

Foreword by Carrie Jenkins, author of *Sad Love*

"A must-read for anyone
navigating open relationships."

— Esther Perel

Audiobook Supplement

polywise

A Deeper Dive into
Navigating Open Relationships

Jessica Fern

author of *Polysecure*

with David Cooley

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A Deeper Dive into Navigating Open Relationships

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Sample Paradigm Beliefs Chart

| Monogamous Beliefs | Nonmonogamous Beliefs |
|---|---|
| Long-term monogamous relationships are the only “real” or legitimate relationships. | Romantic and intimate relationships can unfold in many ways. There is no one standard for love. |
| If you are truly in love with someone, you won’t be interested in anyone else. | Love is not inherently exclusive, and can be genuinely felt and expressed in more than one relationship at a time. |
| You can get too close to other people; connecting with others outside of a relationship is dangerous. | Connection with others is expansive and relationship-enhancing. The more connected I feel, the more I have to offer all my partners. |
| My partner should be the only one who takes care of my needs for intimacy and connection, and vice versa. | It is impossible for one person to meet all of another person’s needs, and having multiple, intimate connections can free us up from thinking that we have to be “everything” for each other. |
| The need or desire for space in a relationship means something is wrong. | Taking space for oneself and having separate experiences supports individual autonomy and can help maintain a romantic or sexual spark. |
| If a partner is attracted to someone else, it’s because I’m not enough. | Attraction can be diverse and my or my partner’s attraction to others has nothing to do with a deficiency in self or other. |
| Monogamy is just easier. | Some aspects of having only one partner are easier, and others are harder. |

| The Four Horsemen | Examples | Impact | Antidote | Examples | Impact |
|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Criticism: Attacking the other person's character. Ascribing negative intentions to their words or actions.</p> | <p>"You didn't let me know that you were going to be late because you were too focused on getting laid. You only think about yourself and don't care about me."</p> <p>"You're always distracted on your phone and never pay attention to me."</p> | <p>The person receiving criticism can feel attacked, rejected, hurt and like who they are or what they do is never good enough.</p> | <p>Giving feedback that focuses on specific behaviors or a specific incident without assuming what the other person's intentions were.</p> <p>Talk about your own feelings using "I" statements and express a positive need.</p> <p>Invite your partner into the positive experience that you want with them versus just focusing on what you didn't like or don't want.</p> | <p>"It's really hard for me when you don't come home at the time we agreed to, especially without knowing what's going on. Next time could you send me a text if you know you're going to be out later than you said?"</p> <p>"I really love it when I get your undivided attention because it feels amazing to have you just focus on me for a bit. Would you be willing to have times when the phone is away and we just focus on each other?"</p> | <p>Safety can be restored when we experience that our partner no longer verbally attacks us, and trust is restored when we are able to take responsibility for our own experiences and needs.</p> |

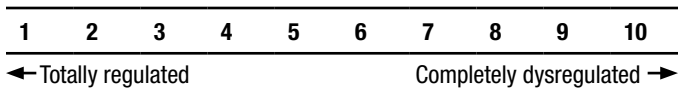
| The Four Horsemen | Examples | Impact | Antidote | Examples | Impact |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Contempt: Taking a superior stance towards another. Acting as if your partner is beneath you in some way.</p> | <p>Eye-rolling, sarcasm, cynicism, mocking language, speaking with hostility, mimicking your partner's speech, ridiculing, patronizing.</p> | <p>The person on the receiving end can feel all of the previously named impacts from criticism, but also forms of humiliation, damaged self-worth and shame.</p> | <p>Treat your partner with respect. Even if you don't agree with them or like what they are doing, you can still speak to them with basic consideration. Build a culture of gratitude in your relationship, where appreciation is expressed daily.</p> | <p>"I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to load the dishwasher when I work late? I'd really appreciate it."</p> | <p>The overall wellbeing of the relationship depends on maintaining a baseline of care and respect and a culture of gratitude. Avoiding contempt, even when triggered or upset, is one of the most important ways to protect the health of your connection.</p> |
| <p>Defensiveness: Making excuses for our own behavior, playing the victim or turning what our partner is saying back onto them in a blameful way. This is often used as a response to feeling accused, judged or criticized.</p> | <p>Question: "Did you call Ron and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight like you promised this morning?" Defensive response: "You know just how busy my schedule was today. Why didn't you just do it?"</p> | <p>Your partner will feel unheard and blamed for their attempt to get information from you. Over time, this creates a pattern where partners start to avoid bringing important things up because they fear having to deal with this defensiveness.</p> | <p>Accept responsibility for your part in the situation. Allow your partner's experience, even if it is different from yours. Take ownership for any of the ways you didn't follow through with an agreement and be willing to acknowledge the impact of your behaviors.</p> | <p>"No, I didn't. I'll call them now." "You know, I totally forgot. I should have asked you to do it this morning because I knew my day would be packed. That's my fault. I'll call them right now."</p> | <p>This kind of accountability promotes a lot of trust and respect. It lets your partner know that you value your commitments and can be trusted to repair broken agreements, which also creates a sense of reliability. It also makes partners feel safe to bring up important issues instead of keeping quiet and becoming avoidant.</p> |

