

Kort's Korner

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He offers workshops for couples and singles. He runs a gay men's group therapy and a men's sexuality group therapy for straight, bi and gay men who are struggling with specific sexual issues.

His therapy services are for gays and lesbians as well as heterosexuals.

Monogamous Ever After?

10 Smart Things Gay Male Couples Can Teach Other Couples about Sexual Non-monogamy

I've wanted to write an article on this topic ever since I began working with a gay male couple who told me that they were monogamous. After several months, however, they informed me they had had a three-way. When I asked if they had changed from monogamy, they said, "No."

I was confused. Maybe I hadn't gotten the correct information in our initial consultation? I told them, "I thought you told me you were monogamous," and they said, "We are." Now I was REALLY confused! So I said, "But you just told me you were monogamous."

Their reply was, "We are monogamous. We only have three-ways together, and are never sexual with others apart from each other." Okay, now I was slowly getting it.

I quickly learned to ask what a couple means when they say they're monogamous. Now, in fact, I routinely ask each couple, gay or straight alike, what their contract is around sex and commitment. Do they have an assumed or an explicit contract, verbal or otherwise? I don't assume that every couple or individual who comes in for therapy is in an open or closed relationship. Nor do I assume that they have—or have not—talked about it.

Books on affairs have been exploding in the self-help market in the past 10 years. This seems to acknowledge the lack of conversation and openness amongst couple—gay or straight—which leads to a rupture in the relationship and exits from intimacy.

When it comes to open relationships, judgments are changing. Historically, it was believed, and still is, that if a couple was open to bringing in others for sex, that was the beginning of the end for their relationship. Also the thought of a couple in an open relationship coming to therapy has been—and still is—seen as one of the problems for them, even if they themselves denied it. But too many happy and successful relationships, both gay and straight, have open contracts around sex. Meanwhile, some monogamous couples struggle and disintegrate for not being willing to open up their relationships at all.

It's not appropriate to judge couples for behavior that society does not believe to be "proper" for any relationship. The therapist can challenge the couple about open relationships and share their thoughts and concerns. However, if the arrangement is working for them, then the therapist needs to stand back and let them make the final decisions.

Open relationships are controversial, to be sure. Claiming that gay male couples can show how to manage them successfully is even more controversial, at a time when the

issue of gay marriage is making headlines. However, many heterosexual couples' lives are torn apart because of affairs and cheating; and only rarely do these couples talk openly about their sex lives. This is far worse than a couple talking openly and honestly with each other about a sensitive topic like sexuality.

At a recent talk I gave on gay marriage, a group of Caucasian CEOs challenged me on the concept. One man in particular asked, "If we open the doors to gay marriage, then what's next—polygamy?" Interestingly, another man in the group looked at him and asked, "How could you be against

polygamy? You've divorced three wives and are looking for a fourth!"

This debate is not about Polygamy—which involves including another person permanently—but about episodic experiences. It's about openness, honesty and commitment to the contract that *two* people make. Heterosexuals have a lot to learn from gay couples about this.

In his book, *The Soul Beneath the Skin* David Nimmons cites numerous studies which show that 75% of gay male couples are in successful open relationships. He makes it clear that whatever you decide as a couple you should be up front, direct and honest about what the contract of your relationship is on both sides.

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Here are 10 smart things Gay Couples can teach other couples about sexual monogamy versus non-monogamy:

1. Responsible Monogamy

Here, both partners agree-openly and honestly-about keeping their relationship monogamous. Both partners should discuss and agree on what monogamy means to them-usually sexual and emotional intimacy with each other, and no one else. If either or both want to open the relationship to others, it's with the understanding that they'll both discuss changing the contract through intentional dialogue and both agree on it. This is something that could take many conversations. One hesitant partner should never agree, and the other partner should never push too hard.

2. Responsible Non-Monogamy

For an open sexual relationship with others, mutual consent of both partners is essential. Here, each agrees to open the relationship in ways satisfactory to both. Some partners prefer not to know about their partner's sexual behavior outside the relationship; others want to know, and many insist on knowing. Rules are important here. I have heard gay male couples say, "We only do it on vacation, "or" only with people we don't know." Working this out is imperative.

