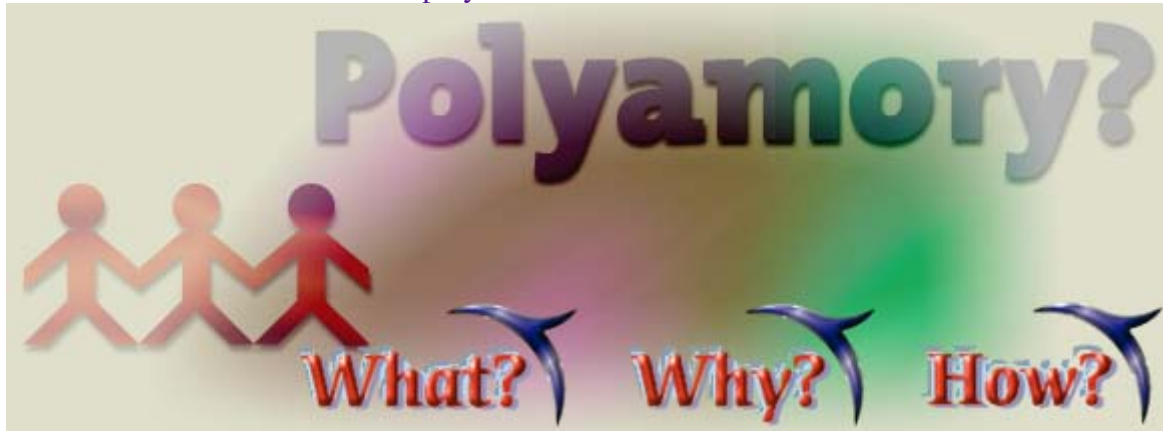


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## All right, so what is "polyamory"?

"Polyamory" is based on the Latin and French for "many loves." A polyamorous relationship is a romantic relationship involving more than two people.

### You mean, like swinging?

No. Swinging is something different. Swingers may swap partners or have sex with more than one person, but it's strictly recreational. Poly people have *romantic relationships* with more than one person at a time.

### Oh, I gotcha. So, like, you have a girlfriend on the side.

No. That is something different as well. The technical term for that is "cheating."

### Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

No. The thing that defines a polyamorous relationship is that **everyone involved knows about, and agrees to, everyone else's involvement.**

If you are married, and you have a girlfriend that your wife doesn't know about, or that your wife suspects but isn't sure about, or that your wife knows about but isn't happy with, you're not poly, you're cheating. Similarly, if you're banging the milkman while your husband is out of town, you're not poly, you're cheating.

Polyamory is defined by **informed consent of all the participants.** Without it, it ain't poly. If you can't invite your lover over to Thanksgiving dinner with the rest of your family, it ain't poly.

**Poly, schmolly. It's just a polite way of saying your partner lets you cheat.**

is cheating. If you do anything you cannot feel comfortable telling your mate about, or if you do anything which you know would make your mate unhappy if he or she knew about it, you are cheating, plain and simple.

Polyamory is a completely different way to define your relationship. Polyamory is an acknowledgment of the simple fact that relationships do not come in "one size fits all." In a poly relationship--

### **Okay, okay, I understand. Poly is for people who can't commit!**

No, no, no. Just the opposite, in fact; people who can't commit to **one** person sure as hell can't make a lasting commitment to **two**!

For example, I have been with my wife for over thirteen years at the time of writing this. I have also been with my girlfriend for almost nine years, during that same time. Both of those relationships have already outlasted many of the nominally "monogamous" relationships of many of my friends and relatives; in fact, I know one person who has been married and divorced **four times** in the time I have been with my wife and my girlfriend! So it's really difficult to argue that being poly is for people who can't commit.

**As an aside:** It's been my experience that many avowed monogamous people actually practice "serial monogamy"--jumping from lover to lover to lover, while claiming to be "monogamous" with each one. Serial monogamy has always struck me as slightly silly; but then again, I think many "serial monogamists" see their partners as expendable, or treat their lovers as a commodity, to be disposed of when someone else comes along. So in that way, at least, I think polyamory is more ethical than serial monogamy; polyamorists do not discard their lovers when the next interesting person walks down the road. Serial monogamy is, I think, the essence of people who can't commit!

### **But if you love someone, you shouldn't want anyone else.**

That's a common idea, but it doesn't really hold up in practice.