| The Four Horsemen | Examples | Impact | Antidote | Examples | Impact |
|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Stonewalling: Withdrawing, shutting down or no longer responding to your partner after you've become triggered in a conversation or interaction. Often a specific response to contempt or overwhelm from experiencing one or more of the first three horsemen.</p> | <p>Silence. Walking away without saying that you need a break or that you'll be back.</p> <p>Hanging up when you're on the phone or intentionally not responding to texts. Giving your partner the silent treatment, tuning out or acting busy so that your partner won't interact with you. Statements like "just forget it," or "it's fine," (when it's clearly not), "Whatever!" or "OK, you win!"</p> | <p>Starts to foster an emotional climate of disconnection and lack of safety in the relationship. It creates uncertainty and sends the message you don't care about the other person's feelings. Also makes initiating repair even more difficult because there is no opening or way to approach.</p> | <p>Take the space you need, assert appropriate boundaries to avoid falling into the other horsemen and return to the conversation when you feel resourced again. Take a break, learn the signs and symptoms of when you are getting emotionally flooded and overwhelmed, so that you can pause or ask your partner to pause and slow down, giving you the chance to stay engaged, without having to cut and run. Lower your tolerance for receiving the fourth horseman. Speak up for yourself in a direct and respectful way if you feel like one of your boundaries is being crossed or you are being disrespected.</p> | <p>"To be honest, I'm feeling too angry to keep talking about this right now. Can we please take a break and come back to it in a bit? It'll be easier to work through this after I've calmed down." "I understand that you're upset right now, but what you're saying is hurtful, and feels like you're naming my experience for me instead of owning your own feelings about this situation."</p> | <p>Explicitly naming the fact that you're triggered and needing to take a break before things escalate into full-blown conflict goes a long way towards protecting the relationship from ruptures that can be hard to repair later. Demonstrating this kind of emotional regulation in the middle of a tense moment also lets your partner know that you are still safe. Clearly stating your boundaries without counterattacking allows you to have confidence in your ability to take care of yourself without needing to shut your partner completely out.</p> |

| Punitive Paradigm | Restorative Paradigm |
|---|---|
| Reason-based focus | Relational-based focus |
| Purpose is to determine right from wrong and then assign blame to wrongdoer. | Purpose is to determine who has been hurt and how, then repair the hurt. |
| The wrongdoer is considered morally compromised and subject to negative labels; shame or damaged self-image is often a consequence of these labels. | Individuals responsible for harm are seen as complex human beings, capable of making mistakes and worthy of the chance to acknowledge and repair the harm they cause. |
| Outcomes are meant to punish or sanction wrongdoer; this is considered the proper application of justice. | Outcomes are meant to restore the relational ruptures between individuals that occur in conflict. |
| Individuals are positioned against each other in an adversarial posture, with the expectation of a “winner” and “loser.” | Individuals are positioned as collaborators in a restorative posture, where everyone is considered a stakeholder in the repair of the relationship. |
| Primes us for emotional intensity and contentiousness, putting us on edge and making us apprehensive about engaging each other. | Creates an emotional environment of mutual respect and safety, allowing us to approach conflict with curiosity and an open heart. |
| Typically generates fear and avoidance, making it more likely that conflict lingers and goes unresolved. | Encourages empathy and vulnerability, functioning as an invitation to work together to change the conflictual patterns. |

TABLE 4.1: Comparisons of punitive and restorative paradigms.

CHAPTER FOUR



SPEAKER

LISTENER

- 1 Describe your own experience** of what happened. Use “I” statements and avoid commenting on other people’s feelings or interpreting the reasons and intentions behind their actions. Try to present your position without blame or criticism.

