

# Making Peace with Jealousy in Polyamorous Relationships

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  
where its votaries live  
in confidence, equality, and unreserve.

--Percy Byshe Shelley

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# Introduction

- Happy poly relationships are attainable if you know how. Without the right skills and a clear understanding of what makes them work, they can seem out of reach when jealousy gets in the way.
- It is no surprise that concerns over jealousy are the biggest obstacle to mutually satisfying open relationships.
- By unmasking jealousy and identifying the sometimes complex underlying emotions present, we can discover its cause and effectively devise a plan to take away its power.

## What Jealousy is Really About - Fear

- It is important to recognize what jealousy is really about – **fear**.
  1. Fear of the unknown
  2. Fear of change
  3. Fear of losing power and control
  4. Fear of scarcity
  5. Fear of loss
  6. Fear of abandonment

Highly recommended reading on the subject of fear:  
Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway, Susan Jeffers, Ph.D.,  
Ballantine Books, Publisher

## Who Gets Jealous?

- Almost everyone except perhaps:
  1. Those who are more highly evolved than the rest of us – these folks are rare due to societal conditioning that encourages jealousy and a sense of single ownership and possession of intimate partners.
  2. Those pathologically not in touch with their feelings
  3. Those who haven't gotten into the set of circumstances that set it off in themselves.
  4. It is safe to assume you will be jealous at some point when the circumstances arise that push your particular jealousy button.

## Common Components of Jealousy

- In every jealous moment there are more significant underlying emotions than the jealousy itself.
- Jealousy is almost always made up of more than one emotion – which ones are most common?

Anger	Fear	Hurt
Betrayal	Anxiety	Agitation
Sadness	Paranoia	Depression
Loneliness	Envy	Coveting
Feeling Powerless	Feeling Inadequate	Feeling Excluded

## Origins of Jealousy

- Societally Programmed Core Beliefs
  1. If my partner really loved me, they wouldn't want anyone else.
  2. If my partner were happy with me, if I were a good enough partner/lover, my partner would be satisfied with me alone.
  3. Love is scarce!
  4. It's just not possible to love more than one.
    - Note: #1 and 2 are very hard on self-esteem if believed.
- Unresolved Insecurities in Self
  1. Unloveability. Believe I got lucky. With freedom to see others, partner will see how inadequate I am and leave me for another.
  2. Vulnerability. Extraordinarily high need to feel in control.
- Unresolved Insecurities in Relationship
  1. Trust problems
    - From past indiscretions and other incidents of untruthfulness.
    - From skepticism about whether partner has courage to be honest when called for.
  2. Lack of willingness to invest enough time in relationship to keep it strong and healthy while simultaneously spending time conducting other intimate relationships.
  3. Sexual dissatisfaction due to something other than individual variations in level of desire, i.e. same sex partner exploring with others of opposite sex, desire to practice a form of sexual expression like swinging or BDSM that partner has no interest in.

## Common Kinds of Jealousy

Possessive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much more common in monogamous couples than amongst intentionally polyamorous.</li> <li>• Green eyed monster variety.</li> <li>• Occurs when a relationship is characterized by commitment without trust.</li> <li>• Sanctioned by society – watch for signs in commercials, popular music, TV and movies. Until the early 1970s, a man who found his wife in bed with a lover and killed them both was not guilty of murder in the State of Texas.</li> <li>• Jealous person says things like, “You are <u>mine</u>, and I’ll <u>make you pay</u> if I ever catch you with someone else.”</li> </ul>
Exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common in poly relationships, especially when one partner has other loves and the other does not</li> <li>• Triggered when one feels they are being left out or deprived of equal time and attention</li> <li>• Typically there is a desire to be included at all times in all activities</li> <li>• Jealous person says things like , “How come you have all the fun.?”</li> </ul>
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common in poly</li> <li>• Jealous person compares themselves to another love and becomes convinced that they are inadequate. Can cause them to act out in hostile and non-loving ways.</li> <li>• Triggered in response to fear that whatever made the relationship “special” is being shared with or surpassed by another.</li> <li>• Implications surrounding need to be “most special” and concern about losing that status</li> <li>• Need constant reassurance, but relief is usually temporary.</li> <li>• Jealous person says things like, “You think I’m not good enough.”</li> </ul>
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most basic type, most common in poly</li> <li>• Concern that partner will leave them for someone else.</li> <li>• Imagines rejection, loneliness and scarcity.</li> <li>• Rational mind knows partner could fall in love with someone else if the relationship is an open one, but jealousy is not rational.</li> <li>• Part of monogamous mindset</li> <li>• Jealous person says things like, “What if my lover finds someone else better?”</li> <li>• Read “Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway” by Susan Jeffers, Ph.D. for an all-around excellent primer on fear and how to control it rather than letting it control you.</li> </ul>