Many people believe that polyamory means you can't give your "whole heart" to another person. This is based on the "starvation model" of love--that is, you only have a limited amount of love, and if you give your love to one person, there is none left to give to anyone else--so if you fall in love with another person, you have to "pay" for it by withdrawing your love from the first person.

But love is not the same thing as money. With money, you have only a limited amount to spend, and when you give it to one person you have less left to give to another. But love behaves in wonderful and unpredictable and counterintuitive ways. When you love more than one person, you soon realize that the more love you give away, the more love you have to give. Yes, you CAN give your whole heart to more than one person, and when you do, you realize it's the most beautiful feeling in all the world.

vital than in a monogamous relationship--for everyone involved to know and understand the rules of the relationship, and abide by them. A successful poly relationship absolutely requires trust and security from everyone involved. If you cannot abide by the relationship's rules, you cannot expect to make a polyamorous relationship work.

## Rules? What rules? You want to sleep with someone else, you do, right?

It doesn't work that way.

There are, of course, as many different varieties of polyamory as there are people. But being polyamorous does not give you license to make like a bunny in heat.

A polyamorous relationship isn't about sex; it's about building a **romantic relationship** with more than one person at a time.

And yes, there are rules.

## Yeah? Like what kind of rules?

Depends on the relationship.

Some poly relationships, called "**polyfidelity**" relationships, have rules not much different from a traditional monogamous relationship, only there are more than two people involved. A polyfidelitous triad, for example, may have three people involved, with one person sexually active with the other two, or even with all three people sexually involved with one another. However, nobody in the relationship may take an "outside" lover, just as neither partner in a monogamous relationship is allowed to have an outside lover; if you do, it's cheating. Cheating, if anything, is a **more** serious offense in a polyfidelity relationship than in a monogamous relationship--because if you cheat, you are betraying more than one person's trust.

Other polyamorous relationships may permit the people involved to have "outside" lovers under certain circumstances--often, for example, only if the outside lover is approved beforehand by everyone involved, and only if the outside lover knows the nature of the relationship.

My own relationship works that way; my wife or I may take another lover only with the informed consent of the other person, and only if that lover knows about the nature of our relationship. Neither of us hops into bed with whoever we fancy; far from it. In fact, there may be periods as long as many years during which neither of us takes a new lover. The same is not true of some of our less-faithful "monogamous" acquaintances...

The individual relationships within a polyamorous group may be very complex, as well. In many cases, there may be one "primary" couple--a husband and wife, for example. Either or both of those people may have outside lovers, but those relationships are secondary.

Note: This does not mean that these relationships are of secondary importance, or that the people involved in such

wife--and therefore a permanent partner--but it does not mean that the other people with whom I become involved are somehow "less valuable" as human beings than she is.

Or, the polyamorous relationship may be a true triad, or quadrangle, or whatever; each individual relationship is as important as all the others, and no single couple is "primary."

### Uh-huh. Says who? Who makes these rules, anyway?

Everyone involved.

Polyamory is not about "I want to go shag that person over there, and if you don't like it, tough."

It's reasonable for everyone involved to expect to have some kind of input on the relationships that go on. It's reasonable to want to set limits, and it's necessary and reasonable to want to establish a framework that protects both your feelings and the feelings of everyone else involved in the relationships, directly or indirectly.

You do this by negotiating a clear, explicit, and unambiguous set of conditions that guides the manner in which your relationships form, and establishes that framework that helps to make sure everyone's needs are being met and nobody's feelings are disregarded.

It is also important to understand that any breach of these terms is a very, very serious matter--just as serious as cheating in a conventional monogamous relationship! This framework, and the willingness of everyone involved to abide by the terms you set together, are what creates the foundation of trust that a polyamorous relationship requires. Without that trust, it's reasonable to expect that you or someone you care about will end up miserable.

### Didn't this whole "free love" thing die out in the sixties?

It never really existed, even back then.

But that's irrelevant. **Polyamory isn't free love.** All these different flavors of polyamory have their own dynamic, but ultimately, they are all about building relationships, not about sex.

Okay, so they are about sex as well. After all, if no sex is involved, then what you have is a monogamous relationship where the couple has other friends. It is, in a sense, the fact that sex is involved that defines polyamory as distinct from monogamy. But the point is, it isn't **just** the sex.

