

Fourteen Steps to Opening a Monogamous Relationship

By Anita Wagner

It's impossible to predict how long it will take to make a successful transition from monogamy to polyamory in a previously monogamous relationship. This is because there are many unknown factors that will effect both of you, factors that don't often present themselves in monogamous relationships.

It is very helpful to acknowledge to yourselves and each other that you are in uncharted waters. That sounds scary, I know, but likely neither of you has done this before, so you must make the journey and deal with obstacles as they arise. The good news is that the guide below, when used with consciousness and commitment, can be a very effective life preserver. And as long as you are generally making forward progress, it's OK. You'll know it when you get to the point where the skies start to clear and your partner is feeling a lot better about sharing you, and you'll know if progress comes to a halt and is unlikely to begin again.

No, this progress probably won't always be linear, and you may take a step back here and there. We are all human, and sometimes we make mistakes, so forgiveness and patience are important components here as well. But the more you devote yourself to making your partner feel loved and cherished and VERY important to you, the better your chances. This is an especially important time for doing special things for them, taking them on dates, etc. You would be wise to make it clear that you do this to prove your devotion and because it makes them happy - not just to persuade them. Plan to keep it up for as long as your relationship lasts. All relationships need this but most are starved for it.

Giving a reluctant partner enough time to adjust is important, and so is framing a plan for opening the relationship that you should revisit and reassess together fairly frequently. Also, your partner can adjust only to a point while you are *not* seeing other people - the rest of the adjustment can only be done while they experience the feelings that come up when you see someone. It can't be done very well in a vacuum.

One of the hardest things about making this transition is that it is for some almost impossible to imagine that they could ever reach a comfort level with sharing their partner. They will even be absolutely convinced that they can't do it. But this doesn't mean they can't, only that their vision is obscured by fear and lack of experience with such matters. None of us knows our own emotional capacity because our society has so limited us in terms of what is expected of us.

Please use the following list as a guideline but amend it to fit the facts in your situation - don't lie and say any of this that isn't true for you. But if it is, here's what has proven to be effective for others in determining just what the outcome is to be. To those who ask, "How can we tell whether continuing to work toward opening the relationship is the best course of action", if you follow these steps, you should both be able to recognize when and if forward progress has stopped and to assess the likelihood of it beginning again so as to know when you come to the point where you have both done all you can. This is an important point, BTW - if things don't work out, you'll both feel better if you can say truthfully to yourselves and each other that you've

done everything you can do to resolve the conflict and preserve your relationship while being true to yourselves.

1. As lovingly and directly as possible, make it clear to your partner that you have been changing and why. If it has little to do with them and your relationship, say so. Either way, convince them that this is who you are now, and that freedom to express who you are is what you need to be happy.
2. Point out that keeping them in your life is also what you want and need, too, and though survival is the only answer no matter what happens, it will be a great loss to you if you can't find a way to work this out between you.
3. Tell them if you don't see yourself moving back toward a monogamous mindset. Encourage them not to hold onto false hopes about that. It is important to live a life that is authentic to who you are. You don't expect them to understand why you have changed and it's OK if they don't, but they should recognize that it is fact, and that it has nothing to do with how good a partner they are, how attractive they are, how good in bed they are, etc. (again, assuming this is so.)
4. Yes, it's true that it is not what was promised at the wedding or when you first committed yourselves to each other. If they are angry about this, acknowledge their anger as understandable as you explain that you couldn't foresee what would later come to pass. Nevertheless it has. You made a monogamous commitment to them and believed you could be happy being monogamous because that's what was expected of you, and you weren't aware that you had any other choices.
5. You have agonized over this dilemma, and it continues to be a source of great concern and heartache for you just as you know it is for them. You regret bringing upheaval into their life and want what's best for him/her as well as yourself. You want very much to find a way to make this work for both of you, given enough time and work.
6. Ask them if they are willing to commit to work on attaining a level of comfort with your seeing others so you can be authentic to who you are without either of you having to go through the wrenching process of splitting up.
7. In as heartfelt and direct a way as possible, make it clear that you intend to honor your relationship, will always remember where home is, and you always want to be with them in ways that keep the two of you tight no matter who else you may also be involved with.
8. You may be accused of emotional blackmail or laying a guilt trip on them by making the following point, but it is still a valid one. If we love another well, their happiness is essential to our own. Your partner's acting in good faith to work toward transitioning to an open relationship would be a great gift of love to you, one that can only serve to deepen your love to them, not take it away. On the other hand, their standing in your way and denying you what you need so as to protect their own happiness is not conducive to a happy relationship because it will leave you feeling frustrated.

