

Creating Healthy Open Relationships

Lanz Lowen and Blake Spears

One of the reactions to our study, *Non-Monogamy in Long-term Male Couples* was that people were pleased we brought some light to the subject of male couples in open relationships and made the topic discussable. The descriptions of the various configurations and approaches to non-monogamy seemed to validate the respective directions that readers had taken in their own relationships.

We also received questions and requests for more information. These usually fell into two camps.

- **Camp #1:** What's the best approach, e.g. How can we create an open relationship so that it will work for us? Clearly, there's no single right way. Having said that, we do think there are key elements and behaviors that can help you successfully navigate this terrain. In this article, we share those with you.
- **Camp #2:** How do you handle Issue XYZ, e.g., What do we do about jealousy? Again, there are no cut and dry answers, but we can share insights and examples that we received from study participants that might help couples deal with specific issues.

Creating A Supportive Foundation

If you're having difficulties in your relationship – such as you're getting bored, you've become distant, you argue all the time, or you think your partner is cheating on you – this is not the time to decide to open the relationship. To the contrary, the more solid the relationship, the better the communication, the clearer partners are about their respective values, the more likely non-monogamy can flourish. As a therapist once told us, "if you want an open relationship, recognize that you're upping the ante – it brings risk and requires work." So, one way to think about non-monogamy is to consider the strength and health of your relationship. If you've been together a long time, how satisfied are you with the patterns you've created? If your relationship is fairly new, how are you paying attention to the norms as you create your relationship?

We recently attended a two-day workshop on the research findings of Richard & Julie Gottman, PhD., which are based on extensive longitudinal observation and interview research on couples for many years. They approach their research from the perspective of what can be learned from couples where the relationship is working and how that is different from the couples where the relationship is problematic.

One of the most convincing findings and a core component of their therapeutic interventions is the observation that a healthy couple requires a foundation of pervasive positive regard in which to flourish. The Gottmans found that there needs to be a ratio of 5 positive comments/gestures/invitations for every negative volley. This doesn't mean that a couple doesn't fight or have negative experiences, but even during conflict, a healthy couple often brings forward a positive emotional regard.

According to the Gottmans, this foundation of positive regard is built primarily in three ways. First, couples take an interest in knowing, understanding and appreciating their partner's internal experience and inner world. Each is curious about his partner's daily events, likes and dislikes, upbringing and family, desires, needs, and evolving perspectives on each other, life, and the relationship. We imagine showing interest and curiosity as 'Relationships 101', but the Gottmans observed many couples who no longer updated this information - who no longer asked open-ended questions to know what their partner was feeling, experiencing or thinking.

Secondly, the foundation of positive regard is cultivated by the sharing of fondness and admiration. Expressions of love, affection, and support mattered. Rather than scanning the environment for what is problematic and what they don't like, a healthy couple tends to notice what their partner does right and what they admire.

This routine habit of noticing the glass half-full builds a culture of appreciation and respect.

In our study of long-term non-monogamous couples, we found the sharing of fondness and admiration to be most obvious in the 15% of couples who no longer had sex together. The 15% cluster was still actively sexual outside the relationship, but had lost desire within it. In many cases, the couple had never been that sexually compatible. What these couples were clear about is how loving, caring and appreciative they felt toward each other. The common sentiment was, "Why would we want to give up a relationship that brings us so much joy, comfort, companionship and love, just because the sex isn't any good?" They spoke glowingly about their joint ventures, intermingled families, renovated apartments, and their desire to cuddle, express their love, and celebrate their relationship. Although it was not one of our Study questions, this group was the most likely to share that they had been legally married or had created a commitment ceremony to affirm their love.

In our minds, they demonstrated the power of the Gottmans' observations. Sexual needs and , and in some cases emotional ones were being met outside the relationship, but this wasn't undermining, jeopardizing or lessening the connection between the partners. These couples were quick to express their love and appreciation and their happiness with each other was readily apparent.

The third component of the foundation is a bias for turning towards connection, rather than away from it. In everyday moments, partners make bids for emotional connection. They might drop a hint about feeling disappointed, give a minor compliment to their partner, or inquire about the status of an activity that was important to them. To the extent their partner picks up on this and responds favorably, they move closer. Popular movies and television programs that focus on emerging relationships are often built around the missed opportunities for connection. The dramatic tension or situational humor comes from watching a character reach out in hopes of reciprocation, particularly if that gesture is not noticed or not met in some positive way. It is these many small choice points – opportunities for creating a positive foundation - that shape a relationship's course toward health or away from it.