And the idea of polyamory predates the sixties, anyway. In fact, it's at least as old as human history. Examples of non-monogamous relationships can be found just about anywhere.

### Okay, so isn't this all some sexist, misogynistic, male-dominated crap?

"polyamory" means "disrespect of women."

But polyamory is not polygyny. The idea of polyamory is founded on a base of egalitarianism; it applies equally to everybody, regardless of sex. Polyamory is not about collecting a bunch of women for your harem. Polyamory is about sharing some part of your life and sharing your love with more than one other person--and your lovers sharing some part of THEIR lives and some part of THEIR love with more than one other person. Polyamory is not about "owning" your lovers and hiring an army of eunuchs to make sure they don't stray.

## Let's get back to this sex thing. How do you decide who sleeps with whom?

Depends on the nature of the relationship. If there is a primary couple and secondary relationships, typically the primary couple will determine a set of ground rules for who is boinking whom, and when. In a polyfidelity group, the people work out their interpersonal dynamics themselves. And, of course, if you have a king-sized bed, who knows? Maybe you'll find that you like an extra pair of feet in your bed!

But the "who is sleeping with whom" question isn't necessarily the most interesting thing about a poly relationship. Remember, with polyamory, we're talking about more than one **romantic relationship**, not just more than one sex partner. The social dynamic can be very complex, and goes way beyond who's having sex with whom.

## I'll bet. Like, how do you keep from being jealous?

Ah, now **that** is a real question!

Nobody is immune to jealousy, of course. It's like being immune to fear or hunger or anger; it's part of the nature of the human animal. Some people are naturally more jealous than others, of course, but anybody can feel jealous.

But jealousy isn't really a response to seeing your partner with someone else. It's a response to your own feelings; it says more about your own security or insecurity than it does about the actions of your partner.

*Jealousy is most common when somebody feels insecure in a relationship.* If you feel secure in a relationship, you don't get jealous. **Jealousy is not the problem; jealousy is the SYMPTOM of the problem.** Address the insecurity, and you address the jealousy. So the trick to making a poly relationship work is to make everyone involved feel secure.

A poly relationship depends much more than a traditional relationship on mutual security and trust. Even the smallest amount of insecurity in a poly relationship can quickly be magnified to the point where it can be lethal to the relationship.

The problems are magnified even more if you try not to let your fears and your feelings show. **One key to making the relationship work is to talk about your fears, openly and immediately, EVEN IF YOU THINK THEY'RE IRRATIONAL.** Even if you think they aren't justified. It's been

I think it's natural to assume that people who aren't monogamous are immune to jealousy, but I don't think it's true. Rather, I think that jealousy is a symptom that something else is wrong. Usually, jealousy is a symptom that someone is feeling insecure. Address the underlying problem, and the jealousy goes away.

Jealousy, like other emotions, it doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from a feeling that someone's needs aren't being met, or someone feels threatened. People who don't feel threatened, don't feel jealous.

The key to defeating jealousy, in my experience, is to address the underlying causes of jealousy--preferably, BEFORE they come up. A person who does not fear that his partner will leave him generally does not feel jealous if his partner has an outside relationship; hence, conquering that fear also conquers the jealousy. Make your partner feel special, needed, and loved, and your partner will not feel threatened or afraid.

### **But if someone feels jealous, isn't that *their* problem?**

No, it's everyone's problem, and successful resolution of the problem requires you to find out *why* they feel jealous.

If you treat your lovers as though they are interchangeable, they'll be jealous. If you don't take care to make your lovers feel wanted or needed, they'll be jealous. If you aren't careful to make it clear to all of your partners that you value them, you won't keep any of them for long.

Sometimes, it's easy, especially when you take a new partner, to forget your existing partner in the rush and excitement of exploring a new lover. That's when everyone involved is particularly prone to jealousy. There aren't any cure-alls to ensure that your partners never feel jealous, of course, but it helps to make a point to pay attention to everyone, to include everyone in the majority of your activities--you know, to be considerate.

If you were raised with the idea that if your partner is looking at someone else, it's because you aren't enough, then you probably won't be happy in a polyamorous relationship until and unless you can unlearn that idea and understand why it isn't true.

People do have the capacity to love more than one other person; there isn't a magical switch inside our brains that says once you love one person, the switch has been flipped and you can't love somebody else. Any parent who has more than one child **knows** that it is possible to love more than one person.

