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Pairs With Spares

For Polyamorists With a Whole Lotta Love, Three, or More, Is Never a Crowd

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I have a love whose name is Johnny

He is dating my best friend Bonnie

The audience members at the annual Poly Living convention -- think hippies, retired science teachers, a high quotient of male ponytails -- are singing, in round, what might be the only song ever written about polyamory.

She lives with her sweetheart Jen

And Jen's husband whose name is Glenn

It's a lifestyle that has been alternatively misidentified as Swinging, Wife Swapping and Really Greedy.

Now they raise their kids together

And are happy more than ever.

Polyamory isn't about sex, polys tell you. It is about love. It is about loving your primary partner enough to love that they have a new secondary partner, even when their New Relationship Energy with that person leaves you, briefly, out in the cold. It's about loving yourself enough to acknowledge that your needs cannot be met by one loving person. It's about loving love enough to embrace it in unexpected form -- like maybe in the form of your primary's new secondary! -- in which case you may all form a triad and live happily together.


That kind of love.

And so some 100 people, a small fraction of the 15,000 polys on the mailing list of convention sponsor Loving More, have gathered at a Holiday Inn off the Pennsylvania Turnpike for two days of seminars with such titles as "Hap-Poly Ever After: Long-Term Poly Partnership" and "Kids and Poly Relationships: A Human Relations Primer About Melding All Your Loves."

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Of course, sex is a part of love. Which is why the pastor leading "Love and Marriage in Bible Times" finds herself talking really loud to combat the noises coming from the tantric sex workshop next door. Which is why another workshop deals with the proper way to navigate a "threesome, foursome, or moresome."

Which is why a lot of monos think the whole thing is a racket, just an excuse to get some.

There is a whole lot of public nuzzling going on at Poly Living.

But the sex vs. love question gets boring quickly. And really, is there anything going on at the convention that we haven't seen on "A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila"?

What you really want to know, after spending a weekend with triads and quads and V's and other combinations of mostly happy-looking people, is this: What does it mean to have a healthy relationship?

Is polyamory the look of modern love?

* * *

"One thing I like to say is, polyamory ain't for sissies."

This is Anita Wagner, 54, a legal secretary with a buoyant [Tennessee](#) drawl, flowing clothes and cheerful lipstick. She has a comfy mom-ness about her that says: *I give amazing hugs.*

If there is such a thing as a typical poly story at this conference, Wagner's is it. She drove up from Jessup, Md., with one of her partners, Jim. Like a lot of the middle-aged attendees at this conference, Wagner was married, twice -- traditional I-Do marriages that weren't supposed to involve cheating but did anyway. Whose cheating?

"Let's just say," she demurs, "that cheating touched my life in a variety of ways."

She thought she might be bisexual, but ignored those feelings to focus on raising her daughter. Once the second divorce was over and the daughter was grown, she acknowledged something about herself: "I realized that, being the bighearted person I am, I was denying myself something that we all need."

That was love. Big Love.

So, for a while she lived with Jim, and they loved each other and they drove each other batty. ("He used to work for the [NRA](#) and I hate guns.") Then she met Tim, who was more on her wavelength, and now they live together, but she still sees Jim and also has a partner named Carla. Tim, Jim and Carla, of course, have other partners, and when Wagner maps out those connections as far as she can; the number reaches 18. Her relationships are "V's" -- the most common poly type -- which means that she is the connection point between multiple other people. She sees Tim and Jim, but Tim and Jim do not see each other.

"Many of us tried to make monogamy work," Wagner says. But monogamy, she says, often seemed to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. Its practitioners would break off "perfectly good relationships" just because of intellectual incompatibility, for example, or because one partner liked ballet and the other liked bowling. Doesn't it make more sense, polys ask, to keep the good parts of a relationship, and find another boyfriend who likes "Swan Lake"?

The compartmentalization of affection: It's completely at odds with today's [Disney](#) Princess/[Coldplay](#)-lyric view of marriage, in which your spouse is your lover, best friend, therapist and [Wii](#) buddy, and you also have identical taste in

movies.

But as people are increasingly expected to self-actualize clear to the grave, what are the chances that they'll pair up with someone who is on the exact same path of discovery?