## If YOU are the jealous one: What Works

- Do your part to be sure the relationship is basically healthy and sound and that you are a competent communicator. Do not expect your relationship(s) to be happy while failing to prioritize the resolution of any troublesome issues, especially those involving trust.
- When emotions are strong and you are very upset, leaping into action makes matters worse. Take time to calm down, and remember that even if jealous feelings at times seem unbearable, they will likely pass with some time and effort, so don't despair. Reach out to the local poly community - you'll make valuable friends that way and gain support in the process. Other sources of support are partner(s), friends, and/or a poly-friendly therapist.
- Temper tantrums, guilt trips and martyrdom make things worse. Remember, the goal is to become comfortable with cheerfully accommodating of your love's other love relationships, or renegotiate your boundaries as to how much is too much if you cannot. You will want the same from them.
- Remember the "ripple effect." Emotional pain and drama that effects your partner's happiness can also create worries, resentment and stress for your partner's other love(s). If we are truly about "loving more", then we must do our part to always act with love and good will and make sure everyone "wins."
- Avoid blaming – it's counterproductive! (Does not mean you cannot calmly express the importance of your partner acknowledging responsibility for any contributions they make to the problem.)
- A good manner of communicating effectively is called non-violent communication ("NVC"). Read the book "Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. Visit the website: <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com>
- Identify emotions being felt and under what circumstances they arise. Diary these - it helps!
- Develop a sense of what percentage of jealousy each emotion is responsible for. Demystifying the exact components serves to help get a grip when emotions feel overwhelming.
- To put things in perspective, visualize your jealousy triggers. Talk about triggers with your partner (s) and their other love(s) and ask for assistance in managing them.
- Jealousy will bring your darker shadow side (deep seated fears) into the light and illuminate disowned, unloved fragments of personality. Growth/resolution of these fears becomes mandatory if you are to stop feeling threatened, assuming your partner's commitment to your relationship is not in question.
- Sometimes specific reassurance from your partner about their commitment to the relationship, how they feel about you and your importance to them can make jealousy much more manageable if not resolve it. Be direct and ask for what you need from your partner to be OK with the situation.
- Consider the Phobia Model of managing jealousy, i.e. desensitization by pushing the boundary of what is tolerable in manageable increments, always checking in promptly afterward with self and partner.
- Be willing to meet all new and potential partners – with a good faith effort and a little benefit of the doubt, it becomes difficult to demonize someone who clearly means well and demonstrates respect for your relationship. (OTOH, be wary of those who don't want to meet you. This is not jealousy but healthy caution. Insist that your partner find out more about why they are opposed.)
- Remember to love yourself. If you can't, solve the problem by reading self-help books on self esteem and seeing a therapist until the issue is resolved. Likewise for other unresolved emotional issues. The drama will keep popping up otherwise, and you'll like you and be happier in the end regardless of how the relationship works out - it's an investment in the quality of your own life!
- Have courage, be patient and forgive yourself and everyone else. Solve conflict creatively - if one method fails, try another, and yet another, until you find something that works for all concerned.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!