3. Staying True to Contract

Never assume there's a contract on sexual exclusivity. Any couple should understand that by itself, being married and/or in a relationship isn't enough to ensure monogamy. Each may have different ideas about what "marriage" and "relationship" mean. So it's vital for the couple to mutually agree on a contract stating their agreement about monogamy, or non-monogamy.

4. Cheating

This, then, occurs if one or both partners stray from the agreed-upon contract. The relationship would not be in trouble over the affair as much as about the contract, consciously and intentionally prepared by both partners. I've noticed that for gay male relationships, cheating has less of a negative impact than for heterosexuals-or even lesbians, for that matter. My concern is that gay men may think that cheating is a "natural" part of any gay relationship and therefore, a foregone conclusion-which is not the case.

5. Playing Safely

When sexually playing outside their relationships, gay men are (or should be) very cautious about STD's, and use condoms. The idea is to assume that everybody else is HIV+ and act accordingly. It's neither appropriate nor realistic to hope the person you're with is telling you the truth-or how recently he's been tested. . Play safe, no matter what.

6. Fidelity without Sexual Exclusivity

In their book *The Male Couple*, David P. McWhirter, M.D., and Andre M. Mattison, MSW, Ph.D. (1984) write that among male couples, "Sexual exclusivity . . . is infrequent, yet their expectations of fidelity are high. Fidelity is not defined in terms of sexual behavior but rather by their emotional commitment to each other."

Gay couples often report that what works best for them is to engage in sexual encounters based on sexual attraction only and not emotions or affection. It is about sex and nothing more. They avoid getting to know temporary partners at any deep level, to avoid turning the encounter into something emotional that might develop into a full-

blown relationship. In other words, any sexual inclusion is simply behavioral in nature, not relational.

7. Waiting Five Years

Many gay couples say they waited an average of five years before opening up their relationships. Much of my clinical experience, journal articles, and in *The Male Couple* all demonstrate that the most successful time for couples to begin opening their relationships is after five years have passed. This gives them time to move past the romantic love part of their relationship (which typically lasts six to eighteen months) and sexual desire toward each other begins to decline. After five years, they have bonded and "nested," and an open relationship is more likely to be a success at this time.

8. Renegotiating Contract

Another thought that gay couples have found helpful is to not make any contracts in stone! Theirs can be a living relationship that is open and closed at various points in time, with no hard rules about it. It's more important to know when and how to discuss desired changes in the contract.

9. Maintaining Intentional Dialogue

Effective dialogue is the best thing couples can do to ensure safety and trust. The best form of communication I have found is called the intentional dialogue, developed by Dr. Harville Hendrix and explained in his book, *Getting the Love You Want*. One partner is the receiver, and the other is the sender. One partner at a time speaks, and the other listens actively by reflecting back what was heard. This guarantees there won't be any judgments, interruptions, interpretations, or reactivity and defensiveness during a partner's sharing. The sender should speak only in "I" statements and talk about personal feelings and judgments, never presuming to know what the other person thinks. This kind of respect and communication is essential for any open relationship.

10. Knowing What Problems Can Occur with Non-Monogamy

When couples open their relationships, jealousy is bound to rear its head. I've heard couples, gay and straight, voice their anxiety that their partner liked the other person more, enjoyed some sexual behavior from the other person more, and so on. Resolving this, again, requires dialogue and safety between the partners. Knowing in advance the kinds of issues that an open relationship may present can help prevent some of these conflicts in the first place.

I think that when gay couples are having an open relationship, it's most important that they distinguish between emotional and sexual affairs. In general, men can have sex without being intimate or emotional with their partners. This is why, I think, gay men can do this effectively-not because they're gay, but more because they're men.

Some say that relationships are hard enough so why add another element like non-monogamy. If this is what you choose to do as a couple, make sure you take these ten precautions and keep a dialogue going. Do this, and you can keep heading in a positive direction. It would be easy to judge gay couples negatively from this article if you are not in favor of non-monogamy.

And remember most of all, *safety and trust* are imperative to all relationships. This is why contracts and dialogue are essential no matter what the topic.

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