As the speaker shares their experience, stay connected to the intention to listen to them with an open heart and mind. Continually reconnect with the intention to listen fully with interest, empathy and sincerity. This is an extremely active process that requires you to resist distraction and really attune to the other people involved. Track your own internal reactions as they arise. Be aware of the thoughts, feelings, judgments, memories or stories that arise within you when listening to the speaker. Silently acknowledge their presence, but then quickly return your full attention to the speaker.

Summarize what the speaker just shared.

You don’t need to recite their words verbatim; you just want to capture the essence of what their experience was, along with the feelings and needs that accompanied their perception of what happened. Do not add any of your own commentary, explanations, analysis or perceptions. It is imperative that the other person feels heard before moving on to more content. When you’re done summarizing, ask the speaker if you got it right, or if they want to change or reiterate something that you may have missed. Postpone sharing your own experience until you switch roles after step 7.

SPEAKER

LISTENER

2

After the listener reflects back what they heard you say, **pause for a moment and check in with yourself** to see if you feel understood by them. If yes, go on to step 4. If no, repeat anything you think is important that the listener may have missed or that you really want them to understand. It's important that you not move on until you really feel understood. It's OK if you need to go back and forth a few times. Be patient and manage any defensiveness or inner frustration that you may feel if they didn't fully get it the first time. Once you feel like they "got it," go to step 3.

If the speaker does not feel fully understood, ask "What do I need to know to understand your experience or perspective better?" Listen to what they said and then summarize what you heard, checking in as to whether you got it or if there is anything else you missed, or anything else they need to say.

Go back and forth as much as the speaker needs to until they feel like you really got it. Stay open and manage any defensiveness or inner frustration that may arise if you didn't get it the first time. Once the speaker feels understood, move to step 3.

SPEAKER

LISTENER

3 Receive the acknowledgement from the listener.

Once the speaker feels like you understand their experience, now it is time to **acknowledge their experience** by saying something like, “*It makes sense to me why you see it this way,*” “*I see why you would have felt the way you did,*” or “*I understand why this was so hard for you,*” etc. Acknowledging your partner’s experience does not mean that you have to agree with it 100%. It also doesn’t mean that your own experience is invalid by validating theirs. It means that you are connecting with what they went through as if you were listening to a friend who just went through a painful situation and you’re empathizing with them.
*Avoid explaining how this makes you feel or launching into an apology.

4 Thank your partner for acknowledging you and then share any positive impact or feelings that you’re experiencing as a result of them taking the time to see you and understand your perspective.

Take responsibility: Share with your partner what you see as your contribution to the incident. Without making excuses for your behaviors, share what you specifically regret, what you wish to apologize for and what you see that you could have done differently.

SPEAKER

LISTENER

5 **Accept your partner's apology**, or let them know what you still need in order to really accept their attempt to be accountable.

6 **Take responsibility**: Share with your partner what you see as your contribution to the incident. Without making excuses for your behaviors, share what you specifically regret, what you wish to apologize for and what you see that you could have done differently.

SPEAKER & LISTENER

7 **Switch and repeat** steps one through seven with the other participants.

8 **Take turns sharing** what you each think are the important takeaways and lessons learned from this situation. Decide whether any of these insights could be useful for crafting agreements about how to do things differently in the future.

9 **Make agreements**: Finally, talk about anything that's needed to repair what happened, and how to do it better next time. Share if there is anything that any of you needs from each other to be able to put this behind you and move on. Take turns sharing one to three things that you agree to do differently the next time something like this happens again. Then share one to three things that the other participants could do to make it better next time. If you need to, write these agreements down so that you all can refer to them and keep them fresh in your minds.

TABLE 4.2: Nine steps for a better conversation.

| Codependent behavior | Explanation | Interdependent skill or behavior to apply |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Holding in | The way you relate to your internal reality is by holding it in, containing or keeping in things that need to be expressed, as well as concealing, minimizing or denying your experience and reality. | Sharing your inner world in a way that reveals your truth, opinion, feelings and needs. Speaking up and advocating for yourself when timely and appropriate. |
| Venting out | The way you relate to your internal reality is by pushing it out, making it known to everyone around you, dumping it onto others or exaggerating and dramatizing it. | Learning how to hold your own experience with an appropriate level of containment that can share what you're going through but does not put it onto others. |

