

THE 12 PILLARS OF POLYAMORY

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Note: The following is adapted from a lecture given to Polyamorous NYC on 19 March 2008

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“Love withers under constraint; its very essence is liberty. It is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy nor fear. It is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited when its votaries live in confidence, equality and unreserve.”

Percy Byshe Shelley

The road to Polyamory Utopia is long and twisting. There are many learning curves and it is dotted with potholes and littered with road kill. The rewards are great on arrival but there is a price to pay. You have to learn how to negotiate this road and unfortunately our parents, peers, teachers, and clerics have not been too helpful in guiding us along the way. But we are learning. Brad Blanton, the author of Radical Honesty, in a keynote address at a Loving More conference several years ago said, “You guys are the research and development arm of society”. And as researchers we will make mistakes.

But we also learn as we make mistakes. In observing the Poly community over the past 10 years it has become apparent to me that there are some basic principles, I call them Pillars, that everyone must understand and internalize to be able to successfully negotiate the road to Polyamory.

THE 12 PILLARS OF POLYAMORY

I. AUTHENTICITY

You must know yourself and be comfortable being you. You need to know without question the differences between your love needs and wants. Do you know your languages of love and which of them apply to you? (words of affirmation, touch, quality time, gifts, acts of service) Do you know and accept your sexuality – kinks and all? Are you genuine with yourself and are you comfortable sharing yourself as you really are with others? Can you be the person you really are? And if you are unsure, can you admit this to others? A good grasp of your sense of self is mandatory.

Polyamory is about VARIETY. I firmly believe that included in our authenticity is an honest acceptance of our need for variety – variety in our sexual and relationship needs and wants.

II. CHOICE

A grounded and balanced Poly understands they are free to make decisions about how they will live their life. They are free to choose. For example every day you choose to stay with your partners.

Of course this may cause conflict with partners who think they know what is good for you. Ask your partners for their opinions, think them over, and then make your own choices. You will make and be responsible for your own mistakes.

Watch out for those in your life who want to control you and limit your choices.

III. TRANSPARENCY

Although some will disagree, I firmly believe that there should be no secrets in Polyamory. Full disclosure is paramount. And even if you try to keep things to yourself remember the Poly community is very small and pillow talk is second only to the Internet in keeping everyone informed about who is in relationship with whom. Many Polyamorists love to gossip and your secrets may well be common knowledge – but you just don't know that everyone else knows.

Nothing is more damaging to a Poly relationship than to find out the details about your partner from others.

A close friend of mine is married, and his wife does not know he is closet bisexual and a closet cross dresser. You cannot believe the amount of stress this causes which manifests as poor health and depression.

Wherever possible, get to know your partner's partners. I say this easily yet I have partners who are reluctant to be fully open about their partners.

Keep all of your partners in the loop. Poly relationships often fail because the primary partner feels left out.

A lesson the Poly community can teach the mono community is how to deal with unadulterated truth in relationships.

IV. TRUST

A quick definition of trust is: firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something. An example might be condom use. You agree with all your partners to use condoms with everyone not your primary. You believe that they will do what they say they will do.

You want to know that your partners will behave responsibly. In fact, an older term for Polyamory is “responsible non-monogamy”.

Trust is always an “iffy” thing, as we all know how easy it is to break that trust in the heat of passion.

Keeping your partners trust and honoring agreements may well be one of the most difficult aspects of Polyamory. I fail from time to time but I communicate, confess and just deal with the aftermath. Sometimes this not a lot of fun.

V. GENDER EQUALITY

What is good for the goose is good for the gander. Different rules for different genders are not allowed.

A lady friend of mine has a bit of trouble with this concept. She is Poly and very much in love with her primary. She continues to date others, but he, being consumed with New Relationship Energy (NRE), preferred to be monogamous. As his NRE cooled and he became more comfortable with Poly thinking (and multi-partnering) he began to develop an interest in other women. She was distraught, entered psychotherapy and now, months later she is still in therapy and still not comfortable with him dating.

It is easy to embrace the concept of Polyamory but the practice is sometimes hard. It may take years to feel at ease with the Poly lifestyle.

Let me add a word or two here about women and Polyamory. There is a saying that men often have to beg women to come to the first Polyamory party. But by the third party he has to beg her to come home. Women seem to love Polyamory and as you look over Poly history you find many women who are the movers and shakers in the Poly community. It is my impression that men are more often prone to have difficulty sharing their women with other men.

VI. HONESTY

Now I ask you, who would want their partner to be dishonest?

When I was first learning about Polyamory I cheated on my primary partner. I had met someone new and was consumed by New Relationship Energy. When I eventually confessed, my partner was destroyed and there was a bloodbath with me getting the worst of the battle. I was told in no uncertain terms that she could handle anything but deceit. She had no problems with my having sex with others, or falling in love with others, but lying and withholding information was not acceptable.

So now I just tell my partners when I am attracted to others and keep them informed. No editing, no withholding. Your partners may not like hearing what you are telling them but in the long run just getting everything out for discussion beats lying, withholding information and editing.

Poly life is so complicated that I cannot imagine not being honest with all of my partners. And I will tell you this is not always easy. In my opinion the essence of Polyamory is about HONESTY IN RELATIONSHIPS

VII. OPEN COMMUNICATION

Although this overlaps other Pillars it is so important it is worth repeating:

There should be NO secrets in Polyamory. None.