These three components, and the resulting foundation of positive regard, create a momentum toward greater connection. This momentum and its accompanying beliefs, increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. It's a bit like the dynamic of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. When there is a belief that goodness and resolution and repair are possible, and likely, it increases the odds of this happening. Bob Weiss calls it the PSO – Positive Sentiment Override. If partners are more likely to notice what's working, assume good intent, and skew their interpretations of comments and interactions to the positive (PSO) then chances for resolution are much greater. When Positive Sentiment Override is operating, misunderstandings are likely to be aired and forgiven.

On the other hand, if a foundation of positive regard has not been built, there may exist NSO – Negative Sentiment Override, in which neutral or even positive messages are perceived negatively. When Negative Sentiment Override is operating a person becomes hyper-vigilant -- primarily noticing the negative, and interpreting the incoming data negatively, resulting in a bias away from connection. The small opportunities for positive connection are squandered, scorching the relationship, rather than breathing life into it.

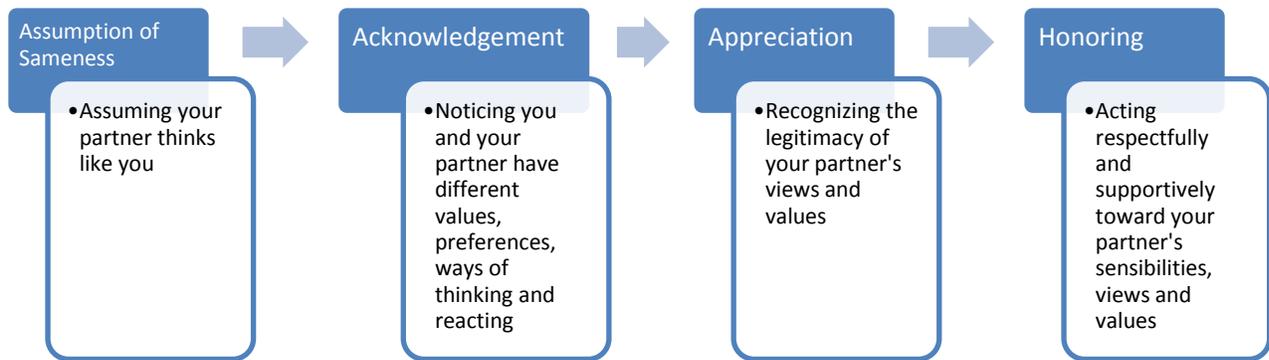
Partners in our Study demonstrated the elements of a foundation of positive regard, and we in turn observed Positive Sentiment Override. In separate interviews, even when talking about difficulties, they spoke respectfully and admiringly about their partners. They described different perspectives fairly, acknowledging the conflict in their viewpoints and being careful to represent their partner's perspective accurately. We think their tendency toward PSO and their supportive foundations helped them be more capable of successfully navigating the challenges and unknowns that come with non-monogamy.

Honoring Differences

Some of the couples in our study had no issues whatsoever with non-monogamy. They both wanted an open relationship and had similar ideas about how it should work. Furthermore, they were both wired similarly in their preferred approach, e.g. they both enjoyed anonymous outside sex, thought it was essential, yet thought it was no big deal. Or they both valued intimacy with others and were disinclined to be competitive, insecure, or jealous.

However, the majority of couples in our study were not so lucky. Many of their differences in personality, self-esteem, familial patterns, and core values had an impact on their approach to being non-monogamous. For these couples, becoming aware of differences and managing those differences was essential.

We hypothesize that managing differences is a continuum. There's an assumption of sameness on one end of the continuum and being fully supportive of those differences on the other end. Couples in the Study reported their experiences in various stages.



STEPHEN AND BUD

Take the case of Stephen and Bud. Stephen considers having an open relationship means 'having lots of freedom and no rules'. Initially, Stephen assumes his partner feels the same way (Assumption of Sameness). However, Bud becomes furious when he finds out Stephen is making dates and seeing people repeatedly. Emotional connections are off-limits as far as Bud is concerned.

A 'fight' ensues and Stephen and Bud realize they have not only different points of view [on] *about* what 'open' implies, but they also have different desires and needs as well (Acknowledgement). The first 'fight' ends in an impasse about whether they should have rules and how restrictive those rules should be. Both Bud and Stephen leave the argument wondering why the other is being so hard-headed,

"Why can't he see what I'm trying to tell him?"

The next four arguments end similarly with various versions of "The way I see it is the way most people see it so you should look at it the way I do." After much frustration, it finally sinks in that both perspectives are legitimate. Their views are different, but both views are reasonable (Appreciation).