| Codependent behavior | Explanation | Interdependent skill or behavior to apply |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Pulling away/ withdrawing | Taking a posture in a relationship that is too far back: disengaging, avoiding, disconnecting, not touching, too little contact. | Learning how to lean into and reach for your partner and interpersonal interactions. |
| Pushing into/grasping | Taking a posture towards a partner that is too far in: steamrolling, clinging, constant texting, too much contact. | Learning self-regulation skills so you can soothe yourself in moments of anxiousness. |
| Overfunctioning | Too much responsibility for the relationship or your partner, too much emotional or practical labor, rescuing, being someone's coach or therapist, thinking you're responsible for your partner's reactions or feelings. Thinking you can fix what's happening for others. | Look at the ways the strategy of caretaking your partners interferes with or overrides your ability to tend to your own needs. Recognize any discomfort you may feel when seeing partners struggle with life challenges and resist the urge to rescue them from their difficulty or pain. Respect their autonomy as individuals and their need to cultivate personal agency. |

| Codependent behavior | Explanation | Interdependent skill or behavior to apply |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Underfunctioning | Not taking responsibility for what's yours or what the relationship needs to stay healthy, blaming others for your difficulties or pain. Getting stuck in a victim narrative. | Acknowledge the areas of your life where you have made a partner responsible for some aspect of your personal wellbeing—physical, emotional, financial, administrative, etc. Assume the responsibility for this element of your experience unless otherwise negotiated. |

TABLE 5.1: Examples of codependent behaviors and their antidotes.

| What is my enmeshed or codependent behavior? | How is this behavior serving me (or what benefits am I deriving from this behavior)? | What is the cost of this behavior to me and my partners? | How can I use a new behavior to correct or change the pattern? | What can I request of my partners, or how can I communicate my intention to change? |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Example: Letting Dave know that I see important emails in Dave's inbox that he should read. | I reduce my own anxiety that Dave will miss important work things that could lead to him losing his job and me having even more responsibilities if he is jobless. | I'm doing too much for him and not focusing on my own projects. This leads to feelings of resentment. Dave is not developing the skills he needs to manage his own job. | No longer looking at Dave's inbox, and letting that be his responsibility. Managing my own fears and anxiety. | "Dave, I've realized that I'm participating in a codependent pattern by keeping track of your work emails for you. I've been doing this to help you, but also to manage my own anxiety about you keeping up with your work emails. The impact is that I get resentful and I have less time for my own projects. I'm not going to do this anymore." |
| Example: Not asking for help when I need it. | I don't have to be too vulnerable or deal with the possible disappointment of Dave not showing up for me. If I explicitly keep asking and he repeatedly doesn't show up for me, I have to face the potential end of the relationship. | Feeling overwhelmed, alone and resentful. Feeling less attracted to Dave. | Asking for help when I need it while also knowing that no one can help me 100% of the time. | "Hey, Dave. I'm starting to feel overwhelmed about the logistics for our upcoming trip and it would be really helpful for reducing my stress and anxiety if you could be the one to take on putting our meals together beforehand." |

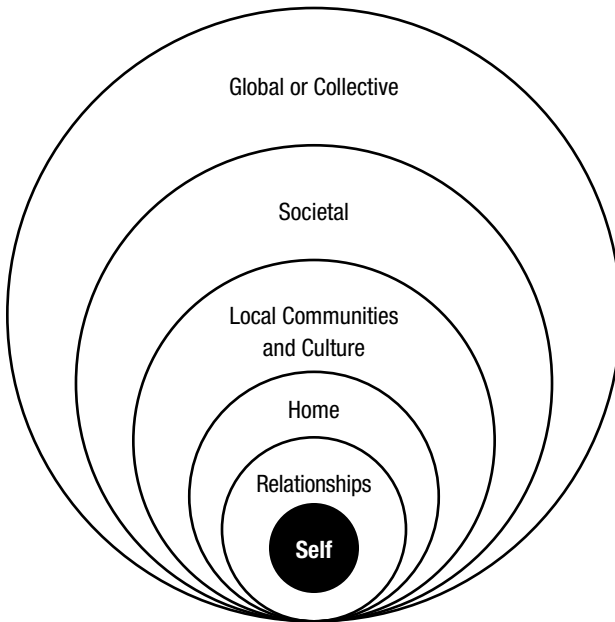
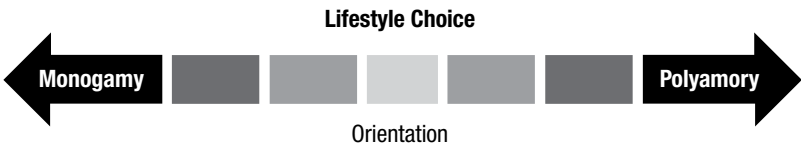


