

AVOID THE PITFALLS AND REAP THE REWARDS OF POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS



Polyamory and Sexual Relationship Freedom Activist

Anita Wagner

<http://www.practicalpolyamory.com>

anita.wagner@practicalpolyamory.com

© All rights reserved

Rev. 04/26/07

INTRODUCTION

- It's clear that many of us yearn for a kind of love and intimacy that differs dramatically from the traditional monogamous model we are expected to follow.
- However much we reject that model, the standard of monogamy is all most of us have ever known.
- Religious and social stigmas have been highly effective in discouraging even the notion that there might be other, more satisfying ways of loving.
- Now we who have the courage to break free from the status quo find ourselves without a frame of reference within which to conduct honest non-monogamous relationships.
- You might say we are the pioneers on the frontier of alternative, legitimate ways of loving.
- and just like the pioneers we courageously forge ahead into the unknown without a road or a map.
- and just like the pioneers,
 - some of whom made great sacrifices to civilize areas of great beauty so others could reap the benefits,
 - we polys sometimes keenly feel the absence of useful guides when we first find ourselves in a polyamorous relationship that seems to be out of control and in trouble.
- What was it that the pioneers needed in order to live to a ripe old age more than anything else?
- SURVIVAL SKILLS! And that's just what we polys need, too, in order to see our relationships become the source of love and happiness we are hoping for on this new frontier of relating.
- The good news is, I know what they are, and I'm going to share them with you here.
- With information and awareness, commonly-encountered problems in poly relationships *can* be avoided

- (and) when they do arise, with patience, time and love they can be effectively resolved.
- In this program I'm going to talk to you about eight poly-pertinent problems such as
 - "The-Kid-In-The-Candy-Store" syndrome
 - Hunting ducks where the ducks are (and where they aren't)
 - (and) Jumping the gun
- It is enormously helpful to recognize the importance of remaining ever aware of the various factors that can make or break new poly relationships. By doing so, we greatly enhance our chance of success.

Eight Common Pitfalls to Watch For

PITFALL 1: Lack of Poly Education

- Many inspired by concept (what and why)
- Few seek out information on how it's done (how)
- Well intended, enthusiastic but uneducated, therefore a danger to ourselves and others.
- (Much like needing instruction before getting behind the wheel of a car for the first time.)
- When things start to go wrong, the size of the challenge is seems too much.
- This is critical stage for dropouts.

SOLUTION:

- Be realistic; there is no shame in acknowledging that you need information and seeking it out. No room for egos.
- Read e-mail lists
 - Not the time to be shy - Participate!
 - Ask questions
 - Don't hesitate to write privately to subscribers whose advice you are drawn to - people like to help.
- Read books and LM
- Seek out local community for info and support

- **Communicate, communicate, communicate -OFTEN** develop the habit of talking to SOs throughout the learning process and share insights about poly relationships, your relationship and yourself.
- **Experienced polys encounter challenges with new situations, too.**
- **Few are experienced, insightful and knowledgeable enough to go it alone without some kind of continuing poly education at some point.**

PITFALL 2 -- Lack of Basic Intimate Relationship Skills

- **Many turn to poly and blame monogamy as reason for failed relationships**
- **Real problem was lack of basic intimate relationship skills**
- **Happy poly relationships require the same skills as all successful close relationships do:**
 - **Listening and communication skills**
 - **Negotiation skills**
 - **Trustworthiness/Honesty**
 - **Respect**
- **If we choose to be poly in order to achieve more intimacy, but when faced with a situation where we must be honest we get scared and lie instead, by being dishonest we drive a wedge between ourself and our partners that kills intimacy. In that event we most certainly set ourselves up for failure.**
- **If we fail to listen to our partners well and respect their feelings and concerns, again, we set ourselves up for failure.**

SOLUTION:

- **Again, educate yourself.**
- **Deal with your fear of being honest**
- **Learn to listen well without judging**
- **Be a person of your word, especially when it really counts.**
- **Learn to negotiate with your partner instead of fighting**
- **If you must fight, ALWAYS fight fair (no name calling, etc.)**
- **Accept and remember that possessing these skills directly affects your capacity to be good at polyamory.**
- **No one can betray a partner's trust, treat them abusively and expect the relationship to be a happy one, or even "good enough". Don't kid yourself – it just doesn't work that way.**

- Many good books in the psychology section of the library and book store

PITFALL 3 Falling Victim to the Kid in the Candy Store Syndrome.

- Excitement of possibilities blinds us to our limitations
- NRE blinds further
- Problems result when taking on too many relationships in too short a period of time
- All new relationships need time to establish themselves. Getting to know a partner and building trust takes time. The older the relationships, the stronger the bond and trust that will sustain it in times of trouble.
- Taking on too many at once sets us up for trouble juggling everything when trouble arrives.
- Be wary of taking on more “inner circle” relationships than you can handle during worst of times.
 - Crises take emotional energy normally used in relationships.
 - Emotional energy can be drained away by crises, leaving less to spend on multiple demanding relationships
 - Backing off relationships we don’t have time or energy for can be painful for all and add even more stress to what may already be a stressful time.