But that doesn't mean that those people are expendable or interchangeable. People with more than one child also know that their love for each child is unique and irreplaceable. Similarly, people in a healthy polyamorous relationship know that their love for each person in that relationship is unique and irreplaceable--and knowing that drives away jealousy.

Many people are brought up to believe that if you're interested in sleeping with someone else, it's because your partner isn't enough for you. It's a myth that's as common and enduring--and as false--as the idea of Santa Claus. Human beings don't work that way; we aren't designed so that when we fall in love, the part of our brain that makes us attracted to other people magically shuts off.

Someone once asked me "How can you stand knowing your lover is with someone else? Don't you feel like maybe they're better in bed than you are?"

The long answer to that question is very complex. The short answer is simple: It doesn't matter. It's not a contest.

There are a lot of people in this world. If you look far enough, you will find someone who is better than you are at **everything**. You'll find people who are better at cooking, better at sex, better at reading and writing and driving and every other thing you can think of. You can't be the best person in the world at everything. Deal with it.

You know what? It doesn't matter.

If you really believe that your lover is going to dump you as soon as they find someone better in the sack than you are, well, perhaps you **shouldn't** try non-monogamy--but then again, perhaps you'll want to re-think your romantic relationship while you're at it.

The fact is, it doesn't matter for the same reason that it doesn't matter if your lover finds a person who is a better cook than you are.

If your lover goes out to a restaurant, do you think "My God, what if their cooking is better than mine?" Do you agonize over whether your cooking may seem substandard by comparison? Not if you're psychologically healthy, you don't.

With sex, it's the same deal.

And guess what? Sex is a learned skill. Who knows? Perhaps if your lover discovers something that you didn't think of, then they might bring that new discovery into your relationship, and hey! You're better in bed for it!

But it's not a contest. It's not like you have to spend your life trying to rank your skills in the bedroom against everyone else's. That way madness lies. It isn't really about sex at all--it's about opening yourself to the possibility of more than one romantic relationship.

And who knows? Perhaps it's YOUR new lover who will teach you a thing or two!

## **So, why? What do you get out of this? Besides shagging a bunch of people, I mean.**

For starters, **being polyamorous doesn't mean you're shagging a bunch of people**. It may mean that you only have one other partner.



become romantically attached to anyone? The answer, of course, will vary from person to person, but at the end of the day we're all social animals. People are happier when they're romantically involved with someone than when they're not. Intimacy adds to the quality of your life.

### **Fine. But why isn't one person enough?**

Well, let's start with the fact that the majority of people are **not** intimate with one person. They're intimate with one person **at a time**...at least in theory. And with statistics from the General Social Survey suggesting that as many as 34% of men between the ages of 50 to 64 will admit to having cheated at least once, evidence suggests that even the theory isn't too widely practiced.

### **But that's different. That's cheating.**

Precisely. **If you want more than one lover--which most people do, in spite of the romantic myth you may have been brought up to believe--then integrity and decency demands that you be honest and up-front about it.**

I've been approached and propositioned by women who have asked me, point-blank, "So, would you ever cheat on your wife?" When I say "I am open to having other lovers, but I would never cheat on my wife--we can become lovers only if she approves," they usually freak out. "Oh, that's just too weird!"

So apparently there are a lot of people who are perfectly fine with lying and deception, who won't hesitate to betray their spouse and think nothing of it--but who can't accept the idea of integrity and honesty.

Those people aren't my lovers. Anyone who can betray their spouse can betray me as well, and I don't want people like that in my life.

### **So you're saying that everyone is either poly or cheating?**

No. Some people seem wired for monogamy. They can stay in a monogamous relationship, and be happy, and never even look at another person. That's cool. But not everybody is like that; in fact, evidence suggests that most people are not.

Even that isn't what matters, though. In the end, it's not about what is "enough." Many poly people could be monogamous, if they really wanted to; in fact, people who can sustain successful polyamorous relationships tend to be **better** at obeying the rules of a relationship, and not cheating, than average people. But poly people don't **want** monogamous relationships.

### **What's wrong with monogamy?**

Nothing.

### **So why don't you want it?**

Because a polyamorous relationship offers more.

When you have more than two people involved in your relationship, it offers you resources and perspectives that you don't have in a monogamous



And it's great for your sex life.

