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Building a Polyamorous Relationship: Handout Set

Excerpted from *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit For Therapist (And Their Clients)* by Martha Kauppi



These worksheets are intended to help you support you in the process of building a fulfilling and resilient polyamorous relationship. Want more in-depth guidance for all the challenges and opportunities you will encounter? My book, *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (And Their Clients)*, is for you. [You can find it here.](#)



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MY RELATIONSHIP IDEAS: REFLECTION WORKSHEET

Think back to the romantic or committed relationships you witnessed when you were a child: parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, community leaders, older siblings, etc.

- How were these relationships structured? Monogamous? Open? Other? How did you know?
- What were you raised to believe about fidelity? Do you have memories of learning about infidelity? Did you witness any of the adults in your life dealing with the impact of infidelity? What was it like?
- What were you raised to believe about relationship agreements? Were they negotiable? Set in stone? Made by people? Made by God? Did you witness any adults in your life renegotiate relationship agreements?
- Did the adults in your life discuss things, generally? What happened when there was a disagreement? Did you have role models for positive experiences of coming to agreement or achieving resolution? Was collaboration and creative problem-solving valued and supported?
- Were you raised to follow a rule book or come up with your own solutions?
- Were your parents independent-thinking rebels, rock-solid upholders-of-convention, or somewhere in between?
- Were you raised in a faith tradition? What did your religious tradition teach you about marriage and relationships?
- Did anyone in your community have an “out of the norm” relationship (by your community’s standards) that you were aware of? How did you know? How did people treat them and talk about them?
- Was sex discussed in your family and/or community? If so, how was it discussed? Did you grow up thinking sex was a positive thing, secret, shameful, or something else?



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Think about the time when you began to have romantic feelings, and intimate relationships.

- In your earliest relationships, what ideas did you have about what was normal and acceptable in a romantic relationship? Where did you get your ideas about what was and wasn't okay? Did you discuss fidelity and other agreements with your partner(s)? If so, what were those conversations like?
- Did those ideas change in later relationships? How and why?
- What kinds of relationships did you witness your friends having? How were those relationships structured? How did you know about their structures?
- How did people talk about other people's relationships? How did your friends talk about fidelity, infidelity, agreements, monogamy, and nonmonogamy?
- Have you had experiences with infidelity? How about broken agreements of other kinds? Were you on the giving or receiving end? Did your beliefs about relationships change as a result of either infidelity or broken agreements? Do you think the wounds associated with those breaches have healed? If not, what do you think would be needed to mend the wounds? Is there something you could do from within yourself that would make a difference in your healing?
- Have you ever been in a nonmonogamous relationship? If so, what was that like for you? For your partner(s)? If not, what is the first thought that comes to mind about whether you would ever choose to be in a nonmonogamous relationship?
- Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which a previous relationship agreement is no longer working for you? Did you initiate a renegotiation of a relationship agreement with one of your partners? Have you ever lied about something rather than discuss it? Have you tended to give up something important to you rather than discuss it and renegotiate?



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How did you decide what to do? What happened as a result? How do you feel about it in retrospect?

- Do you think of yourself as being a little conflict-averse or are you more on the side of volatility? How willing are you to initiate a difficult discussion? How able are you to make a soft landing place for someone else to tell you something difficult?

Think about your friends, mentors, and role models. These might be actual people you know and love or fictional characters from a book or movie.

- Do you have role models for positive long-term monogamous relationships? If so, what do you admire about the people involved and their relationship?
- Do you have role models of positive long-term open relationships? If so, what do you admire about the people involved and their relationship?
- If you don't have role models for either monogamy, open relationships, or both, what do you make of that?

Now that you've written down a few notes about each of these questions, take a minute to write down any thoughts that pop out for you after having reflected on these questions. What do you think your current beliefs are about fidelity, nonmonogamy, relationship agreements, polyamory, and related issues? Indicate which of your current beliefs you want to keep and which you would prefer to change. Next to the ones you would prefer to change, write a brief statement about why you want to change them.



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DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

The first two topics on this list, fidelity and connection, will help any partners clarify their feelings about important material. Lack of discussion of these topics has led to all sorts of relationship misunderstandings, so please roll up your sleeves and have some talks. You don't have to be planning to open your relationship to have these discussions.

Safety; primacy; visibility; time, money, and other resources; disclosures; and negotiation are all topics that are relevant to any form of open relationship. Discussing these topics can help you figure out what type of open relationship might serve you, if any. These conversations will surface some issues that can blindside you if not discussed, and it is better to see them coming.

- What does fidelity mean to you?
- When do you feel secure emotionally?
- What do you do to make yourself feel emotionally secure?
- What does your partner do that results in you feeling emotionally secure?
- There are many aspects of sexuality, and your feelings about all of them may not be the same. Your feelings might also be situational or specific to a particular person or gender.