Thought: Maybe you can have it all. You just can't get it all from the same person.

It's the thought that illustrates a paradox in polyamory: Its practitioners have astonishing optimism for humans' endless capacity to love, to share, to forgive, to grow, to explore. But that optimism seems rooted in a cynical belief that the monogamous are stuck in a myth, one that leads to cheating, unhappiness or divorce court. They believe, as do some evolutionary biologists, that most humans do *not* have endless capacity to be faithful to just one person.

There's a vague aura of entitlement to polyamory. The concept that one *deserves* complete romantic fulfillment seems a decidedly Me Generation concept.

More than one presenter at Poly Living's sessions utters a variation of this statement, which is either an explanation, an excuse or an untruth: *We're just doing what everyone else is doing anyway. The difference is that we're not lying about it.*

* * *

"Your turn!" Nicole says cheerfully to her partner Rebecca. The two women, both in their early 30s, are trying to eat lunch with their other partner, James, but the trio's toddler has chosen this moment to smear cake on his face and sprint toward the hotel restaurant's door. Rebecca hurtles out of her chair, cutting him off before he careens into a waitress. Nicole rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. "I have no idea," she says, "how people do this with just two parents."

Rebecca returns the boy to the table, handing him off to James as Nicole excuses herself to the bathroom. Morning sickness. Ugh.

Nicole, a social worker who asked that the family's full names be excluded for fear that child protective services would take away their son, has been with James for six years. They met when both were involved in other open relationships, and knew they wanted to raise any children in a group marriage. They are in a triad with Rebecca.

Nicole is the toddler's biological mother, though she fondly tells the story of how a classmate at his preschool assumed Rebecca was: They share platinum blond hair and nearly translucent skin, while Nicole and James both have brown hair and dark eyes. All three adults share a similar thick-through-the-middle build. When a reporter asks whether they all share a bed, Nicole bursts out laughing -- she has a hearty and well-used laugh -- and says, "Not until we lose some weight."

Though Nicole and James had jointly dated other people before, Rebecca, a paramedic with an efficient British accent, is the only one to mesh equally with both. For the triad's first date, James made Rebecca a plate of homemade Jammie Dodgers (one batch with strawberry jam, one with raspberry; he didn't know which she'd prefer). Rebecca brought them a plant. There was, says James, "a lot of courting," and a lot of evenings that ended with him and Nicole pillow-talking about how adorable Rebecca was.

Now they all live together. Most of the time, Nicole and James sleep upstairs in the master suite and Rebecca keeps her own room downstairs. But sometimes James joins Rebecca, or Rebecca joins Nicole, or the three of them lie comatose in front of the television and ponder the baby that will arrive in five months. After that, Rebecca would like a turn at carrying a child, and if the trio meets someone they all connect with, they might add another adult to the household, too.

It's less about them wanting to fulfill personal desires, they say, and more about needing more people to meet the daily requirements of 21st-century life. As in, if it takes two incomes to keep up with the modern mortgage and school fees, then who is going to provide the kids with a stable environment at home? "Five hundred years ago," says James, "'family' meant mom, dad, grandma, aunt, great-grandma -- everyone."

They're all "out" in real life, accepted by their parents, their respective workplaces and at their son's progressive school. It's been, they say, relatively easy. But they've heard enough custody horror stories (most famously, April Divilbiss, a [Memphis](#) poly, lost her daughter after discussing her lifestyle in an [MTV](#) documentary) to make them wary of being too public.

"People in my generation are recognizing that they have more choices when they're deciding what they want their families to look like," says Diana Adams, 28, a polyamorous lawyer who specializes in alternative family law in [New York](#). "This is an important historical moment because of the gay marriage conversation. We're becoming more accepting of gay parents, of single parents." She hopes to soon start a family with her two male partners.

About a dozen poly parents discuss both changing public perception and the daily grind of child-rearing at the "Kids and Poly Relationships" seminar.

"My oldest son is very attached to our current girlfriend," one male participant says. "It's happened before with a relationship that didn't last." He wants to know how to protect his son while still giving him the opportunity to know the girlfriend.

