

# Open

# Monogamy

A GUIDE TO

CO-CREATING  
YOUR IDEAL  
RELATIONSHIP  
AGREEMENT

**Tammy Nelson, PhD**

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Relationship of Your Dreams

“You must love in such a way that  
the person you love feels free.”

THICH NHAT HANH

**W**hat if you could have everything you wanted in a relationship? What is the marriage of your dreams? Does it include love, passion, and openness, without dishonesty or indiscretion? If you could be madly in love with your spouse *and* explore outside relationships, would you do it?

If you could stay together in a comforting, warm, connected, and attached partnership without jealousy or fear and still explore sex outside your marriage, would you want to do that, and would you want your partner to explore those options?

What if you had the sex life of your dreams, sharing your desires and fantasies honestly with your partner, opening up in the most vulnerable way about the things you need and want and the things that turn you on? Could you share your erotic life with others?

What else would you include in the relationship of your dreams? What would you add if you could have it all? How far are you from that ideal? Does the possibility of having everything you want feel realistic or more like a dream? Are these your relationship goals? Are they attainable?

Why can't you have all of these things? What is the belief system you have that might be holding you back? Are you afraid that if you ask for

what you need, your partner will be angry, fearful, turn away from you, reject you? Maybe they'll feel jealous or hurt. Perhaps there will be tears or arguments.

If you want a more open monogamy but you stifle that desire, don't tell your partner, and keep it to yourself, what will happen? Is that a better choice? Is it a better choice to stay locked into a marriage that makes you feel trapped, unhappy, or stifled?

What if you could have everything you want, and more?

Humans are unique, diverse, and distinctive. We don't all want the same thing. What a boring life we would all lead if we did. There are some things, however, that all of us want. We want to be heard, validated, and understood in a relationship. We want our relationships free from conflict. Not only do we want to avoid conflict with our partner, but we want to avoid our own internal moral conflict that comes from shame, guilt, and the pressure of doing what we think is wrong. We want freedom and security at the same time. We struggle perpetually for safety and for adventure, for exploration and for comfort. These conflicting desires are common to us all.

In many relationships there is what I call a “**monogamy gap.**” Couples disagree on the level of openness in their monogamy. This may be caused by a lack of communication, lack of experience, or simply lack of trying. The monogamy gap can lead to conflict, resentment, and for some couples, ultimately separation. Before you get to the catastrophic step of ending your relationship, it's worth it to talk things through to see what kind of changes you can make to your lives. When done right, open monogamy can work. It may be worth it for you to take some chances, rather than ending your relationship for good.

Open monogamy is a form of relationship based on love, commitment, and a desire for honesty and transparency. People in open monogamy relationships value their partners' feelings and have a desire for freedom. They want connection and they sense that their committed partnership could contain more joy, more excitement. They are not held down by their monogamy, but rather, woken up by it. It helps them to expand and grow as individuals as well as partners. They support each other in exploring their needs and desires. They work through the fears and insecurities that naturally come up in any relationship and minimize them when they become conflicts.

John and Julie Gottman, researchers and couples therapists, studied thirty couples for three years in their Love Lab, an apartment laboratory where they watched couples' interactions on video cameras.<sup>1</sup> They found in their research that it is not the amount of conflict that makes for a successful couple, but the attempts to repair the conflict. They found that couples who were successful at repairing were “emotional, vulnerable, and . . . understanding” and validated one another's feelings.

The most powerful conversations began gently, and each partner took responsibility for their part of the problem, working collaboratively. They paid attention when the other had something to say and listened when their partner was upset. This may seem obvious to some—that having a healthy relationship takes communication and listening, validation and responsibility—but if you've ever been married, you know it's harder than it appears.

In an open monogamy, the agreement is not based solely on the desires of one partner. Contrary to the idea that a happy marriage is a well-negotiated quid pro quo arrangement, couples do better when their agreement is based on mutual self-interest. Open monogamy is not the continuation of an affair, nor is it the negotiation of sex outside the relationship in a way that feels threatening or unsafe to the other partner. Open monogamy starts with curiosity, conversations, and a discourse on personal boundaries. The work of making what was implicit explicit is less about having lots of sex parties and more about creating intimacy and expanding the love you can experience, together.

*Monogamy* is a legal term. It means being married to one person, versus *polygamy*, which means being married to more than one person at a time. We often use the term monogamy interchangeably with *fidelity*, which means being committed to having sex with only one person in a relationship at a time. This is the *traditional* form of monogamy agreement, the explicit promise to have sex with only your partner, until death do you part. *Classical monogamy* has been around for a long time. It is the idea that you wait until marriage to have sex, so that both partners are virgins until their wedding night. They then partner for life, with each being the other's only sexual partner. While this rarely worked out, with infidelity rampant and implicit for centuries, it has been the default in many civilizations.