I'm creative in bed. On my better days, I like to think I'm *very* creative in bed. But the fact is, no human being has seen or done it all; in fact, no human being can even begin to scratch the surface of Cool Things To Do In Bed. We have six billion people on the planet right now, and thirty thousand years of recorded human history behind us. Someone, somewhere, has thought of something that you would absolutely love, but you'll never think of yourself.

I've learned a lot of things from my lovers, both in and out of the bedroom, that I have been able to take with me into my relationship with my wife. Not even just new techniques, but sometimes new ways of looking at things. All of those have enriched my relationship, and my life, with my wife.

It may not even be what you're thinking. Not all poly people are into group sex. There are polyamorous individuals who've never had a threesome. **Being poly doesn't necessarily make you kinky. Nor does it mean that you're into orgies, or that you're promiscuous, or that you want to boink everyone you meet.** For polyfidelitous people, being poly really isn't that much different from being monogamous. Polyamory also doesn't make you bisexual; in a polyamorous relationship, all the people involved are not necessarily sleeping with everyone else involved. (The idea of being a guy in the middle of hot girl-on-girl action is a cliché as old as time, but don't think polyamory is automatically going to get you there.)

## Okay, so what's the down side?

The down side is that you have more than two people involved in your relationship.

That is both a blessing and a source of stress. Romantic relationships come with a certain amount of tension built in; I've never known anybody, anywhere, who's never had even a single argument with their lover.

Add another person to the mix, and your potential for disagreements and arguments and tension goes up. A lot. Add two more people to the mix, it goes up even further. The more people you have involved in a romantic relationship, the greater the potential for problems.

It's not necessarily all bad. Sometimes, having people who you can turn to when you have problems is a big blessing. On the whole, however, managing more than one romantic relationship is, not to put too fine a point on it, harder than managing only one.

It is incumbent on any people in a polyamorous relationship to take care that they follow the rules, and make sure everyone's needs are met. Without that, the relationship will fail--just as a monogamous relationship will.

## Let's assume I buy all this. How do I make it work?

it fail. One of the surest ways to make it fail is to lie. If you can't be honest with your partner, and I mean about **everything**, then polyamory isn't for you. If you can't abide by the rules of a monogamous relationship, then poly isn't for you. If you cheat, then poly isn't for you.

Another good way not to make a poly relationship work is to browbeat your partner, or coerce your partner into accepting it. Poly relationships don't work if one of the people involved only grudgingly accepts it; it has to be for the benefit of **everyone**.

## **I'm with you so far. No lying, no bullying; check. Now what?**

Depends on you, and on the person you're involved with. When in doubt, if you're considering trying a polyamorous relationship, it's best to go slowly. Make sure you and your partner feel secure in what you're doing. Make sure you don't get so carried away that you forget about your partner's needs. This is a very easy mistake to make, even if you're watching out for it!

Also, if you are already in a relationship, it is vitally important to make sure that relationship is solid and stable **before** you go experimenting with non-monogamy. A relationship that is not healthy to begin with will further erode if you try to change the foundation on which it is built.

So: No lying, no bullying. Remember to consider the feelings of your partners--ALL of them. Don't forget that everyone has to be happy, or you can bet that nobody will be! Pay attention to your lovers. Don't get distracted.

Get over the idea that polyamory gives you license to be promiscuous. **It doesn't**. Being poly does not mean you sleep with anyone you want. It doesn't mean that your life is an endless vista of wild orgies. Put aside those ideas before you even start; that is not what it's about.

**A poly relationship works only if everyone involved is happy.** While you can't expect someone to be everything for you, all the time (even in a monogamous relationship), there is absolutely no dishonor in telling your lover point-blank "Look, I don't think you're spending enough time with me. You need to pay more attention to me."

And, of course, some common-sense rules are always good. If you have more than one lover, then for God's sake, play safe. You already know the whole safe-sex spiel. Well, do it.

## **But how do I know if I'm even poly at all? How can I tell if this will work for me?**

That's something you have to find out yourself.

If you can imagine sharing your lover, and be happy with that, then that at least suggests that you can be happy in a poly relationship. No guarantee, of course, but at least it's possible.

Generally speaking, polyamory is not something I recommend people just dive into. You need to be secure in your relationship **before** you think about opening it up to other people!

up for the first two years of our relationship, because I thought it was more important to establish a good foundation with her first. Even when it did come up, it was over a year before anything happened--and it was her, not me, who took an outside lover first. This was important, because it let her see firsthand that she could have another lover, and it would not hurt our relationship.