FIGURE 5.1: The Nested Model of Attachment and Trauma



| Stage of Development | Typical Ages and Percentage of the Adult Population | Associated Traits | Focus | Capacities Under Conscious Awareness | Capacities Still in Progress or Under Development |
|------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|
| Stage 1: The Impulsive Mind | Early childhood. Approximately 2–6 years old. | Learning about the objects of the world. Trouble understanding others' perspectives or opinions. Needs to be repeatedly reminded of social rules. | External | — | Impulses and perceptions. |
| Stage 2: The Imperial Mind | Adolescence 6 years to teens (6% of adult population). | Self-centric, self-protective and opportunistic. Tendency to view relationships in utilitarian terms. Limited ability to take others' perspectives. Seeks out and follows unchanging universal rules. | Internal/individualistic | Impulses and perceptions. | Feelings, needs, interests and desires. |
| Stage 3: The Socialized Mind | Post-adolescence (58% of the adult population). | “I am my relationships, and I follow the rules.” Oriented to maintaining affiliation with group or family. Capable of goal-setting, planning, self-reflection and empathy. Able to think abstractly and reflect on others' actions. Can be diplomatic or conformist. | External/collective An outside-in approach to understanding and defining one's self. | Feelings, needs, interests and desires. | Interpersonal relationships, mutuality. |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Stage 4: The Self-Authoring Mind | Adult (35% of the adult population). | <p>“I have an identity. I make choices.”</p> <p>Identifies values and aims to contribute meaningfully.</p> <p>Able to identify the need for and nurture affiliations.</p> <p>Self-guided, self-evaluative, conscientious and responsible.</p> | Internal/individualistic An inside-out approach to understanding and defining one’s self. | Interpersonal relationships, mutuality. | Self-authorship, identity, ideology. |
| Stage 5: The Self-Transforming Mind | Adult (1% of the adult population). | <p>“I hold many identities. I embrace paradox.”</p> <p>Able to regard multiple perspectives simultaneously.</p> <p>Able to think systematically and embrace complexity.</p> <p>Attentive to multiple levels (self, collective, systemic).</p> | Both external / collective and internal / individualistic. An integration of both an inside-out and an outside-in approach to understanding and defining one’s self. | Self-authorship, identity, ideology. | Dialectic among ideologies. |

TABLE 7.1: Kegan’s stages of development. Adapted from *The Evolving Self* by Robert Kegan, 1982.

| Monogamy and Kegan's stages | Nonmonogamy and Kegan's Stages |
|--|--|
| <p data-bbox="153 482 277 506">Imperial mind</p> <p data-bbox="153 529 495 725">Adolescent mentality/self-centered. I do what I want, when I want. My needs are the only ones that matter. I don't cheat because I'm afraid to get caught, but I would probably cheat if I thought I could get away with it.</p> | <p data-bbox="529 482 650 506">Imperial mind</p> <p data-bbox="529 529 866 788">I'm reclaiming the primacy of my needs and wants. My need for freedom is more important than your need for safety. Any request for me to slow my pace is an imposition on my freedom. I will honor our agreements only when it's convenient to do so or fits with my needs.</p> |
| <p data-bbox="153 812 298 835">Socialized mind</p> <p data-bbox="153 859 495 1110">I am monogamous because that is what is acceptable in my world. I am a respectful and loving partner because that is how I was raised. I respect your needs because that is what "good" partners do. I believe cheating is morally wrong even though I may have the desire to be with other people.</p> | <p data-bbox="529 812 671 835">Socialized mind</p> <p data-bbox="529 859 866 1172">I identify as nonmonogamous and I follow the "rules" of CNM. We must negotiate our needs because that is what we do as CNM partners. CNM culture says agreements are important, so I make them with my partner and strive to follow them, and I feel like a bad person when I don't. CNM culture says prescriptive hierarchy is bad even though I want it, and I feel bad for not being CNM enough.</p> |