SOLUTION:

- Slow down! Too much of this kind of candy can give you more than a tummy ache. Go ahead and indulge yourself, but don’t overindulge.
- It’s easy to think we have to seize the day when a new love interest comes along – after all, love might never come again, right? Wrong. This is very risky thinking.
- Know that if we minimize the number of non-negotiable requirements a potential partner must meet, there is love to be had out there, and we can find it when we are ready for it if we are patient. It’s a lot better than taking on too much, thereby damaging other healthy relationships
- Remain aware of your responsibilities to your existing partners. All hearts hang in the balance.
 - DON’T let NRE with a new partner distract you from your duty to spend time and be loving with your existing loves.

- **Don't start relationships you don't have sufficient time and attention for without being clear as to what your new partner can expect from you.**
- **Talk with partners about what might happen if your or someone else's needs must take priority for a while.**
- **Recognize and acknowledge with your partners that, though you dearly hope it never becomes necessary, changed circumstances in a relationship with a higher level of commitment could necessitate that your relationship be renegotiated.**
- **Share your goals with new partners, especially goals that could limit your time in the future or cause you to move away. They deserve the option to opt out early if chances are good that you will have not enough time for them in the future. At the very least they deserve to enter into a relationship with you with their eyes open.**

PITFALL 4: Hunting Ducks Where The Ducks Are – and Where They Aren't

Type 1: Dating People Who are Monogamous

- **Reason: Some believe there aren't enough available polyfolk**
- **Don't expect too much if you are not willing to be monogamous**
- **Some monogamous people think polyamory sounds cool and indicate a willingness to learn more, especially if they are also falling in love**

SOLUTION:

- **See to your monogamous partner's poly education – remaining blissfully unaware or in denial will only backfire down the road**
- **Pace yourselves emotionally throughout the learning process**
- **Talk with your monogamous partner about what they are learning and get to know each other within a polyamorous relationship context, as much as is feasible.**
- **Few really know themselves well as to how they will really experience polyamory until they've had some experience with it.**
- **Allow monogamous people time to experience benefits and challenges of polyamory reconcile their misgivings embrace polyamory for themselves. Only then can they be reasonably certain they are in fact on the right relationship path for them.**
- **Allow monogamous people time to**
 - **experience benefits and challenges of polyamory**

- **reconcile their misgivings**
- **embrace polyamory for themselves**
- **Only then can they be reasonably certain they are in fact on the right relationship path for them.**

Type 2: Dating people recently widowed, separated and divorced - special considerations:

- **It is well known that for many what we want and need from a love relationship during the divorce process is much different than what we will need after we've finished it.**
- **Emotional resources more limited while "achieving an emotional divorce."**
- **True even more so with custodial parents.**

SOLUTION:

- **Very high risk - go slowly.**
- **Pace yourself emotionally**

Type 3: Desire for opening mono relationships

- **Stakes are high, especially if relationship is valued, partner is very conservative and/or jealous.**
- **One leads the way, the other often reluctant; Rarely do both partners equally invested in successful outcome, especially in the beginning.**

SOLUTION:

- **If partners reaction to idea is horror - let it go for a while.**
- **If same reaction 2nd time, resign self to monogamy while with this partner if possible. If not, DON'T CHEAT. Do the right thing and make the tough choice.**
- **If partner is open but reluctant, be very clear that:**
 - ✓ **Contemplating such a life in order to please one's partner without personal desire for it is frightening – from their perception there is no payoff but much to lose.**
 - ✓ **BE PATIENT - You can only go as fast as the slowest person – understanding polyamory and dealing with common but difficult feelings of insecurity takes time**
 - ✓ **Educate yourselves (See above)**
 - ✓ **Don't stop talking with one another – COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.**

- ✓ **Heal thy relationship (Trust problems especially)**

PITFALL 5: Jumping the gun

Type 1: The Kid in the Candy Store does it

- **See pitfall 3 above. Rushes into too many relationships too quickly**

Type 2: Individuals do it

- **Some need to heal emotional issues in order to be successful at any kind of intimate relationship**
- **Are afraid to face internal demons and hope poly will work where monogamy failed**
- **Poly relationships do especially poorly when those involved are seriously co-dependent, have poor self-esteem, have been abused, are commitment phobic, have abandonment issues, etc.**
- **These unresolved issues follow us into new relationships and can bring out insecurities that your partner(s) haven't the power to help you resolve with reassurance and time**

SOLUTION:

- **Be brave, do the responsible, loving thing and GET THEE INTO COUNSELING.**
- **Your future poly relationships will have a much better chance of succeeding**
- **It's the loving thing to do for yourself as well as them.**