## **If YOUR PARTNER is the jealous one: What Works**

- Do your part to be sure the relationship is basically healthy and sound. Do not expect your poly relationships to be happy while failing to prioritize the resolution of any troublesome issues, especially those involving trust. See a poly-friendly therapist or consult one by telephone - many offer this service!
- If you value the relationship, DO NOT take any partner(s) for granted. Give everyone as much love and affection and attention as they desire and you can provide. Recognize them for the unique and special contributions they bring to your life and tell them what special qualities you admire about them.
- Beware of the blinding effects of NRE. DO NOT allow it to cause you to lose sight of the extra importance of being attentive to existing partners during this time. Check in with your partner about how they are feeling while you are together. Even if they seem OK, extra love and attention during this time can't hurt and can help if trouble is encountered later. Romantic gestures like asking them out on a date, bringing them flowers, giving them a sensuous massage, whatever will be a treat for them and bonding for both of you can be highly effective at avoiding and/or resolving jealousy over a new lover.
- Let your jealous partner know you're there for them. Make yourself available to listen while they express hurt. Try to validate how they feel, even if you don't agree with everything they say.
- Be generous with hugs, encouragement and affection.
- Avoid dismissing partner's feelings. Always remember that jealousy is not rational – don't tell your partner they are being silly and expect them to largely if not completely resolve their jealousy by invoking their rational mind.
- Again, learn nonviolent communication. (See reference on page 5 and in bibliography).
- If your partner is willing to learn from jealousy and grow, honor their courage.
- Solid trust is indispensable - be reliable! Come home when say you will - this is no time to indulge in passive-aggressive controlling and/or control-resisting behaviors. If you say you won't have sex without discussing it with your love first, don't! How you demonstrate your trustworthiness is crucial and can make or break a poly relationship. Don't violate agreements - renegotiate them if you can't abide by them. Don't agree to \*anything\* just to appease your partner unless you are willing to stick with it. If you screw up, admit it promptly and affirm that you won't let it happen again.
- Draw the line at verbal abuse; avoid reciprocation.
- Though stalling about giving permission is understandable in the face of fear, you are entitled to set reasonable limits on any "foot dragging" your partner does.
- Take a look inside yourself. Are you pushing their buttons needlessly? Do you often affirm your partner's value in your life? Do you sufficiently prioritize the relationship over other obligations and activities? Which is more important, your relationship or the bowling league?
- Your emotional intelligence matters, too, as do your communication skills. If you have any doubts about these, start now to educate yourself. Read relationship self-help books - 75% of the skills necessary to keep a monogamous relationship healthy are essential to poly relating. See a therapist, either with your partner or on your own, if doing so seems like a good idea - it can speed up the process
- If you find yourself attracting highly jealous partners, ask yourself why? What does a partner's jealousy do for you? Does it perhaps make you feel powerful? Desirable? Secure? Do you enjoy having the upper hand? If you find you have a part in the jealousy crisis, own up to it.
- Assess potential for violence – jealous rages can be lethal. Be sure you can count on your partner's self-control. (Such folks tend to avoid poly, but there can be exceptions.)

## Triad Dynamics or When You're the Hinge in a V

- New relationships can dramatically alter power dynamics.
- Resist the urge to compete; competitiveness creates struggles for control.
- If you have two lovers, bend over backward to avoid power struggles by making sure both lovers get plenty of time and attention
- If a lover abuses power, both of the others should call them on it Try to avoid appearing to gang up. Be careful and cooperative about each other's feelings and needs, it's easy for one person to feel like the odd person out.
- No need for anyone to feel powerless, there is enough love for everyone.

### What to Keep in Mind

- Remember that we don't get to have everything our own way, but neither do we have to grin and bear it while our partner gets everything their way. Compromise!
- Seek to maintain an environment where it is as safe to be honest with each other as possible.
- If you're having trouble communicating in a loving way, suggest calling in a neutral third party or a therapist.
- If you don't have good communications skills, make it a priority to acquire them, this is a tool it's hard to do without.
- Remember that jealousy is complicated and often is resolved only after trying various strategies and assessing the results.
- To avoid jealousy, strive to be the most emotionally healthy person you can be; confront internal insecurities and learn to love yourself if you don't already.
- Always act as lovingly as possible with everyone's best interests at heart.

