



HE HAS TOLD ME WE MUST HAVE AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP

▶ DEAR JOE

I have been with my boyfriend for nine years and he is the love of my life. A couple of years ago we stopped having sex - I think we just lost the desire to, although we didn't talk about it. Last year I discovered he was having an affair with a mutual friend. After being extremely angry with him, we sat down to discuss it maturely and he told me he wanted us to have an open relationship. I didn't want to lose

him - so now he is sleeping with both of us, as well as other men. Surprisingly, since I found out about this other man, the sex between us has never been better and I have never wanted him more - although I am often consumed with feelings of jealousy. I have so far remained faithful to my partner. What should I do? Is this situation tenable?

RICHARD, LONDON

DEAR RICHARD

While I can't tell you what you should do, I can tell you that yes, this situation is tenable with a lot of maturity from you both, and lots of negotiations, and planning. Studies have shown that 30% of gay relationships are open. That number in no way shows how successful these partnerships turn out to be. Recent research by American sociologist Helen Fisher claimed we men aren't wired for monogamy. So an open relationship – with mutual understanding and agreement – is one way to help your sex life work. To maintain an open relationship, you have to work on it constantly. If anything begins to interfere, it will become damaging unless you handle it immediately. Your jealousy may be masking your understandably hurt feelings that your partner isn't willing to give up other men. You need to address this quickly so that you two can get back to feeling secure in your relationship.

I suspect you feel betrayed because he went behind your back with a mutual friend. His unwillingness to give up other lovers is a bad sign: he's made a decision unilaterally that should be made together.

For an open relationship to work, every couple has to discover as they go along their limits, boundaries, and openness. In your case, having this start as an affair – especially with someone you know – may not work at all. I also wonder why this mutual 'friend' was willing to betray your trust in your existing relationship. He may not be much of a real friend after all.

When you and your partner stopped having sex, why didn't you talk about it? Actually, many couples – gay, straight and lesbian – stop having sex within seven to ten years after their relationship begins. To keep sex from growing familiar and monotonous, we need to introduce continued novelty, from enjoying it in different rooms and places to bringing in toys, erotica, porn – even other people.

If you and your partner weren't expanding your erotic horizons, it makes sense that your desire for each other faded away. This may also be why you and your boyfriend are having good sex again – these other men have brought novelty into your relationship. Ironically, many couples report enjoying great sex right after a terrible argument. The threat of a breakup releases a host of internal hormones, bringing

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partners to feel their original need to attach to each other, driving them to have passionate sex.

You say your man is the love of your life, but are you his? You need to ask him this question, and he needs to show you. Even in an open relationship, there are many ways you both can show that you love and care about each other.

Open relationships need several key elements in order to work. The best book I've ever read on this topic is Tristan Taormino's *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*. To make them work, she lists seven necessary factors:

- **CONSENT**

Is this arrangement consensual on your part? If you're simply going along with your partner's unwillingness to end it, then you should stand your ground. Tell him he needs to put his other lovers on hold until you feel truly ready to embrace this new situation – if ever. If he won't agree, this arrangement is too one-sided.

- **SELF-AWARENESS**

How well do you know yourself? Have you ever been to therapy or done anything to discover what issues from your past and childhood may be surfacing in your present-day life – and especially in your relationship? We all need to know ourselves as best we can, but open relationships really demand that we work on understanding ourselves.

- **COMMUNICATION**

When you and your partner sat down to discuss his affair maturely, did you get all your emotions out into the open? To move forward with an open relationship, talking about the rules and limitations is going to be key, along with all of your feelings and emotions.

- **HONESTY**

You must be honest in what you're willing to say and do. Can you admit things that are hard to say and hard to hear along with the easier ones that won't bring conflict?

- **BOUNDARIES**

Every couple will agree to different boundaries. Some decide to have sex only with strangers they don't know, or only when on vacation, to only play together, not separately, the list goes on and on. I suggest you each make a list of what you want and draw up a contract for the open relationship that you both find satisfying and acceptable.

- **TRUST**

Can you trust him to be honest? Given that he started an affair without telling you? Has he apologised for bringing in a third party and if so, how? Broken trust takes time to mend, and until trust is regained, most couples close their relationships, which I highly recommend

- **FIDELITY AND COMMITMENT**

Most successful non-monogamous couples agree to make emotional fidelity their top priority. If anyone else threatens or competes with your affections, you agree to focus on each other until you both feel satisfied and happy.

My advice is to close the relationship at this point and have your boyfriend pause his relationships with the other men to give you both the time and space to clear things up between you.

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