Having realized and appreciated their differences, Stephen and Bud can now begin to look for solutions that will meet both parties' needs. Perhaps they will avoid making hard and fast rules but come to agreement about avoiding emotional involvement. Or perhaps they will decide it's really about communication, trusting each other, and creating norms that encourage both.

What's key is acting in accordance with their joint resolution and honoring the differences that are important to each partner (Honoring).

RUSS AND TERRY

Russ and Terry assumed they were alike even though they came from very different backgrounds. Russ had been married for many years prior to partnering with Terry and was relatively new to the gay scene. On the other hand, Terry had come out in college, remained single and had been sexually active most of his adult life. When Russ and Terry agreed to open their relationship, Terry enthusiastically talked Russ into going to a sex club. Terry loved anonymous sex, the thrill of the chase, having multiple partners, and lots of variety. Russ assumed he would like it too and was up for the experience. However, as Russ reported later, "I hated it! It felt cheap and degrading and I didn't want to have sex with people I didn't know. And I wasn't comfortable trying to hook up. Everyone looked better than me and there seemed to be rules about what was supposed to happen. I went one more time, but then I told Terry, 'Never again'."

Russ and Terry had discovered important differences in what they preferred and valued. It turned out that getting to know someone was an essential part of sex for Russ – a prerequisite. Having discovered their differences, they were both sufficiently mature to acknowledge both perspectives and began figuring out ways

they could meet their respective needs. However, they soon realized that neither of them was fully accepting of the other's approach. Russ couldn't understand how Terry could want to have sex that he deemed 'degrading' and Terry discovered he was more 'okay' with the idea of Russ having anonymous sex more than he was with Russ having sex and relationships with real people.

One of the things they said that helped them was talking to an older couple that had a lot of experience and validated both perspectives. Over time, Russ learned to understand Terry's perspective - it was all play and fantasy to Terry.

On Terry's side he found he actually went too far in accommodating Russ. Russ befriended Albert, who initially became a close friend of Russ's and then became close to both Russ and Terry. Terry liked Albert and occasionally the three of them would have sex, but over time it became clear that the energy was primarily between Russ and Albert. Terry realized he wasn't comfortable with this and when the relationship ended, Russ and Terry established a new agreement, "You can fuck whomever you want, but you can't take him out to dinner."

This resolution seemed to be working for them at the time of the interviews. Both perspectives were seen as legitimate and both partners were acting in ways that were supportive of those differences (while still respecting their own needs and being protective of the relationship).

MIKE AND LUIS

Mike and Luis knew they were wired very differently. They worked hard at their relationship, yet despite good communication and good intent, they often found themselves arguing about outside sex. When a problem arose, there would be hurt feelings, defensiveness, and then a constructive effort to revise ‘the rules’ so that ‘it wouldn’t happen again’. Unfortunately, “No matter how many times we modified the rules, Mike found a way to bend them” (according to Luis).

Their big shift came one day when they were talking about their new tattoos. Mike had a huge Eagle with wings spread across his back and Luis had a magnificent lion prowling through his chest hair. The two tattoos were significant. For Mike, the Eagle represented freedom – the ability to fly anywhere he wanted. For Luis, the Lion was about strength, pride and security – having a place where he knew he was King. While talking about the significance of the tattoos, they began relating their tattoos to their sexual proclivities and found themselves arguing familiar territory. Luis wanted to be able to go to the gym and not run into any of Mike’s ‘fuck-buddies’. He wanted his home and surroundings to be sacred. Security was important to him and surprises were jarring.

Mike, on the other hand, didn’t care who Luis fucked or where he ran into them. He just wanted the freedom to play with others

and to do it without feeling secretive or ‘getting in trouble’. Luis wanted to own his territory and Mike wanted to fly above the radar.

At this point, it occurred to them that if a Lion and an Eagle are fundamentally wired so differently than maybe they needed different rules from each other. Their solution: Luis could do whatever he wanted sexually and play wherever he wanted (Mike wasn’t bothered by much and he knew Luis would always be respectful). Mike, on the other hand, would agree to only play when he was traveling for work (unlike Luis’s job, Mike’s job required a fair amount of travel). What Mike did while he was traveling was his business, although they still had rules about emotional involvement that applied equally to both of them.

By creating separate rules, Mike and Luis were fully legitimizing each other’s perspectives for the first time. They had been so busy trying to legislate fairness that they were losing sight of how to respectfully appreciate their corresponding differences. Mike realized he had never fully accepted Luis’s position as legitimate. He was caught in the trap of “Why is Luis so ‘old school’? (Why isn’t he enlightened like me?).” Luis, on the other hand, had always been quick to denigrate Mike’s desire for freedom because it trampled on his own desire to be secure in the place where he lived. Luis couldn’t understand how Mike could have so little respect for his sensibilities.