### Conclusion

- Closing quote: "Jealousy is all the fun you \*think\* they had." - Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*.
- Non-monogamy requires being willing to stretch, tolerate certain amounts of discomfort, risk-taking and uncertainty, especially in the beginning.
- Jealousy can feel paralyzing at the outset, usually the balance of pain and pleasure gradually shifts until the enhanced satisfaction and joy far outweighs the anxieties and insecurities.
- Remember that there is no shame in being jealous, no nobility in a lack of it. We are what we are.
- Reach out for support often. Attend community events regularly to be around people who share your points of view and avoid feeling isolated.
- Remember to let the winds of Heaven dance between you. The more self-sufficient you are in being able to be happy as an individual, the more comfortable you are likely to be with sharing a partner with others.

# Understanding And Handling Jealousy

Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd, Ph.D.

Most of us have experienced Shakespeare's "green-eye'd monster"--jealousy. In its intense forms, it is a horrible, tormenting obsession. Often in a crisis we'd like to kill the person who tries to take our lover away. It is estimated that 20% to 35% of all murders involve a jealous lover (White and Mullen, 1989; Pines, 1992). A third of all couples in therapy have a problem with jealousy. It is common for a jilted lover to threaten suicide, and some do it. Certainly power is involved; we want the power to keep our lover to ourselves exclusively. Just as falling in love seems "natural" and unlearned, so does jealousy. It just comes over us when someone or something (like work, TV, or sports) threatens our love relationship. Of course, it isn't always painful and crazy-making, sometimes it's milder and fun--a tease--and a sexual turn on, as in swapping partners. We will focus on the more intense, unpleasant kind. How does it differ from envy and rivalry?

There isn't a clear-cut distinction between jealousy and envy but, in general, **jealousy** is experienced when something you have (e.g. a lover) is taken away or is threatened by someone else. **Envy** is when you do not measure up to someone else or you very much want something someone else has (e.g. an attractive lover, a sports car, success, a sexy build, etc.). **Rivalry** is when no one yet possesses the thing you desire (a particular person or position or status) and there is keen competition for the desired goal. Obviously, all of these feelings increase as our desire--our desperation--for the "prize" increases. Jealousy is the most intense. It involves having something highly valued and losing it to the competition--that hurts, angers, and shames us.

Nancy Friday (1985) has written an enormous volume on *Jealousy*. Schoenfeld (1980) discussed jealousy in a practical way. But, Barker (1987) has been considered most personally helpful by my students.

The greater the threat, the more intense the jealousy. Accordingly, a large *Psychology Today* survey (Salovey & Rodin, 1985) showed that separated and divorced persons suffered the most jealousy, followed by cohabiting single people, and married people the least. How we perceive the threat influences the jealousy; thus, men and women have somewhat different experiences. A jilted man gets mad at the other male; a jilted woman dwells on the loss of her partner's commitment and love.

There are five stages of jealousy (White, 1981; Brehm, 1985):

**1. Suspecting the threat:** If you are insecure about a love relationship (not necessarily about yourself in general) and very dependent on your lover, you are likely to be jealous. You may see "signs" of disaster when none are there. Conversely, some people overlook very suggestive signals. In reality, 45% of the people in the *Psychology Today* survey had cheated on a partner while pretending to be faithful. Men are more likely to deny feeling jealous; women more readily admit it. If the threat to our relationship--the competitor--is attractive, intelligent, successful, etc., we will be more threatened and more disturbed. If we have or want an exclusive sexual relationship with our lover, we will be more threatened by a competitor than if we were in a non-sexual relationship. If we ourselves have been unfaithful to our partners, others might expect us to be less jealous if our partner also has an affair, but research shows that some unfaithful spouses are more jealous (perhaps, in these cases, the greatest threat to the relationship is when both partners have had affairs).