Type 3 Couples do it

- **See Pitfall 2 (Lack of basic relationship skills)**
- **Unresolved resentments**
- **Trust problems**

SOLUTION:

- **Get thyself into counseling and heal thy relationship.**
- **The people you date will find the two of you a much more attractive package**
- **A lot of heartbreak can be avoided for the sake of all involved.**

- **NOTE: Opening mono relationships can serve to improve them where needs cannot otherwise be met, but won't work without sound trust and honesty in place.**

PITFALL 6: Letting Guilt, Fear and Jealousy Get the Best of You

GUILT:

- **Some polys have trouble shaking off deeply-held beliefs about virtue and respectability**
- **Feelings of shame can overwhelm to the point of making some polys return to monogamy**

SOLUTION:

- **Right up front, promise yourself to chase away staid notions about what constitutes "respectable" behavior**
- **Don't give other people or institutions control over how you feel about yourself**
- **Recognize that traditional monogamous behaviors like cheating are certainly NOT respectable**
- **Recognize that the quality of character is not determined by the kind of relationship you choose but instead by your actions within them**
- **You are the master of your life**
- **Refuse to let any person or institution shame you for loving others openly and honestly**
- **You have every right to be happy**

FEAR:

- **Some polys become afraid of the unknown (what will happen when he gets a girlfriend, etc.)**
- **Some polys become afraid of what parents/friends/the boss will think**

SOLUTION:

- **Feel the fear and do it anyway**
- **Keep moving forward despite fear – hang in there and don't give up too easily or quickly if you really want to be poly.**
- **Remember that guilt and fear are often highly irrational and exaggerate our emotions beyond what is reasonable for the circumstances**
- **Develop a tough hide**

JEALOUSY:

- **Frightening to feel, again, overwhelming**

SOLUTION:

- **Recommend reading Deb Anapol on different kinds of jealousy**
- **Download PDF of Anita's jealousy handout at <http://www.practicalpolyamory.com>**
- **Be patient with yourself and work with partner(s) to find what works**
- **Doesn't have to destroy relationship**
- **Once fears are proven unfounded, moving past them often leads to their being replaced with feelings of compersion.**

PITFALL 7: The Challenges of Poly Parenting

- **Worry about effect of poly on children (guilt, shame, etc.)**
- **Worry about persecution by extended family and friends**
- **Worry about legal problems (charges of child endangerment, etc.)**
- **Problems akin to those with step parenting. i.e. parental authority issues**

SOLUTION:

- **Be a responsible parent**
- **Don't hide from community (join PTA, etc.) This demonstrates that yours is a normal family**
- **Make sure nothing happens that is not age appropriate for children present**
- **Talk with partners on appropriate parenting; talk with children in an age appropriate way about how they feel about having and accepting their new parental figures.**
- **Shake off societal conditioning and guilt – children do fine as long as there is at least one adult serving as a responsible parent consistently present in their lives.**

PITFALL 8: Failing to get what poly demands of us all

- Romantic involvement with a poly person who is also romantically involved with someone else automatically obligates us to always act in good faith and be mindful of the best interests of all involved.
- Be respectful of other loves place in the life of our mutual love
- Be cooperative and flexible.
- Be generous with our partner's time and attention
- Recognizing that what we do that hurts our partner's partners hurts our partner as well.
- It's a package deal
- Not about competition. If you feel a strong need to compete or pretend that other partners don't exist, you're definitely on shaky ground.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, tonight I told you about eight major pitfalls to watch for in poly relationships:

- 1. Lack of Poly Education**
- 2. Lack of Basic Intimate Relationship Skills**
- 3. The Kid in the Candy Store Syndrome**
- 4. Hunting Ducks where the Ducks are and where they are not**
- 5. Various ways we jump the gun**
- 6. Letting guilt, fear and jealousy get the best of us**
- 7. Worries about poly parenting**
- 8. Failing to get what poly demands of us all.**

Please note that:

- **Some of these issues bleed over into each other, and multiple factors can be present in any given situation.**
- **The more that are present, the greater the challenge, but I would never say that any one of them automatically spells doom.**
- **Do your best to remain aware**
- **Be deliberate in your actions**
- **Regularly evaluate your developing relationships and what they bring to your life, both good and bad.**

- **Be brave, and be willing to set healthy boundaries and enforce them, both with yourself and others.**

Final thoughts:

- **People who are successful at and find happiness in polyamorous relationships tend to be more ethical, responsible, respectful, patient, loving, emotionally secure and open to intimacy than those who are not.**
- **The good news is that we are all works in progress,**
- **You don't have to be perfect to adequately possess those qualities,**
- **You have the ability to better your skills and yourself in any of those areas,**
- **A world of loving abundance beyond your fondest hopes lies waiting for you if you do**