: a partner who is a sci-fi nerd homebody, and another who is a mountain-climbing adrenaline junkie, so that all domains of life can be explored and learned from.

False Argument: People in polyamorous relationships are insecure and need to keep getting validation from multiple outside sources.

How can a truly insecure person sleep well at night when their partner is out with someone else? True insecurity kills compersion.

False Argument: People in poly relationships are just never satisfied with what they have, or their relationship is missing something.

People in poly relationships allow their partners to be exactly who they want to be, and don’t pressure them to engage in hobbies or other activities that aren’t in line with their nature. No one is going fishing who hates fishing. A poly person will reach out and find a fishing friend or fishing partner, and also enjoy whatever it is their non-fishing partner enjoys with them. No one can be everything at once, and poly people realistically realize this. But rather than see a person as “not enough,” they see them as perfect as they are, and see additional love as additive, not subtractive. Forcing someone to be “your everything” is unrealistic and coercive, and to keep seeking a different monogamous relationship after monogamous relationship looking for the perfect “one” is fruitless. There is much more room for individuality in poly and very little enmeshment.

False Argument: But doesn’t having multiple partners take time, money and energy away from each partner? Isn’t it neglectful?

Not when done properly. Poly dates are about quality instead of quantity, and about learning to be truly intentional about how you spend time, money and energy on each person. It’s about having fewer, but more meaningful contacts that are more deeply fulfilling, rather than allowing things together to become common and taken for granted. Poly people become experts at meaning-making and living and loving mindfully and intentionally.

False Argument: Poly people are able to share their partners because the relationships are superficial and they just don’t value them as much, thus being less afraid of losing them.

This is an experiential question. Meet some truly happy poly people out in the community, and it is quickly observed that this simply isn’t true. One need only attend some poly meetups to see the love that flies around.

False Argument: Isn’t it fraught with jealousy?

In Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy (2020) by Jessica Fern, this topic is addressed. Page 104 discusses a study by Haupert et al. that found that people in nonmonogamous relationships have higher levels of trust and lower levels of jealousy than monogamous people do. They also report “similar levels of commitment, longevity, satisfaction, passion and love as monogamous relationships do.” Fern also cites other studies that say that over 20% of people admit to having participated in some form of consensual nonmonogamy at some point in their lives, and that 4 to 5% of people (16 million people in the United States) are currently in consensually nonmonogamous relationships. That’s a lot of people to be doing something that is “emotionally impossible,” though some monogamous people may feel it to be so for themselves. That doesn’t make either poly or monogamy right or wrong. It just means “different strokes for different folks,” that there is a rainbow of diversity in both life and love.
False Argument: Ok, so then poly people just don’t feel jealousy or insecurity? Does that mean the people in my office expressing jealousy, anxiety or insecurity just aren’t cut out for poly?

“Strength doesn't come from what you can do. It comes from overcoming the things you once thought you couldn't.” (Rikki Rogers)

It’s not that polyamorous people never come up against negative emotions in regards to their partner seeing someone else. It’s that they’ve learned to use coping methods, self-soothing, secure connection-making and good communication to ease their fears until they begin to see the real benefits of polyamory and become more comfortable and accustomed to it. Poly people usually have to do a ton of work on feeling secure in their relationship and in themselves before either partner can successfully begin dating others. They typically have invested heavily in self-care and self-soothing skills to be able to handle their own emotional intensity. They’re going to a counselor for help with that work. But as they learn to work with their own fears and insecurities, they become stronger people with happier relationships, and find the good outweighs the bad.

False Argument: You can’t tell me someone actually supports their partner being with someone else. They can’t possibly get anything positive out of it.

The first benefit they get is called compersion, the joy of seeing someone else happy. Additionally, the relationship that partners A & B have can actually be strengthened when B starts seeing C, because there’s more deep conversations between A & B about what love means to each one, what trust means, what each one needs, what each can realistically give, fantasies about other people that now can be shared without shame, the ability to be a full and honest person with your partner without repercussions for being interested in others (which we all, as humans, are at times). A and B can be more honest with each other and more fully themselves. As C teaches B new things in life, such as introducing them to new foods, new music, new places to go, these then are things B can also enrich A’s life with, creating a whole new world for A & B as well. A can also make a good friend or even romantic partner of C, further benefitting A.
False Argument: Isn’t polyamory just justifying an affair?