The new rules were helpful, but their new thinking had an even greater impact. It occurred to Mike that he wasn't really seeing Luis as a Lion, but merely focusing on the ways he wasn't an Eagle. The absurdity of not respecting the needs (and strengths) of a Lion was startling. Mike began to really appreciate Luis's views and he realized for all the years they had been together, he had merely complied with the rules – rules that didn't really make sense to him, although he was clear he wanted to avoid Luis's roar. Mike began operating from a different mindset. He realized the extent to which his freedom-seeking behavior had hurt Luis and he began honoring Luis's needs, rather than minimizing or belittling them.

Luis shifted his perspective as well. He began seeing Mike's needs as legitimate, rather than reckless or uncaring. He noticed Mike's efforts and became more trusting. Ironically, he reported that once he felt like he had more control, he felt freer and in less need of it.

Addressing Conflict

Being able to manage conflict is a core skill required for enduring relationships. Being able to 'fight fair' – constructively discuss an issue without escalating into a cycle of defensiveness, criticism, or contempt is essential. Conflict within a relationship is a given – it may arise from differences in likes/dislikes, interests, personality styles,

values and beliefs, and ways of approaching problems. Most therapists and researchers would agree on some version of the following principles:

- Sharing honestly about actions, thoughts and emotions
- Being able to communicate – ideally verbally – about your emotions, concerns, and needs, even if it makes your partner uncomfortable
- Avoiding attacks – name-calling, negative attributions, dragging up old wounds, etc.
- Being open to feedback and hearing what might be problematic
- Assuming good intent when constructively addressing an issue
- Having the belief that many problems are resolvable, that misunderstandings can be cleaned up, and that constructively airing issues is preferable to ignoring them

Conversely, the Gottmans describe the negative cycle of conflict in terms of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling (see side bar). Any one (or more) of these may make constructive resolution of conflicts considerably more difficult for couples.

Being in an acknowledged open relationship requires good communication. Couples reported that “Being Honest” was the most important characteristic of making non-monogamy work. Negotiated non-monogamy is built upon the principle of truthfully disclosing outside sexual behavior to the level agreed upon by the couple. However, being honest also included acknowledging the desires of which they’re aware, their degree of emotional involvement with outsiders, the extent to which they are comfortable or uncomfortable with the non-monogamous arrangement, and the reactions they might have to their partner when they have outside sex or get involved with others.

Certainly the skill level of managing conflict varied amongst Study couples. However, we do think a couple that is willing to openly discuss non-monogamy may be more comfortable addressing potential conflict. The willingness to acknowledge personal wants and desires, to hear about what their partner may need or want from someone other than themselves, and to deal with the reactions of their partner as they disclose potentially charged experiences require either a comfort with conflict or a willingness to make oneself and their partner uncomfortable.

On the other hand, we did see a big difference between couples that had an agreement for outside sex, but did not disclose the details of the experiences. These couples were less comfortable with conflict, dealing with each others’ reactions and managing their own feelings of jealousy, envy, and vulnerability. The couples that disclosed the most seemed to value articulating and working on relationship issues as a way of resolving them and also learning from them. We can’t say that one approach is healthier than another – what’s most critical is what is right for the individuals involved. However, couples that disclose and discuss more have more opportunity to learn about themselves and each other, to practice and improve communication skills, and potentially to develop a deeper, more tested trust.

Four Horsemen

1. Criticism:

Attacking your partner’s personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone wrong:
(“you always...” “you never...” “you’re the type of person who ...” “why are you so ...”)

2. Contempt:

Attacking your partner’s sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her:
(Insults and name-calling; hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery; sneering or rolling your eyes)

3. Defensiveness:

Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack: (Making excuses; Cross-complaining: meeting your partner’s complaint, or criticism with a complaint of your own, thereby ignoring what your partner said; Disagreeing and then cross-complaining: “That’s not true, you’re the one who ...” “I did this because you did that...”; Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing)

4. Stonewalling:

Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Partners may think they are trying to be “neutral” but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, and/or smugness:
(Silent Treatment; Monosyllabic mutterings; Changing the subject; Leaving the room)

The Gottmans talked about two types of conflict. The first type consists of conflicts around problems that are resolvable – issues that just require clarification, compromise and constructive problem-solving.