9. If your partner agrees to give it a try, make a date to talk again to make a plan as to how it might go initially. Put it in writing.
- NOTE: It is vastly preferable to take these steps BEFORE you meet and develop an interest in a new love, because you and your existing partner are both likely to be more rational absent a sense of imminent threat.
 - Acknowledge that events likely will not go precisely as either of you envision. The plan you are developing is an outline or roadmap to help you both know more about what you can expect from each other, but as events progress there will likely be need to revisit the plan and revise it to incorporate what works and what doesn't as you go along. Then follow the plan.
 - If you later get the feeling that your partner is putting you off or coming up with excuses why you should wait six months, do your best to discuss the delay in terms of their possibly trying to disrupt the process unconsciously. If there are serious reasons why you should wait, i.e. there is already a lot of stress in one or both your lives due to extraordinary circumstances, they aren't foot dragging, and this may indeed *not* be the right time to open the relationship. If their primary motive is purely fear of what all this will ultimately mean, they are foot dragging and letting their fears prevent them from honoring your agreement to work the plan.
10. Think about your partners' self esteem and emotional intelligence. Are they a reasonably confident, well-adjusted person? The more major issues they have with fear of abandonment and poor self-esteem, the less likely they will be able to handle all this without doing some emotional work to get healthier around their own issues. This generally happens faster with the help of a good therapist. If such issues exist and they are resistant to resolving them, going through the process of opening the relationship will be all the misery without the growth that inevitably takes place when both are thinking, talking, sharing, taking responsibility for their own emotions and working to make it work.
11. If your partner does agree to give it a try, this is where baby steps are important. (Note: Inaction and foot dragging do not count as baby steps.) Don't expect them to deal well with it if the first thing you propose is going away for the weekend with someone else. Instead, make a first date with someone else for coffee in the afternoon or on a week night instead of dinner on Saturday night, which holds too much significance as a "date night". Don't stay gone more than a couple of hours. Come home when you say you will, and be attentive to your partner. Check in on how they are feeling and be open to listening to what they are feeling.
12. You may need to repeat step 9 until your partner becomes more comfortable. It is also highly advisable to make a fairly brief, i.e. an hour or two, date for coffee for all three of you. You want your partner and your new potential partner to meet and get to know each other a little. Though it is human nature to do so, it will be much more difficult for your partner to demonize your new love interest once they meet them and see that they are basically nice people.

13. After your partner is reasonably comfortable with your having dates for coffee, acknowledge that it's time to move on to the next step of the plan. Make a dinner date for a week night (no sex!) and come home when you promise. It would be good if your partner makes plans to be busy while you are on your dates, too, by the way, preferably with friends - distractions are good in this circumstance.
14. After the dinner date, check in with your partner very soon, i.e. when you get home or the next morning. Listen, listen, listen. The idea here is to help them desensitize as they recognize that you aren't steamrolling over them, that you still love them, still come home, etc., and are doing everything with accountability and integrity. Accountability and integrity on everyone's part will greatly increase your chances for success. Prove to them in everything you do that they can trust you.

A word of advice about revealing intimate details: In general, don't. This is definitely the exception to the desensitization strategy. All relationships need a certain measure of privacy, which fosters intimacy. Your partner has a right to know the nature of other relationships, i.e. if one is about to become sexually intimate, but beyond that the specifics will likely cause needless pain. Don't fall into the trap of thinking such details must be revealed in the interest of honesty. Some even find such information a turn-on, but this kind of titillation can tend to backfire unless your partner is entirely comfortable – best to steer clear, at least until you have your other partner's permission to reveal such sensitive info and you feel certain that your primary partner no longer feels threatened by your having other lovers.

Hope this helps. I wish you much happiness and the best of luck!

Anita Wagner

Yahoogroup providing support for polyfolk with mono partners:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cpnpolymono/>

Mirror group providing support for mono folks with poly partners:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PolyMono/>

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Feel free to write to Anita at imapolygirl@yahoo.com
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works for you and those you love - she cares!

Rev. 9-12-07