Here are some topics that commonly come up when discussing fidelity, or perceiving infidelity:

- Fantasy about other people
- Fantasy about particular activities we don't do together
- Watching pornography
- Reading erotic stories
- Self-pleasure when alone
- Self-pleasure with your partner present
- Sexting



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- Flirting
- Connecting emotionally
- Connecting emotionally or socially on social media, or sexually with an ex, or with another specific person
- Discussing your relationship with someone else/another friend or partner
- Erotic connection using technology

Connection:

- What does your partner do that really lights you up?
- What do you do that lights your partner up?
- What do you do that lights you up?
- Who else is in your life that contributes to you feeling whole and amazing?
- Who do you have special connections with that you don't want to lose? What is special about those connections? What do they bring to you and your relationships with others?
- Do you have any special connections with others that make you nervous in any way?
- Does your partner have any special connections that make you nervous?
- Regarding connections that make you nervous, what are you nervous or fearful about?
- What type of connections would you like to have more of in your life?
- What people or activities do you think would add to your experience of connection?
- What types of outside connections do you think strengthen your relationship(s) with others?
- What types of outside connections do you think weaken your relationship(s)?

Safety:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about physical safety when dating others?



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- What are your thoughts and feelings about sexual safety when dating others?
- Do you know what you need to know about sexually transmitted infections to make good decisions and strong agreements?
- If not, what do you need to know? The American Sexual Health Association is a great resource, as is Planned Parenthood.
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the safety of your children, housemates, or other family members when dating others?
- Do you have fears about any of your shared resources or any other safety concern to discuss?

Primacy:

- Do you imagine having a primary/secondary relationship structure if you decided to try polyamory? If not, what do you imagine instead?
- What is it about primary/secondary that you like and are drawn to?
- What is it about primary/secondary that worries you or that you think could be problematic?
- Are there things you do with your partner that you would like to reserve for doing just with them? (This could be anything from kissing to going on international trips.)
- What is it about those things that feels special?
- What are some ways you could keep those things special?
- How do you imagine handling a difference of opinion with a partner about doing certain activities with others?
- Are there some things that are particularly difficult for you to think about your partner doing with other people or another person?
- What is it about those things that feel special, important, or unique?



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- What are some ways you could keep your relationship feeling special and unique? (Think of some ways that don't limit activities and some that do.)
- How do you feel when you imagine having your activities with another person curtailed by your partner's preferences? Are there some activities you have stronger feelings about than others?
- How do you feel when you imagine requesting that your partner curtail their activities to match your comfort level or preference? Again, are there certain activities you have stronger feelings about than others?

Visibility:

- What are your feelings about other people, family, friends, or coworkers knowing about your (some form of open) relationship?
- How do you feel when you think about telling other people? (Your feelings might vary from person to person; discuss any that feel relevant.)
- How do you feel when you think about *not* telling others and keeping it private?
- What are the pros and cons of telling/not telling important people?
- What are your thoughts about telling your children about your open relationship?
- How do you feel about public displays of affection with another partner?
- Do you care if your partner has PDAs with others?
- What constitutes a PDA?
- How do you want to handle questions or judgments someone might have about, for instance, a perception of some infidelity as a result of not knowing about your relationship agreements?
- Is there at least one person you can agree would be a safe person to discuss opening your relationship with? If there is more than one person, make a list. It can backfire if you don't



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have sufficient support, so see if you can find at least one person to agree on, or else find a therapist or coach to meet that need.

Time:

- When you imagine opening your relationship, what challenges do you imagine arising regarding allocation of time?
- How much time do you imagine spending with other partners?
- How much time do you imagine your partner(s) spending with other partners?
- Do you feel relaxed and secure about the amount of time you spend with your current partner(s)? If not, why not?
- Does time feel like a limited commodity?
- Do you know where your time goes? If not, write it down for a week and see where you might be able to reallocate some time from less important things to more important things
- Do you feel connected when you are with your partner? If not, what could increase the feeling of connection you get with the time you have together?
- Do you feel relaxed and connected to yourself? If you aren't getting high-quality time alone and you need it, the lack will undermine multiple aspects of your life.
- What do you most love to do alone? Make a list of things you love to do alone. Keep it handy. This can help you find something enjoyable to do if you ever find yourself alone with nothing to do.
- What do you love to do with your partner? Make a list and keep it handy, too. This will help you choose high-reward activities when you have the opportunity to make a conscious choice.
- Are there times you and your partner particularly love being together and times you don't so much? What activities do you enjoy together, and what things don't like to do together? If



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so, that information might help you plan how and when to spend time with others. For instance, maybe that other date is your yardwork buddy, or is amazing at helping with the kids, or really enjoys batch-cooking meals for the week.