This could be something simple like how to decorate a room or something more substantial like whether to buy a house. The thorniest conflicts we heard addressed issues where one partner became too involved with an outsider. A crisis ensued. Trust is shaken. The structure and safety of the partnership feels threatened and partners feel emotionally vulnerable and volatile (hurt, betrayal, fear, jealousy, anger). At these moments good Positive Sentiment Override really pays off. The couples we interviewed were able to work through these times even though they acknowledged that they never wanted to repeat the experience.

To the extent the issue can be constructively discussed, it is usually resolved with a new understanding and a new agreement. For example, Ruben got 'too involved' with an outside partner. Jack insisted he stop seeing the guy and they had several deep discussions about the issue.

Ruben: "I learned I have to manage myself much more carefully. If I find I'm getting too enamored with someone, I make sure we stop having sex or I stop seeing them."

Jack: "Since then, we've had an agreement that I can ask Ruben to stop seeing

someone if I think he's getting too involved. I've never had to do that, but I think knowing I could is reassuring."

The second type of conflicts are long-term, intractable issues that are probably not resolvable, but instead require on-going dialogue about the perpetual problem. In type two conflict, in order to avoid gridlock a great deal of positive regard is required even when disagreeing.

In the Study, one of the most memorable conflicts a couple shared was during the AIDS crisis. Both partners were involved in a gay men's spiritual group that valued openness, emotional closeness, a strong sense of caring and community and a certain amount of freedom to dive head-first into personal and spiritual growth. Given the times, the group had lost a number of key members to AIDS and probably 1/3 of the group was dealing with the illness themselves. It was definitely not a time of 'business as usual'. Emotions were raw, members were perpetually grief-stricken, and the old rules about what's a couple, what's an emotional boundary, what's the appropriate amount of emotional distance to keep were all tossed on their head. "When someone is dying and you care about them and they are reaching out for help, you don't want to put barriers in the way of your intimacy." This was a particularly sensitive issue in the gay community where many men with AIDS had been rejected and ostracized by their families.

LARRY AND RON

In the midst of this was Larry and Ron. They had an agreement for an open relationship, but with some understanding that they would not get too emotionally involved with any one person. Ron had a penchant for 'falling in love', which he tried to keep in check, but given the circumstances with AIDS, it didn't seem possible or, for that matter, what either Larry or Ron really wanted. They didn't want to jeopardize their relationship, but neither man wanted to see Ron pull away from a partner he adored who was a year or two away from dying. This was an on-going dilemma that required a lot of discussion, experimenting with various rules, and the perseverance to struggle through painful periods of doubt, tension, and sadness.

One of the more creative ways they dealt with their dilemma was to establish the rule that "You can only date the terminally ill." This seemingly macabre and tongue in cheek prohibition was actually serious. The rule implied that what was tolerated under the circumstances of someone dying would not be tolerated under 'normal' circumstances. It was a way of protecting the relationship without restricting the desires and considerations of a crisis situation.

TIM AND ROB

Tim and Rob, on the other hand, were less willing to surface conflict. Tim had had

surgery for debilitating hemorrhoids and no longer was comfortable having anal sex. Rob missed it terribly. Even though they had agreements to be open, Rob was reluctant to do so. He didn't want to make Tim feel bad about his health and he was a little afraid Tim might react angrily. Most importantly, he wanted this relationship to work and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize it. Unfortunately, not speaking up didn't do anything to help move the conversation forward or help Rob meet his sexual needs. Tim and Rob may have a type two conflict that doesn't offer an easy solution. As daunting as that may be, their growth, intimacy, capacity to 'fight fairly' and the positive regard they hold for each other could be enhanced by tackling this issue even if they don't find a 'perfect' or permanent solution.

Trust

Trust is an essential ingredient in a healthy couple. It begins with a leap of faith – a willingness to trust the other. When the willingness to trust is not betrayed, the trust builds and deepens. In this sense trust is both an action and an outcome.

In our Study, we heard trust described as an action – "I trust my partner will be honest with me." "I trust that my partner doesn't want to hurt me or see me get hurt." "I trust my partner is committed to making this relationship work."

We also heard about trust as an outcome. “We’re more trusting because we went through a bad spell when Richard got too involved with someone. It was a bit of a crisis and we had to work things out. Now that we have, I think we’re even more committed and more trusting of one another. I know how much he cares about me and this relationship. We’ve been tested.”

Couples, who permitted emotional connection with outsiders, were more likely to discuss, test, and affirm their trust. More communication was needed and a greater willingness to trust was necessary given that they were taking greater risks by becoming emotionally vulnerable and connected. To the degree they successfully navigated this terrain, their sense of trust in each other deepened. Each experience re-affirmed and reinforced their trust in each other.