What is more common in Western society today is *serial monogamy*, where couples are married or partnered with one person and have sex with

only that person until the relationship ends. At that time, they meet someone else and commit to be monogamous with them, until that ends and the cycle is repeated.

*Open relationships* are defined as any type of partnership where rules about monogamy are more fluid. There is less exclusivity and options for sex with people outside the relationship. Swinging, the common name for sexual adventures with other couples, falls into this category, as does polyamory. *Polyamory* encompasses a broader approach, one that includes close emotional, romantic, and sexual relationships outside of the primary partnership. There are many different types and subtypes of open relationships within these categories that we will discuss later in the book.

Some level of nonconformity is inherent in all of us; we want to be independent while at the same time honoring our promises. *Open monogamy* is a way to structure our most intimate relationships in order to balance that search for both commitment and autonomy. Open monogamy simply means being committed, dedicated, loyal, and devoted to one partner while having a consensual understanding to be with other people in some way that's agreeable to you both. Each open monogamy agreement is unique. Couples may agree to be totally closed and traditionally monogamous and at other times wide open. One partner may be open while the other partner may be exclusive. There is no wrong way to have an open monogamy agreement. By its nature, it is workable if it is acceptable to both partners and is open, honest, intentional, and consensual. Some people call this consensual nonmonogamy, others call it ethical nonmonogamy. Some call it being *monogamish*, in an open relationship, or new monogamy. All of these names are creative ways to define being in a flexible, committed partnership with an open relationship agreement.

This book will help you create a uniquely meaningful relationship, one that is accessible, flexible, and fulfilling. Starting with your very first conversation about opening your monogamous relationship, this book explores how to create new boundaries, how to welcome in new partners, how to find balance and excitement, how to change the agreement when things are not working, how and when to be more fluid and flexible, and how to create a vision of the future.

As we as a society move away from traditional monogamy we gravitate toward a more open form of partnership, one with a variety of self-defined

limitations, which we can rethink and redefine again. The confines of monogamy can be restrictive, or they can be the platform from which we jump into the unknown, holding the hand of our partner.

## **INTERVIEWS**

The people and the stories you will read here are real. These are all genuine people who shared their authentic journeys with me for the purposes of helping you, the reader. I have changed their names and their identities in order to protect their privacy.

I asked each interviewee a series of questions, which you'll find on page 203. All of the interviewees volunteered more information than I asked for and seemed genuinely interested in sharing information about their relationships.

Some of the stories are taken directly from my psychotherapy sessions. These couples are self-selected, and their names and identities have been changed to protect their privacy. They have successfully navigated the world of open relationships and have struggled with the process. They have fought, doubted, and argued. They have healed from their mistakes and created better boundaries using communication and patience.<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand open and expanded monogamy it's important to look at all sides and all possibilities. As people, we are multifaceted. Like diamonds, we can shine on one side and be hidden in the dark—dusty and cracked—on the other. The stories I will share with you here show the varied faces of humanity in all of its shining beauty.

What you will not find in this book is an argument for or against monogamy. You will not find evidence to show your spouse to prove that you are, indeed, a nonmonogamous mammal, nor research findings to drive you inevitably toward a consensually monogamous relationship. I personally have no investment in your relationship structure. I would like, however, to help you find a way to experience love.

Love can be expressed in a variety of ways. In fact, there are so many ways that it would be unfair of me to say that this book covers them all. But open monogamy is one way to express your love without the restrictions of shame or guilt you may have experienced in the past; it may provide new ways to think about traditional marriage. I have also included



many tools in this book to help you create a new open monogamy agreement that might work for you and your partner.

This book will lead you through the steps to opening your monogamy. You may be unsure if this is for you. You may not be ready. You and your partner might not be on the same page. You could be in very different places with your philosophies about open relationships. “Open” means different things to different people. This book will show you how to decide what you want and how to communicate with your partner. I hope it can help you both find the path toward a happy life.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Expanding Your Love

**M**arriage is not a guarantee of monogamy. The vow you make at the altar or under the chuppah is a vital promise. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not a guarantee of forever.

A wedding is a celebration. The wedding vow you make on the day you celebrate your marriage is a promise, and that vow should be real, for sure, but a one-time vow on one special day is not going to last a lifetime. A one-time promise is not a guarantee of monogamy or sexual fidelity. It doesn't cover all of the changes you will go through in a shared lifetime—all the stressors, the arguments, the illnesses, the children, the financial troubles, and the difficulties of real-life are part of the natural ups and downs of a relationship. To weather these changes, you need something more. You need an everyday vow.

Your wedding vow is not the ultimate promise. It takes something more to make a marriage work. It takes a constant pledge to preserve, sustain, maintain, and/or uphold your obligation to each other.

Monogamy is a decision you make *every day*; the choice to be monogamous is always on your terms. Some days are harder than others, which is why *you should adjust your monogamy to fit your relationship*. *You don't have to adjust your relationship to fit your monogamy*. *Adjusting your monogamy to fit your life is more practical and more realistic*.