If you're approaching polyamory for the first time, remember that you have to be willing to work at it. You must listen to your partner, without pressuring that person. You must be willing to concentrate on what's important, and on making sure your foundation with that person is stable and secure.

Of course, some people find themselves in a poly relationship without really considering it first. It's easy if that happens to feel overwhelmed, insecure, jealous, angry... Take a step back. Look at the situation rationally, with a cool head. What's happening? Is your partner rejecting you? Is your partner losing interest in you? If the answer is "no," then you should think very carefully before you allow yourself to become angry or jealous. What's really going on? How much of an investment in your relationship are you prepared to make? What assumptions are you making about the way your relationship "should" be, and are those assumptions valid?

Yeah, I know, it's tough.

### **So where would I even find poly people, anyway?**

Where do you find anyone? The world is full of people. It's hard to walk out your door without running into them.

That isn't intended to be flippant. My point is, you can't just go to a certain place and expect to meet people who are poly, or look for a certain sign to tell you when people are poly. It's like anything else. Where do you meet people in general? I've met poly people at conventions, at work, at clubs--you know, the same places you meet anyone else.

And just because someone doesn't advertise that he or she is poly doesn't necessarily mean that person is closed to the idea. My wife wasn't poly when I first met her, but she is now, and in fact is very happy in her relationship with me. I first met her at a McDonald's, of all places.

So the rest is kind of up to you. I can't give you a magical Guide to Making It Work, and I can't tell you where to go to find people who are polyamorous. But I can tell you that, difficulties aside, it can be an incredibly rewarding and fulfilling way to extend and expand your romantic life.

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## **Want to find out more? Here are some links to visit.**

### **[PolyTampa](#)**

Web site for the Tampa, Florida-based poly group we belong to. (Shameless plug; I also created and maintain this site.)

A hands-on description of a working, functioning polyamorous quad. Ins and outs of dealing with full-time polyamory.

### [Polyamory Index](#)

The polyamory section of [sexuality.org](http://sexuality.org). Resources, writings, and so on.

### [Polyamory Through the Eyes of JetteRose](#)

One person's take on the whole poly thing.

### [Some Thoughts on Polyamory](#)

A balanced, well-reasoned rant on the subject--if "balanced" and "well-reasoned" can be said to go along with a rant. Includes a bit of ranting on the subject of some people who [claim to be poly but shouldn't](#).

### [A Boquet of Lovers](#)

A top-notch article on the whys and hows of making a committed, ethical, responsible non-monogamous relationship work.

### [alt.polyamory Web site](#)

Web page for the alt.polyamory newsgroup. Includes FAQ's, a Guide to Screwing Up a Poly Relationship (or, what mistakes NOT to make), and even a poly BBS.

### [polyamory.com](#)

Resources for poly people. Conferences, organizations, books, news, and other resources.

### [Polyamory Society](#)

News, information, discussion, and resources, particularly for people who aren't necessarily poly but know people who are.

### [Thoughts on Polyamory](#)

A well-written, insightful essay on polyamory, directed to an audience who is not familiar with the ideas of polyamorous relationships.

### [The Poly Bureau](#)

Got questions about polyamory? Send 'em in, and these guys will take a stab at answering them. Some interesting and informative stuff here.

### [Subspace](#)

A site for those who, like me, practice both [BDSM](#) and polyamory. Contains a poly BDSM message board, as well as other resources.

### [Poly Meaning](#)

A personal essay on what polyamory means, and the distinction between polyamory and swinging.

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## **And while we're at it, some books on the subject.**

Note that these titles are now links!

### [\*\*The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities\*\*](#)

by Dossie Easton and Catherine Lizst

## **Monogamy** by Adam Phillips

Written by a psychologist, this book examines the traditional concept of marriage in a society where divorce is altogether common.

## **Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships** by Dr. Deborah M. Anapol

An excellent resource for polyamorous people. Focuses more on polyfidelity than on other kinds of polyamory, but another all-around must-read.

## **Lesbian Polyfidelity: A Pleasure Guide for all Women Whose Hearts are Open to Multiple Sexual Loves** by Celeste West

Recommended by an online visitor; I don't know much about this book personally, but it's received excellent reviews.

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