

ELLErelationships

There are certain phrases you never want to hear from your therapist. One of them is: 'I need you to know I've had mild sexual contact with someone you've been seeing.' *Mild*. What does that mean? And wait – with *which* person I've been seeing?

She looked at me expectantly. I blinked, and felt... nothing. In comparison to the magnitude of why I was there, this didn't faze me. I was attending couples therapy with a man. Who was *not* my boyfriend.

To understand how this came about, imagine you are non-monogamous. You live with your beloved boyfriend of three years and have also casually fallen in love with a seasoned non-monogamist (SNM) in your neighbourhood. Nine months in, SNM announces he just can't do it. With you, that is. He can do it just fine with all his other lovers. When he tells you this, you go into an hour-long shock.

For six months, the two of you orchestrate the worst-managed break-up ever. (Hysterical emails? Check. Crying in front of other lovers? Check.) The only detail you can calmly agree upon is that you are both nauseous. And so, in desperation, you agree to try couples therapy – although you were never, strictly, a couple – with a non-monogamous therapist who looks like you. Obviously.

Open relationships are not for the faint-hearted. When I first considered non-monogamy in 2007, trauma and couples therapy with a future SNM were not part of the plan. There wasn't a plan, actually. I was a 27-year-old card-carrying monogamist living in Manhattan. I had posed for a magazine in connection with a book, so my stock was high – Wall Streeters wanted to date me – yet I had just finished another lacklustre relationship.

I was also collecting anonymous week-long diaries from around the world for

The Sex Diaries Project, which became a book and now a TV show. I spent my nights reading tales from behind the bedroom doors of teenagers, porn stars, grandmothers – everyone. And I was plunged into the reality that private lives are just like jobs: there's a huge range, there are no rules, and you can build whatever reality you'd like for yourself. Whatever works for you.

And so I became open to *possibility*. My brain realised that, just like the diarists,

I could freely relate to men in whatever way made sense for myself and the man in question. Instead of worrying about exclusivity or long-term prospects, I could just *enjoy the person I was with*.

It was the moment at which my romantic life began to flourish. Non-monogamy has taught me so much about relationships and what I do and don't want in love. Such as? I'll share the biggest revelations with you...

I met Taj, a muscular man in an open marriage. We fell into an easy routine: ➤

BIG LOVE

Looking for true love? The ANSWER may lie in redefining your idea of a relationship. Arianne Cohen offers a LESSON in opening up

Photograph by GUY BOURDIN



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weekly dinner dates, followed by a giggly sleepover. That I was completely content was a revelation. Once a week was plenty. I learned that if your man is with someone else, if you play your cards right, *she can do most of the work*. All of the maddening details were *not my problem*. I was left with good music and tickling.

If I were to summarise the purest joy I find in openness, it would be the ability to revel in relationships that, in a strictly monogamous world, would not exist.

‘Because I wasn’t ATTACHED to the relationship’s outcome, I was more APT to say what I wanted’

There are so many wonderful roles men (or women) can play in your life. Will is a prime example. A lawyer 15 years my senior, we struck up a conversation at a party. We went home and fooled around a bit, but mostly talked. He explained his BDSM leanings (to the uninitiated that’s a sexual predilection for any or all of the following: bondage, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism), and I explained my complete lack of BDSM leanings. He proceeded to offer me the most useful and efficient sexual experience ever: a ‘tasting’. Six weeks later, over two hours, he tried everything he could think of in five-minute increments: feathers, whips, toys. He tied me up, had me play characters. I’d recommend a ‘tasting’ to everyone. Two thirds of it will fall flat – some man is waving a whip at you and you’ll laugh so hard you fall off the bed. But the remaining third will send a shock of pleasure through your toes. Extremely useful information.

I have not had sex without a condom since I was 20. Many relationship articles skip this detail. I do not care whose birthday it is. *It is non-negotiable.* And important.

As a budding non-monogamist, I found that because I wasn’t attached to the relationship’s outcome, I was more apt to say what I wanted. There can be no assumptions; you will only get hurt if you assume. *And so you must come in with your*

boundaries on the tip of your tongue. It’s the kind of self-knowledge and ready communication that would serve any relationship well. I collected a shortlist of lovers who come in and out of my life.

Then I met my boyfriend. We found each other at a party and when, later, he went outside to smoke, I felt an empty hole in the space next to me. The first time we touched, we fell into each other, and have never fallen out. He moved in.

Though I had been toying with non-monogamy, I was still essentially single and dating – I didn’t consider myself to be non-monogamous. I was just doing what made sense. Which is why I bawled when, six weeks in, my new partner told me *he* didn’t want monogamy. I was scared to test non-monogamous waters with a serious love. *Being non-monogamous and single you have nothing to lose. An open, deep-love relationship is another animal.*

Like most new non-monogamous couples, my partner and I began with a lot of rules: more than making out required a call; dates needed pre-approval. We spent the first year inadvertently stabbing each other in the heart. It’s inevitable, because though you stringently avoid committing the sins that cause *you* pain, there’s a logical fallacy: the things that hurt you are not the things that hurt them.

I learned *it’s quite possible to be in love with two people* when it happened. SNM was that good-time guy with a flashing sign that said You Probably Shouldn’t Date Me. But in him I saw something I couldn’t resist: myself. He was, and still is, the only person I’ve ever met who operates in the world the exact same way I do. Our natural connection is one of twinship. Weekly dates and deep-but-casual love ensued.

When doubly in love, you become a better person. If one guy is complaining about something, it’s probably him. If both are complaining, it’s you. Both complained a lot. I improved how I relate.

SNM told me over our usual Tuesday dinner that he couldn’t, actually, manage

the emotions at hand, and that I was an accident. I walked home, closed the door, sank down and sobbed. I felt like I was dying. A moment later, the door clicked open and my partner walked in. In that moment, I learned crying over another lover in front of your boyfriend is far more meaningful than sex with someone else.

I did not handle things well. I was a mess: crying randomly, not sleeping, mourning. I learned *the cycle of obsession is not in any way tempered by being in a loving relationship*; in fact, open relationships neuter your ability to move on, because the ritual of sleeping around is rendered useless when you’re already doing that.

My particular mess was well beyond any reasonable boyfriend duties. Part of non-monogamy is the task of being there for your partner when things go badly and talking through all the issues it brings up. I apologised for being crazy and indicated it would pass. But it was bad. Thus, couples therapy with SNM.

But my boyfriend and I got through it. We are still non-monogamous. Why? To begin with, because every man I’ve ever dated has made me ever-more positive my boyfriend is the one for me. No question. Often, I’ll be lying in bed with someone else and I’ll miss him. This is a good thing. *Each relationship is its own island*, and that is clearest when you are secure in your primary relationship. I feel very free. If one of us has feelings for someone, we talk about it. It doesn’t happen often – we both work a lot and we both have long-time friend/lovers. The potential for emotional drama is far outweighed by what we’ve built: a container of deep trust and love, constructed through years of communicating insecurity, fear and jealousy. We’re truly each other’s other half.

I recounted this to a dear friend, Claire. ‘If you had told me three years ago that your life would be full of men, I wouldn’t have believed you,’ she said. Claire and I play a game called ‘Life Stage or Phase?’ Her urge to buy a £3,000 sofa? Life stage, definitely. My open relationship? Unclear. For now, I am open to what makes sense. And non-monogamy is, to put it mildly, what makes sense for me today. ■

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