Definitely not. An affair lacks the consent of all parties, whereas polyamory is considered ethical non-monogamy; ethical because everyone has a say in the matter and everyone approves of the situation. In an affair, there’s deceit, broken trust, injured self-esteem, lots of heartache and unmet needs and misunderstandings. Each partner is a combative, competitive threat to the other and a host of other problems to worry about. In polyamory, there may be hard feelings, such as fear and jealousy at times, but overall the experience is a positive one for all parties. Many people practice what’s called “Kitchen Table Poly,” where all parties are actually friends who can sit around a kitchen table together to talk, eat, game and laugh! Affairs split up relationships into separate lives. Polyamory unites new friends into a larger, happy family.

False Argument: But I only see miserable polyamorous people who can’t handle the jealousy, the time inequality, etc.

Yes - because you’re a therapist! Mostly unhappy people seek you out! The happy people are the ones out in the community that you’re not getting the chance to meet.

What if I have one person of a couple in my office who wants to become polyamorous and the other doesn’t?

This begins as a discernment process in which you discover why partner A wants poly, and why partner B doesn’t. Not everyone wants poly for reasons their current partner can stomach, such as already having someone “on the side.” It’s not impossible for that relationship to succeed, but it is highly unlikely. If person A wants it because of ideological reasons, or feel they are oriented that way (some people feel it’s who they are; some others say it’s a decision) and are willing to do the work to ease the fears of B and not push too quickly, this can be quite successful. The key lies in addressing all of B’s concerns in an authentic and compassionate and patient manner and teaching them compersion while teaching A patience and empathy. Remember- consent is key. Yes, poly partners can cheat! If B isn’t giving consent, then what A is doing is infidelity.

To blame one’s lovestyle, whether polyamory or monogamy, for one’s woes is to miss the biggest contributor to those woes. As Bill Doherty, PhD puts it, “You can’t divorce yourself.”

So what is health in a relationship? You don’t define health. You experience health. You simply know it, for yourself, when you feel it, and no one else can tell you what your own particular version of health is.
Resources for Therapists

More Than Two Franklin Veaux and Eve Ricket (2014) This is one thick book, but if I could recommend one and only one book on polyamory to people, it would be this. Fortunately for professionals who are lacking in time, it has an index and a very practical table of contents to help you with the pertinent issue at hand. Buy it!

Polysecure Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy Jessica Fern (2020) Written by a psychotherapist, public speaker and trauma and relationship expert. Has a lot of really “gem” sections, but I particularly recommend pages 109-116 to help you understand the different types of poly and monogamy- there are many!

Sex Rules! Astonishing Sexual Practices and Gender Roles Around the World, Janice Zarro Brodman, PhD (2017) This brief, entertaining, eye-opening book will help you understand that our ideas about relationships and gender really are based on our culture, not a universal norm that is inherently “right.”

Not into reading? Need Continuing Education Credits on the Cheap?

Try the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) https://www.aamft.org/courses/courses.aspx . You don’t need to be a member to get several courses on polyamory for under $100 each.

Even cheaper Continuing Education credits: https://affirmativecouch.com/courses/ Affirmativecouch.com states “We train psychotherapists to provide a safe space and affirmative mental health services for LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, transgender, gender nonbinary, intersex, asexual, etc.), consensual nonmonogamous (CNM; swinging, open, polyamorous), and kink (fetish, bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, masochism, etc.) communities. Our online magazine for community members, Out on the Couch, publishes articles written by psychotherapists to increase awareness of the unique needs of these communities and how therapy can help. Approved by the American Psychological Association to sponsor continuing education for psychologists.” -From its website

My background:

I love love. It is the most powerful force for fulfillment and growth that this crazy universe offers. Even when a relationship ends, it is a painful but powerful time for insights and personal development. I believe this is true for both monogamous and ethically nonmonogamous relationships in all their forms. I equally love and support both monogamous and consensually nonmonogamous relationships.

I have over a decade of working in the mental health field and am currently a graduate student in Marriage and Family Therapy through Medaille college at Ott Counseling and Consulting. I have served on several advocacy boards and committees for LGBTQ2IA+ diversity, anti-stigma awareness, and systems improvement, and have worked on the Chautauqua County Mobile Crisis Team and Niagara County Department of Mental Health’s Crisis Hotline. I currently work as the Peer Activities Director of the Mental Health Association of Niagara County, where I wear many hats and oversee four programs. I spend most of my time offering Peer Specialist services in Inpatient Behavioral Health at Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center. Contact me if you have any questions; I’m happy to help.

I welcome hearing from you!

Warmly,

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