| Monogamy and Kegan's stages | Nonmonogamy and Kegan's Stages |
|--|--|
| <p data-bbox="184 232 311 255">Self-authoring</p> <p data-bbox="184 279 505 686">I have considered the possibilities of (and maybe even experienced) other relationship structures, and I consciously choose exclusivity. Monogamy meets my needs, and I feel happiest in a monogamous relationship. I am clear about my personal values and monogamy is in alignment with them, but my exclusive relationship will have elements that are less traditional, such as travel apart, fluid gender roles or sleeping in different beds.</p> | <p data-bbox="557 232 684 255">Self-authoring</p> <p data-bbox="557 279 915 537">Despite the fact that CNM is not generally accepted, I choose to be in an open relationship. Through my experiences with CNM, I constantly learn more about myself and my needs. The philosophy and principles of CNM are in alignment with my own as an autonomous, free-thinking person.</p> |
| <p data-bbox="184 707 391 730">Self-transforming mind</p> <p data-bbox="184 754 524 1099">I don't necessarily identify as monogamous, I'm simply not interested in more than one relationship at this point in my life. I recognize that monogamy is only one of many valid relationship structures but I choose it for myself. I recognize the potential shortcomings or pitfalls of monogamy and choose the elements that suit me and my relationship and leave out the ones that don't.</p> | <p data-bbox="557 707 764 730">Self-transforming mind</p> <p data-bbox="557 754 915 1122">I don't necessarily identify as nonmonogamous but the authentic expression of my needs in this moment are served by some form of CNM. I see nonmonogamy not as an identity but rather as a stepping stone along a bigger journey of self-discovery. I recognize the potential shortcomings or pitfalls of nonmonogamy and create my own unique version of it, tailored to my particular path as an individual, knowing it could change at any point.</p> |

TABLE 7.2: Applying stages two through four of Kegan's developmental stages to monogamy and nonmonogamy.

GLOSSARY

Compersion

The positive feelings experienced when a lover or partner is having a positive experience with one of their other lovers or partners.

Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM)

The practice of having or being open to multiple sexual or romantic partners at the same time, where all people involved are aware of this relationship arrangement and consent to it. CNM can take forms such as polyamory, swinging, open marriage, open relationships, solo polyamory and relationship anarchy.

Garden party polyamory

An approach to polyamory where metamours only spend time together at social events, such as a mutual partner's birthday. In such cases, these metamours will usually have cordial and respectful interactions or even a friendly connection, with little contact outside of these events.

Kitchen table polyamory

An approach to polyamory where partners and metamours are friendly or close with each other, all comfortable sitting at the literal or metaphorical kitchen table together. Metamours tend to cultivate their own friendship with one another, and partners are open to their children or extended family spending time together.

Metamour

Two people who share a partner but are not romantically or sexually involved with each other. For example, if you have a partner who also has a spouse, you and their spouse would be metamours, or if you have a boyfriend and a girlfriend who are not involved with each other, the two of them would be metamours to each other.

Monogamy

The practice of having one sexual or romantic partner at a time.

Mononormativity

A term coined by Marianne Pieper and Robin Bauer to refer to the societal dominant assumptions regarding the naturalness and normalcy of monogamy, where political, popular and psychological narratives typically present monogamy as the superior, most natural or morally correct way to do relationships.

Parallel polyamory

CNM relationships where a person's different relationships have little to no interaction.

Polycule

A combination of the words *poly* (for polyamorous) and *molecule* referring to a connected network of partners and metamours in CNM relationships.

Polysecure

Experiencing secure attachment with yourself and your multiple partners. A person who is polysecure is both securely attached to multiple romantic partners and has enough internal security to be able to navigate the structural relationship insecurity inherent to nonmonogamy, as well as the increased complexity and uncertainty that occurs when having multiple partners and metamours.

Relationship anarchy

A relationship style that applies political anarchist principles to interpersonal relationships. Relationship anarchists seek to dismantle the social hierarchies dictating how sexual and romantic relationships are prioritized over all other forms of love, and so people who identify as relationship anarchists make less distinction between the importance or value of their lovers over their friends or other people in their life, and they do not only reserve intimacy or romance for only the people they have sex with.

Solo polyamory

An approach to polyamory that emphasizes personal agency. Individuals do not seek to engage in relationships that are tightly couple-centric or financially or domestically entwined. People who identify as solo polyamorous emphasize autonomy, the freedom to choose their own relationships without seeking permission from others, and flexibility in the form their relationships take. It is a common misconception that people practicing solo polyamory are either more casual or less committed in their relationships; this is not necessarily the case. Solo polyamorous folks can be deeply emotionally involved and committed in their relationships, but they typically choose not to take on the traditional roles that some partners assume, such as living together, having shared finances or doing domestic duties (at least not as a relationship expectation or obligation).

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