Money and Other Resources:

- Does money feel like a limited commodity to you? To your partner?
- Do you have concerns about financial resources in your current relationship situation?
What are your concerns?
- Do you have concerns about financial resources related to opening your relationship? What are your concerns?
- Are there resources other than time and money that you have concerns about related to opening your relationship? What are your concerns?
- How comfortable are you talking about money?
- What are some ways you can imagine handling money matters regarding opening up your relationship that would feel comfortable to you?

Disclosures:

- When do you want to know that your partner(s) is interested in someone new?
- When do you want to tell your partner(s) that you are interested in someone new?
- How much do you want to know about what your partner does with other people?
- How much do you want to share about your activities with other people?
- How comfortable are you with either of you discussing your relationship, challenges, struggles, or issues with another partner? Are there circumstances or topics where your feelings about this vary?



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- How much do you want to hear about struggles your partner(s) might be having with another partner?
- How much would you like to tell your partner(s) about struggles you might be having with another partner?
- If you are considering don't ask/don't tell, how would you like to handle emergencies that might require sharing information?

Negotiation:

- How much advance notice do you like to have for changes in plans? Does it matter whose plans?
- Are there exceptions? How would you like to handle emergencies that result in changes in plans or exceptions to agreements you have in place?
- When do you want to hear about your partner's desire to renegotiate some aspect of your relationship agreements? (Tip: Don't wait until it's time sensitive.)
- How do you plan to make it easy for your partner to share something uncomfortable with you?
- How willing are you to bring up something that your partner might have trouble hearing?
- How confident are you that you and your partner(s) can be honest with one another and discuss the hidden assumptions and particulars of any given agreement? This is important, because if you are not confident about that or you have a partner who is not confident about it, that would be a reason to get to know a therapist or coach who can help you every now and then.
- How comfortable are you discussing the particulars of your relationship agreements? How comfortable is your partner?



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- Do you tend toward oversharing or undersharing? Do you tend to avoid conflict or thrive on a spirited exchange of views? How about your partner(s)?

Discuss your different unique styles of conversation and what might be challenging topics, so you know how to help one another and make sure you cover the ground with important discussions. For instance, if vacations are a hot-button issue for one of you, the other(s) should not wait until the last minute if they want to discuss something about vacation or renegotiate an agreement. A difficult topic will benefit from especially careful communication and lots of positive feedback for the struggling partner(s).



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HOW I PLAN TO HANDLE NEW RELATIONSHIP ENERGY

Fill out this worksheet and put it somewhere you will be able to find it when you or your partner are falling in love with someone new. When the time comes and either you or a partner are experiencing new relationship energy, find this worksheet. Carry it with you or post it prominently, and read it often. Don't lose sight of this material; keep it front and center, and follow your own advice about how to manage your relationships. The success of your polyamorous relationship, and all the important relationships in your life, depends on how you handle yourself when you, or your partner, fall in love with someone new.

- The kind of person I aspire to be is . . . (List at least three qualities you display when you are at your best. A good prompt is to ask yourself, "How would I want the people I love to describe me at my funeral?")
- In my most important relationships, I show those qualities by . . . (It can help to imagine you're watching your life as if it's a movie. How would the movie show, through your character's actions, that you have the qualities you listed? List the actions.)
- The people I want to make sure I stay connected to are . . . (List your most important people: partner(s), children, best friends, closest family members, etc.)
- My favorite qualities of this person are . . . (For each person on the list, give five to 10 of their best qualities. As you consider each person, really allow yourself to feel the love, respect, and admiration that their qualities invoke in you.)
- Fun things I love to do with those people are . . . (List several things for each person. Challenge yourself to find a lot of fun things you can do with the people you love.)
- I feel connected with each of those people when . . . (List moments or activities that make you feel close. Maybe these are already on the fun list, or maybe not. Make sure you identify



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at least one or two activities that feel deeply connecting or rewarding with each person on your list.)

- Fun things I love to do alone are . . . (See if you can list 30 or more things that you have fun doing alone.)
- Describe how you want your partner to feel about you.
- Describe how you want your partner to feel about your polyamorous relationship.
- List some things you can do to elicit those feelings in them, both in the throes of new love and in regular day-to-day life. If you can't think of anything, ask them. It is crucial that you know how to delight your partner and understand what makes them feel good about polyamory.

Start each day by looking at these lists and figuring out at least one small action you can do to show the most important people that you love, enjoy, and appreciate them. Commit to making all your relationships fun, not just the new ones.

To take it one step further, you might choose to write two letters to your future self. In the first letter, describe how you want to handle your intense feelings when you are experiencing NRE with someone new. How do you want to show up for your partner(s) and why? How do you benefit, and what is the payoff? In the second, describe how you want to handle your relationship when your partner experiences NRE. How do you want to show up? Why? What is the benefit to you of showing up in that way?