**2. Assessing the threat:** We may spy on our lover and the rival; we probably lie awake nights worrying about the situation and reviewing the evidence, "Did she come on to him?," "I wonder if he has talked to her?," "Does he love her?," "Wonder if everybody but me knows about it?" Women are concerned about their partner becoming attracted to other women by sex, intelligence, and other attractions, *and* dissatisfaction with the current relationship. Thus, women feel multiple threats. Men are consciously more concerned about their partner finding someone who will offer a more secure, committed relationship. Men are more concerned (than women) about protecting or re-building their egos if they are "beaten out" by another man; they worry about their partner having sex with someone else (but they'd probably blame the partner if that did happen). Men see a threat and feel jealous first, then worry that something is wrong with them. Women are more concerned with



maintaining the relationship; they worry about losing love; they feel inadequate first, then jealous. It is in this intensive worry and spying stage that we go crazy, see the discussion of irrational ideas in chapters 6, 7, and 14. [Found at <http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/>]

**3. Emotional reactions:** If we decide there is a threat to our love, we can have a very wide range of responses: clinging dependency (more women but many men too), violent rage at the competitor or the partner (more men), morbid curiosity, self-criticism, and depression with suicidal thoughts (more women), hurt and resentment of the partner's lack of devotion and resistance, social embarrassment, selfish--sometimes realistic--concerns ("I'd better take the money out of the bank"), urge to "get back at" the partner, fear of losing companionship, loneliness, regrets at giving up all the future plans, etc., etc.

Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,  
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.  
-William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, 1697

In spite of Congreve's famous quote, there is some evidence that men have a more intense jealousy response to losing a loved one than women do, and they take more time to get over it (Mathes, 1988).

The 1950's advocated "family togetherness." In the late 1960's and 1970's there was an "open marriage" movement (O'Neill & O'Neill, 1973); we were told that jealousy was a sign of inconsiderate possessiveness and immaturity, that we were selfishly restricting our partner's love for everyone. Certainly many people tried gallantly to suppress jealous feelings while being open and modern "swingers," but many failed. At the same time, there were arguments that jealousy was a natural, inevitable, and useful reaction (Mace, 1958; Harrison, 1974). Surely, a couple deciding on exclusiveness in their love and sexual life is not always a master-slave relationship, not necessarily one-sided possessiveness. Yet, love is scary. We can be hurt; the lover has power over us; we need to be #1 in his/her life. How does someone become so important in our emotional life? In the same way *The Little Prince* loved his rose bush (Saints-Exupery, 1943). It's a neat part of the story; I'll summarize:

The Little Prince lived on a tiny planet all his own. He had only one rose bush. He loved it. It was so beautiful, it gave him so much pleasure. He remembers tenderly planting the little bush in his richest soil, building a fence to protect it and a trellis to hold it, trimming it and watering it every day. With pride he watched his rose bush grow into a healthy, mature rose bush which faithfully produced beautiful blossoms year after year. Then he went to another planet, Earth, and saw thousands of roses, much bigger and more beautiful than his one little bush. At first, he felt foolish for having liked his rose bush so much. After all, there was nothing special about his bush. Then he realized he didn't love his rose bush for its bigness or its outstanding beauty, he loved it because he had personally cared for his bush and because so much of his time and pleasure had been with only one rose bush, "his" roses. Like the Little Prince, we hurt when we lose "our" love. The hurting doesn't necessarily mean we lack confidence or that we believe we possess the other person; it means we are human, we long for things we have lost.

**4. Coping response:** There are two basic choices--desperately trying to shore up the threatened relationship or trying to protect or bolster your sagging ego. Men are more likely than women to become competitive and/or have angry reactions, often including getting drunk or high. Women more often become weak and depressed; sometimes they act like they don't care; more often, they cry, plead, and blame themselves (Brehm, 1985). Bar talk suggests that recently rejected lovers are sexually on the make and/or sexually "easy." An interesting study by Shettel-Neuber, Bryson, & Young (1978) suggests that men and women, when threatened by an *unattractive* competitor, are about as likely to go out with "someone else" and be sexually aggressive. However, when threatened by an *attractive* competitor, men felt an even stronger urge to make it with "someone else," while women didn't want to get involved with any other men at all.