JOHN AND LES

John and Les were wired very differently. John was an open-hearted adventurer, who was passionately interested in yoga, self-growth, and Eastern religions. Les was introverted, a workaholic who loved his profession, and who was very secure and comfortable in his own skin. Les trusted John to get involved with other men, to

become emotionally attached, and to explore their spirituality together. Les was comfortable with John spending the weekend hiking or attending a meditation retreat with whomever John was interested in at the time.

Les felt like John was trustworthy and he couldn’t see the point in curtailing John’s desire to discover himself and the world. He knew John would be miserable if he couldn’t actively explore possibilities and have new experiences. “Basically, I want him to be happy. Right now, he’s hanging out with Kip, a very sweet, good looking guy that John finds interesting. They have a lot in common and seem to have great fun together. If I were ever to get jealous or feel threatened, this would be the time. He’s John’s ‘perfect guy’ for that part of John that wants to explore psychological growth and spirituality. I have to remind myself of our trust; I check in with John about how he’s feeling; And I focus on what’s important to me in my life. Although it causes me a bit of concern, I think our relationship is solid. Kip is giving John the things I can’t give him and don’t want to give him. We’ve been here before and it all worked out.”

David Meister, an authority on trust, identifies the elements necessary for trust in his formula:

$$\frac{\text{Credibility} + \text{Reliability} + \text{Empathy}}{\text{Self-Interest}} = \text{Trust}$$

According to Meister, trust is built primarily by increasing the three elements in the numerator. However, those elements can be seriously diminished by a large denominator. The formula's denominator is 'self-interest' – a partner's focus on their own needs at the expense of the overall needs of the couple. In other words, if Partner A is only looking out for himself, even though he may be reliable and empathetic, Partner B will be less likely to trust him.

Trust Numerator

- Am I behaving responsibly?
- Am I consistently living up to our agreements and the spirit behind them?
- Am I being sensitive to my partner's needs and feelings? Do I really understand and have empathy for the impact I have on my partner?

Trust Denominator

- Am I approaching issues through the lens of us as a couple or am I just looking at things from my own viewpoint? Am I wanting what's best for both of us or am I primarily focusing on getting what I want by being aggressive, strategic or manipulative?

JERRY AND BRAD

Jerry: "Brad is very honest about his actions and never tries to hide anything. He's good

about only having safe sex and I never worry about him getting too emotionally involved. In general he's supportive, willing to listen, and I feel like he's totally in my corner. However, when it comes to outside sex, he's out of control. Brad's got that Bear look that guys love and they're constantly coming on to him. Finding partners is no big deal to him. I'm much less secure about myself and confident about my sexual abilities. I have a hard time meeting guys I feel comfortable with. Brad doesn't take this into consideration. He's frequently cruising guys when we're out together and constantly finding new partners at the gym. It's not like he's overtly doing anything wrong, but he's not the least bit sensitive to how it makes me feel. When he starts flirting or telling me about his latest conquest, I get envious and then start feeling inadequate. We stopped doing 3-ways because I always felt like a 3rd wheel. Lately, I've been withdrawing – I could talk to him about it, but I really don't trust that he will change."

From Jerry's point of view, Brad has some key elements of trust (credibility and reliability; empathy when it doesn't involve sex). However, Brad's self-absorption when it comes to outside sex is undermining Jerry's trust in Brad. In order to improve the level of trust, Jerry will need to be willing to confront Brad and Brad will need to be open to looking at his own behavior and the impact it is having on Jerry and the relationship.

Managing Jealousy

Jealousy is referred to a lot in the literature and it's usually the first concern mentioned by people who aren't in open relationships. We focus on it here because it can be a thorny issue and we use it as a way of summarizing what we have covered.

Despite its reputation, jealousy wasn't brought up by our study participants as often or as heatedly as we expected. Only 21% of couples mentioned jealousy – bringing it up on their own or naming it when we asked about issues. For the majority of the 21%, jealousy was talked about in past tense – as something they had learned to deal with.

A few found it was a matter of just facing it and making a decision. Tom told us, "Early in our relationship it became clear I had to learn to deal with my jealousy if we were going to be a couple. We both wanted an open relationship, but it was my first time. We lived in the heart of the Castro. Steven is very hot, has a huge dick, and he works out of our house. Walking the dog, going to the gym, getting coffee – he was always being presented with opportunities. I got really jealous, but decided if I wanted to be in this relationship – which I really did - I just wouldn't be able to indulge in those feelings. It's like I stopped allowing myself to go there and instead I just focused on my own needs and desires, not his."