Over and over I hear stories about multiple partner relationships failing because someone felt left out. Everyone should know about everyone in your life that is of romantic/sexual interest to you. Not knowing is deadly. Keep all of your partners in the loop, especially when you are starting new relationships.

By way of illustration I have a partner whose husband became depressed because of health issues. He did some inappropriate things which I didn't understand until I found out about the depression. And I will warn you; depression dissolves lots of the defenses and melts your self-esteem.

Depression and Polyamory are not a good mix.

As an example of communication there is an apocryphal story about a man in therapy who finally confessed that he always wanted to tie up his wife and have sex with her. He was afraid to tell her for fear she would divorce him and he didn't want that to happen. The wife finally entered therapy and after many sessions confessed that she always wanted her husband to tie her up and have sex with her but was afraid to tell him fearing that he would want a divorce. Think about the joy these two might have shared if only they were about to be honest in their communication.

When I begin a new relationship I always make it a point to tell my other partners the details of my romantic life.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

It has been said that successful Polyamorists are so busy communicating that they cannot find time to have sex.

VIII. NON-POSSESSIVE

No one owns anyone.

This supposedly ancient Chinese proverb sums up possessiveness:

“If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was. We do not possess anything in this world, least of all other people. We only imagine that we do. Our friends, our lovers, our spouses, even our children are not ours; they belong only to themselves. Possessive and controlling friendships and relationships can be as harmful as neglect.”

In Polyamory you must quickly learn to love with an open hand. Allow yourself to understand and accept your partner's autonomy.

My partners have complete autonomy to establish relationships that work for them. Of course, I am free to voice my opinions but they are welcome to make their own mistakes.

Practicing Polyamory requires heaps of self-esteem!

IX. CONSENSUAL

Everyone knows what is going on in all the partners' lives and everyone AGREES to what is going on. If there is no agreement it is cheating. And if it is cheating then it is NOT Polyamory. It is cheating.

X. ACCEPTING OF SELF DETERMINATION

Understanding that each of us is different is essential. Encouraging your partners to follow their own life's path is mandatory. Suppose, as for an example, your partner wants to explore BDSM and you have little interest and maybe even an aversion to this pastime. If they find a play partner for an occasional session of impact play or bondage you just encourage them to do it safely and welcome them home.

I have members of my extended Poly family where she wanted to explore her interest in BDSM and he encouraged her to find safe ways to do this. For a year or two she had one or two sessions a month with a Dom, learned her limits, and eventually lost interest. They remain happily married and Polyamorous.

You must keep an open mind about your partner's behavior since you have no control. Yes, you can voice your opinions and make your concerns and wishes known but expect disagreements from time to time. And disagreements can lead to disruption of relationships.

No one ever said that Polyamory is about perfection in relationships. Rather Polyamory is about honesty in relationships. Polyamorous relationships can and will fail, just like monogamous relationships.

I will be the first to tell you THIS IS NOT ALWAYS EASY, especially in the early stages of exploring Polyamory.

XI. SEX POSITIVE

Sexuality is, of course, a major part of Polyamorous relationships and all partners being in agreement on sexual matters is essential. Are all of your partners sex positive?

I have seen few descriptions of what sex positive means and here is my definition.

1. A sex positive person is comfortable with their emotional, spiritual, physical and sexual self.
2. A sex positive person understands, accepts and tolerates their partners sexual needs, beliefs, practices, and yes, even kinks.
3. A sex positive person is open to exploration of a variety of sensual, intimate, and sexual experiences and freely shares their thinking with their partners.
4. A sex positive person can easily communicate their sexual needs to their partners -- they can ask for what they want comfortably.

Communicating your needs to NOT have sex or participate in activities you do not desire is also sex positive.

Ask for what you want – sometimes you might even get it.

XII. COMPERSION

Understanding and embracing compersion is the essence of successful Polyamorous relationships.

I plagiarized this description from a web site now disappeared into cyberspace and I quote (in part): “Compersion is the opposite of jealousy. In simple language Compersion is the love we feel when others feel love. It is the pleasure we feel when others feel pleasure. It is that vast landscape of pleasure and intimacy beyond jealousy. It is the emotional expression that what we want for our loved ones more than anything is their happiness and fulfillment. Compersion recognizes people for who they really are rather than for whom we might want them to be. Compersion recognizes that autonomy, not control, is the way of the lover.

Here is an example plagiarized from an entry by “birgittefires” on My Space April, 2008:

”Compersion is taking your fiance out to buy flowers for the girl he’s wooing, and offering to help pay for the bouquet without being paid back when he finds one a little out of his price range... And feeling excited and happy for him when you’re sitting on the couch eating pizza and watching romance movies while he spends his first night over there... waiting up for him to get home from a late date so you can hear all the sordid details.”

It takes some time and some practice to fully understand and embrace the concept of Compersion.

IN CONCLUSION

Having considered these 12 pillars, you might conclude that Polyamory is just not for you! Polyamory is not for everyone. It works for some and is a disaster for others.

As you travel down the road to Polyamory, especially during the first few miles, do not exceed the speed limit – ever. Go slow! Speed kills.

The road to Polyamory is difficult since there are no roadmaps that are suitable for all. But the traveler, by studying and understanding and embracing the 12 Pillars of Polyamory will have a much easier journey.

END

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