**5. The outcome:** It is important to know if particular emotional and coping responses help or harm threatened relationships. Also, do these responses build or destroy self-esteem? Both self-esteem and love are important. For instance, a threatened lover, who temporarily keeps his/her partner (and protects his/her ego) by threatening

violence or suicide or by frantically begging, will probably lose the lover's respect in the process. What are the best responses?

Before looking at ways to cope with jealousy, let's try to understand its causes better. Different therapies have different explanations of jealousy. Examples: Freudians say the overwhelming dread and pain of rejection originates in childhood when we discover that we are not Mommy or Daddy's favorite (Daddy or Mommy is). Of course, this insecurity is unconscious. The Family Systems therapists point out that both partners contribute to the jealousy-producing situation. If one partner has an affair, it reflects a troubled relationship, for which both are responsible. Yet, behavioral therapists use psychological techniques to reduce one individual's jealousy response--desensitization, flooding, and satiation (having the unfaithful partner "report in" every hour). Sociological treatments emphasize cultural influences. For instance, all societies tell us we should be jealous but in different circumstances, e.g. certain Eskimo men consider it a compliment if a visiting male wants sex with his wife but a visitor wanting to keep the wife would be highly resented. Thus, jealousy is a learned social reaction, not our innate nature. On the other hand, the sociobiologists, like Darwin, believe jealousy is innate and instinctive for genetic survival. Men want exclusive sexual partners (to pass on their genes) and women want devoted helpers (to help with the kids' survival). Thus, after an affair, men want sexual details and women want to know how serious the relationship is. All these "understandings" can reduce intense jealousy and blaming each other (Pines, 1992a).

### **So, what can be done about jealousy?**

Needless to say, the best protection against jealousy is a good relationship, i.e. prevention is better than a cure. If the love can be kept alive and exciting, that is much more effective than trying to revive a threatened love. Once jealousy has occurred, however, what works best? Salovey and Rodin (1985) asked 100 college students what had worked for them. *Best was "tough it out,"* i.e. controlling their emotions and becoming even more committed to and attentive to the loved one. A second method was somewhat effective, namely, *"selective ignoring,"* i.e. telling themselves that the desired object (the lover or some achievement) was just not that important. A third method, telling themselves their good qualities and doing something nice for themselves, was not helpful in this case. Read on.

Branden (1981) advocates an openly honest "I feel..." response. Example: you see your partner flirting with a very attractive person at a party. Rather than bitterly attacking the partner, what if later you said: "As I watched you with *him/her*, I immediately felt anxious. There were butterflies in my stomach and I started to imagine that you might try to see *him/her* later and get all emotionally involved. The idea of your touching and holding *him/her* really upset me. I'm scared you will leave me." Such a frank, unattacking response, which discloses the true feelings underneath the jealousy, should make it easy for the flirting partner to respond sympathetically and honestly to the heart of the matter, namely the jealous person's hurt and fears. This honesty is usually the best way to handle jealousy.

What is the best protection against being devastated by an actual break up or the possibility of a break up? *Self-esteem and a belief that your future will work out okay.* But esteem has to be developed before the break up, not afterwards. Some simple techniques may be useful in reducing jealousy: stay active, distract yourself with friends, fun, hobbies, work, self-improvement, etc.; *thought stopping*<sup>1</sup> should reduce the jealousy arousing fantasies; *desensitization*<sup>2</sup> can reduce the emotional response of jealousy just as if it were a fear; *venting*<sup>3</sup> will

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<sup>1</sup> This is simply yelling (loudly but silently to yourself), "Stop! Get out of here!" And, believe it or not, the thought often goes away. It will come back, so yell again. Eventually, by telling yourself that you don't have to put up with useless or hurtful thoughts, you can frequently control "your mind". [Detailed discussion re: thought stopping at <http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap11/chap11g.htm#a>]

<sup>2</sup> Desensitization is a procedure designed to break the connection between certain neutral stimuli and an inappropriate emotional reaction (identified as fear) and replace the fear response to the situation with a stronger relaxed response. It is also called counter-conditioning. Fear is countered with calm relaxation, since you can't feel both fear and calm at the same time. See detailed discussion re: desensitizing at <http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap12/chap12g.htm>