3 Steps to Help Manage Jealousy

- Learn to constructively acknowledge, discuss and explore the issues as they arise. Can the jealous partner learn to describe the feelings without attacking and blaming? Can the partner triggering the jealousy listen without becoming defensive or dismissive? Can both partners move to clarification, exploration and reassurance?
- Reflect on underlying issues that may be triggering or exacerbating the jealousy. Self-reflection is useful for both partners (see below). Better understanding of the nature of the jealousy provides more options for reassurance, self-growth, and responsible caring behavior.
- Agree on ways to minimize or limit triggering events and create patterns that are supportive and likely to reduce feelings of volatility, competitiveness, and insecurity.

Another strategy was used by couples that preferred minimum disclosure. "I don't want to hear what Jerry does. It makes me uncomfortable – both envious and jealous. We don't talk about what we do and as long as I don't see or hear about it, I have no trouble." This strategy seemed to work well for couples with minimal disclosure and agreements or norms that limited outside connection and emotional involvement. Outside sex was kept in a box away from the primary relationship and so the chance of triggering troublesome reactions like jealousy was minimized.

Some participants mentioned jealousy as something they just had to live with and manage constructively when it came up. "Terry sometimes gets jealous. It often surprises me because we've had an open relationship for years. When it happens, I have to slow myself down and make sure I don't dismiss it. I try to reassure him and sometimes he wants that and sometimes he doesn't. He's pretty good about dealing with it, but because he can get jealous, I've learned to be more careful about openly flirting."

BARRY AND SCOTT

Jealousy can be a multi-headed monster, especially when the foundation of the relationship isn't solid, which was the case with Barry and Scott. Barry complained about feeling very jealous of Scott. "I hate the sight of him kissing another man and I get really upset when I know he might be out fooling around. I imagine he's going to meet someone much more handsome than me and that will be the beginning of the

end. When he comes home, I tend to prosecute him to make sure he tells me everything that's happened. He gets really defensive and then gives me the silent treatment. We've been dealing with this for several years – ever since we opened the relationship. We opened the relationship because I discovered Scott was fooling around on the side - Nothing serious, but lots of one-time transgressions that he wasn't telling me about. We split up for awhile and then we decided we would try having an open relationship. It hasn't really worked that well – in fact it seems like it's resulted in a lot of jealousy, hurt feelings and unhappiness on both sides."

If we step back from Barry's comments we can hypothesize that a number of issues might be at work. In addition to the tendency to become jealous, Barry and Scott might also be dealing with:

- Barry's insecurity around his own looks and concerns about how attractive Scott finds him
- Scott possibly being insensitive, dismissive, and/or disloyal to Barry
- Unfinished business about Scott fooling around prior to opening the relationship
- Both partners having difficulty constructively discussing the issue without attacking, defending, or stonewalling
- Either or both partners having difficulty trusting and being confident about their commitment? Each other's love? Whether or not an open relationship can really work?

Jealousy is the headline, but there are underlying issues and symptoms of a relationship that's on shaky ground. In order to successfully reflect on and address both jealousy and the underlying issues, Barry and Scott might need to:

- Build a stronger foundation of positive regard. Barry and Scott may need to share more, listen more, and ask more questions (as an interested and concerned partner, not as a prosecutor). They may need to provide more affirmations of each other and the relationship, e.g. feedback about what they appreciate in each other, what they like about the relationship, why they want to be together, feelings of love and connection. Having a bigger emotional bank account will allow them to assume good intent and more quickly repair slights, slips and misunderstandings. A positive foundation will enhance their ability to reassure each other and trust in the relationship and each other.
- Actively honor their differences. They seem to be aware and acknowledging of their differences. It's not clear, however, to what extent they perceive the other's position and inclination as legitimate. Scott needs to be able to really honor Barry's tendency to get jealous and fearful. Honoring means taking Barry's sensibilities into account when having outside interactions – weighing the potential impact his actions may have on the relationship. Honoring means attentively listening even though Scott may not think there's anything for Barry to be worried about. Barry, on the other hand, may need to see Scott's desire for variety as legitimate, not a negative reflection on Barry or an indication of irresponsibility or immaturity.

Self Reflection for the Triggering Partner

- To what degree do I fully understand and appreciate the impact my outside sexual behavior has on my partner?
- To what extent am I playing by the rules and the spirit of the rules? Are our agreements overtly clear to both of us?
- How important is loyalty to me? To my partner? To what extent am I respectful of his needs for loyalty? To what extent does he feel I'm being respectful of our relationship?
- Is there any part of me that feels competitive? That enjoys the conquest and showing off the prize? That needs constant validation? That feels compulsive?
- Am I feeling a need for more attention and appreciation from my partner? Are there needs I'm getting met outside that might be better met with my partner?
- To what extent am I valuing my partner? Communicating my appreciation? Honoring our differences?
- Am I keeping my partner informed about my activities in the manner in which he prefers? Am I avoiding surprises? To what extent might I be acting impulsively?