An oath, pledge, promise, or vow you make to another person is something you will have to revisit over and over. You will have to adjust your meaning of open monogamy as you grow so that the agreement fits your lifestyle and needs.

Instead of examining your partner to see how they do or don't meet your ideal vision, instead of blaming them for why you can't remain monogamous or keep your vow, you can instead commit to adjusting your monogamy agreement every day of your lives. Examine together how your agreement fits your lives. **If it's not working, change the agreement. Don't change your partner.** *You don't have to change your partner if you are both willing to change the arrangement.*

## DO IT YOUR WAY

There are many ways to live and love and no simple guidelines for living in our complex world. Each one of us and every one of our emotional experiences are unique. Everyone alive has a distinct style of expressing love in a relationship, and these feelings can change throughout a lifetime. Romantic love is unique in this way.

Deciding to be in a relationship is the first step. After that, there's usually a lot of flailing around, taking chances, and heartbreak. It's a struggle to get it right.

For whatever reason, the two of you have come together to love each other, and you're doing it. You're finding your way. But you sense there could be more, a more significant kind of love, a love that expresses and encompasses more delight with the world, and more joy. You want a relationship that embraces the whole experience of love.

What makes your particular relationship exceptional is that no one's ever done it before. There's never been a pair like the two of you in the history of the universe. All the books, podcasts, and online advice columnists tell you to do it this way or that way. They ask you to call it one thing or another. Some of what you read or hear works for you, but other parts don't apply. You are looking for a clear path, a direction, a way to keep the parts of your relationship that are good but make it more expansive.

The two of you are special. You don't want to mess this up. You want your relationship to work. You want to love each other with fairness and integrity because that's what you signed up for and honesty aligns with your shared values. You want to know how to stick to those values and be honest about what you want without hurting each other. But you also want more.

You want answers.

The bad news? There is no one right way to do this. The good news? You can have anything you want. I am going to tell you how.

## **MONOGAMY AS A VERB**

Many people, like you, are finding that traditional monogamy no longer encompasses the myriad of ways there are to love. There can be hurt and confusion when you try to fit into a *closed monogamy agreement*, an agreement where sexual and emotional connection stays between two specified partners. It can feel restrictive and at times punitive and doesn't encompass the broader vision of your best life. You sense that if you could love the way you want, life would feel more spacious. You wouldn't have to try to fit into a life that doesn't make sense for you.

By definition, open monogamy is open to interpretation, your interpretation. It starts with being vulnerable with each other; open to the conversation and a new definition that's limited only by your imagination.

Open monogamy means you have a primary partner with whom you also have a flexible relationship agreement. This agreement can include emotional, romantic, and open sexual behaviors with other people. Open monogamy is a way to structure your commitment. You can have a little structure or lots of rules, it's totally up to you.

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People of all ages and backgrounds are moving away from traditional monogamy and gravitating toward more open partnerships, ones with a variety of definitions. This new form of monogamy is flexible and unique to each couple. It is an agreement that works for your life.

From the first conversation, open monogamy is about creating new and expanded boundaries. It means changing your relationship agreement to make things better and then shifting again when things are not working. Open monogamy is a fluid and flexible form of monogamy. It

could mean finding more pleasure and excitement together, in private, or it could mean welcoming in new partners. Couples who practice open monogamy co-create a vision of their ideal future and continuously redefine it.

Many couples who consider themselves primary partners see their relationship as essential to their lives. Styles vary, and the way they create their monogamy can vary from year to year or even day-to-day.

You can modify it to work in any way that is comfortable for the two of you. Monogamy is not something you do in your head; it's something you do together. *You can't be monogamous alone.* It takes two people to be monogamous. Therefore, you have to agree on the meaning of monogamy between you.

Monogamy is not something you choose once, it's something you create over and over, revisiting its definition regularly.

## **EXPANDING THE LOVE**

You love your partner. Your desire for a more flexible monogamy agreement has nothing to do with what's missing or lacking in *them*. You may be delighted to be together and still want to expand on what you already have, making what's right even better.

That's the funny thing about love. It expands, it doesn't contract. When you love someone, you want to share more of yourself with them, bringing more of who you are into the relationship. You can envision something big for yourself and your relationship; the two of you, side by side, living your biggest and best life, sharing the potential of a flexible and fluid relationship.

Opening yourself to your partner in a real, deep, and meaningful way is the core of open monogamy. Pushing into the potential of what your relationship could be can also be scary. Growth is frightening. Being in open or expanded monogamy is a radical way to love someone. It's not for everyone.

This decision should be mutual. It should come from a place of love, not from a place of confusion or frustration. Don't do this because something is going wrong or things are going poorly at home. (NOTE: If you aren't doing well as a couple, try starting with the empathy exercises at the end