- Constructively address the conflicts as they arise. This is not a one-time event or something that will be resolved by one heart-to-heart conversation. Scott and Barry need to be able to have a constructive, on-going dialogue about these issues whenever they arise. This requires learning to fight fairly, so when a conflict is triggered they don't descend into a downward cycle of criticism, defensiveness and withdrawal. Things will get said poorly and feelings will be hurt, but they need to learn to repair the damage, re-engage in the dialogue and build their confidence in their ability to do so.

- Actively trust each other and pay attention to the elements crucial for on-going trust. Scott needs to look at his own behavior to identify the ways he might be contributing to the problem. To what extent might he be disregarding Barry's need for loyalty? Acting competitively? Behaving irresponsibly or insensitively or disrespectfully? Barry needs to be able to express his concerns and get reassurance, but then take a leap of faith and trust Scott at his word. To successfully do this, Barry will need to be able to reassure himself, e.g. remind himself that Scott has been truthful for the last 12 months, that Scott has clearly expressed his commitment to the relationship and his behavior is consistent with that, etc. Both Scott and Barry will have to make sure they build track records of living up to their commitments (Is Scott continuing to be forthcoming with facts and avoiding surprises? Is Barry surfacing issues in a constructive manner?) They both will need

Self Reflection for the Jealous Partner

- Is it about him being with anyone else or just someone else to whom I'm attracted?
- Is it about a particular person? What is it about this person that is threatening?
- Is it related to my need for loyalty? To what extent am I feeling competitive? To what extent am I feeling possessive? Am I experiencing him as being: Competitive? Disloyal? Disrespectful of me? Disrespectful of our relationship?
- Is it related to my confidence in our relationship? Do I have concerns about whether he loves me? Do I have concerns about whether this will jeopardize our relationship?
- Do I have a belief that he shouldn't need anyone but me? That I should be able to meet all of his needs? That he will leave me if he finds someone better?
- Is my jealousy related to how I feel about myself? My looks? My confidence?

to be able to empathize with the other. They both will need to take responsibility for 'jointly holding the relationship' ensuring that they are looking through a lens that includes the views and needs of both of them.

Having built a stronger foundation for their relationship, the actual work around managing jealousy will be easier and have a much better chance of success.

Although both partners can react jealously, we mainly heard about situations where one partner was more inclined to become jealous. We assume a person can be predisposed to react in a jealous manner when they are feeling unsafe, insecure, or disrespected. However, this tendency is usually triggered and exacerbated by underlying issues in the relationship that are the responsibility of both parties. Although one partner may be the one inclined to become jealous, the partner triggering the jealousy may have a significant role in creation of the dynamic. Viewing jealousy from a system perspective is more likely to result in positive outcome.

Conclusion:

In concluding, we go back to the Study responses about what most helped a couple successfully maintain an open relationship. Two answers stood above the others. The top answer was honesty. Honesty was seen as a prerequisite for everything that followed. A healthy foundation can only be built on truthfulness and the trust that your partner is being truthful.

The second most frequent answer was communication. In this article we've shared what that communication may need to look like. The content of the communication might be quite different in an open relationship, but the need for acknowledging and honoring differences and constructively working to bridge them is no less important. Healthy open relationships are definitely possible, but they require the same conscientious hard work that is needed by all couples trying to build relationships that foster caring, connection, and trust.

Note: We again would like to thank all of the couples who participated in our Study for their time and willingness to be so forthright in detailing the nature of their relationships and their individual feelings.

- Is it related to my own opportunities? How much of it is envy, rather than jealousy? If I would have had good outside sex yesterday, would that have made a difference? If I had someone hot lined up to play with in the near future, would that make a difference?
- To what extent am I willing to reassure myself (based on successful history, my trust in our relationship, my trust in my partner's love)? To what extent am I needing reassurance from my partner?

References

Non-monogamy in Long-term Male Couples, Blake Spears and Lanz Lowen, 2010.

www.thecouplesstudy.com

Bridging the Couple Chasm, John Gottman, PhD and Julie Schwartz Gottman, PhD, The Gottman Institute, Inc., 2011.

The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work, John Gottman, PhD, Three Rivers Press, 1999.

The Trusted Advisor, David Maister, Charles Green & Robert Galford, 2000.