A woman in her mid-30s wants to know how to enter the poly dating scene again. "I've basically been baby-hibernating for the past five years," she says, but now she'd like a partner in addition to her husband.

"My 13-year-old is embarrassed of us," says one concerned dad, with an expression of profound shame.

The session leader, a clinical therapist, laughs. "All 13-year-olds are embarrassed of their parents."

Nicole, James and Rebecca acknowledge that a group marriage requires work that a monogamous one does not. "At first, I felt interrupted all the time," says Rebecca. "We all have different communication styles."

"Sure, if I'm putting the baby to bed for two hours while they're having hot sex, I get annoyed," says Nicole. "But it's not because they're having sex without me. It's because I'm really tired and I've been putting a baby to bed for two hours."

A group of grandmotherly women -- who all may be in a relationship, it's a little unclear -- stop by to admire the toddler.

Feeling shy, the child is out of his seat again, angling for more cake. James gets out of his chair, ready to run interference, and takes a moment to exchange a glance with his two partners. It's a look that clearly says, "We really need a fourth."

* * *

When you watch people interact at Poly Living, it can seem that we humans have no idea what makes people happy inside relationships, or what arrangements people need to navigate the world.

Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio, a professor who traveled to [Pennsylvania](#) from [Puerto Rico](#) for the conference, puts it this way: "What is my sexuality? I don't know. I'm an artist. One day I paint a face, the next day I paint a landscape. Why

should I paint the same thing every day?"

There is, however, jealousy. Everyone at Poly Living has a story about jealousy, or sometimes, a story about non-jealousy. Michael Rios, a poly from [Arlington](#) with mad-professor hair and a goatee, likes to tell about the time that he spent four hours on the phone with his wife's new boyfriend, trying to convince him that he was totally cool with them dating.

The wife and Rios aren't together anymore, but he and his current partner, Sarah Taub, still count her among their closest friends. Rios, 59, has been similarly supportive of Taub's other relationships.

She'd come home from [Boston](#), where a romantic interest lived, "and Michael would just *smell* wrong," says Taub, 39, wearing a tie-dye shirt and sharing an orange with Rios. "There was always a period of adjustment that could be a little tense."

"At first you denied it," Rios says reassuringly. "But that was your process of self-discovery."

But most of the stories are about actual jealousy, especially from mono-poly couples, the ones in which one half of the relationship never planned on sharing.

Joe LaVasseur and his girlfriend, Victoria, who asked that her last name be excluded because her other partner is *not* out, were a couple like this. They met four years ago, and by the time LaVasseur, a 25-year-old with a shaved head, wire-rimmed glasses and owly, thoughtful eyes, learned Victoria, 28, was poly ("Something I had no experience with," he says), he was too smitten to stop seeing her.

The couple are sitting on a couch outside a conference room at the convention, waiting for a seminar on improving communication between personality types (he procrastinates; she doesn't). Victoria, who has long, thick hair and perfect, porcelain doll skin, rubs LaVasseur's shoulders. He absent-mindedly kisses her hand.

"It was hard," LaVasseur says. "I'd always identified my self-worth by my relationships. I felt really insecure that I wasn't enough for her."

They developed a system. If Victoria so much as *thinks* she's interested in someone else, she tells LaVasseur immediately. "Then, later, I'll say, 'I'm *thinking* about kissing them,'" says Victoria. "And then, 'I'm thinking about getting serious.' "

Ironically, what's helped LaVasseur's jealousy the most was meeting his girlfriend's other partner, with whom she lives. He recognized how different he and the other guy were, and realized that what Victoria got out of that other relationship would not compete with what they had together.

There is thoughtfulness, *mindfulness*, that goes into each one of their interactions. (A favorite poly joke: "Swingers have sex. Polys have conversations.")

Whatever their lifestyle is, it's not easy, and it doesn't allow for a whole lot of me-time. "Sometimes," says Victoria, "I have to pull out my planner and say, 'We have three hours on Sunday. Want to see a movie?'"

Later that night, Victoria and LaVasseur have signed up to be facilitators at a cuddle party -- a nonsexual outlet for people of all ages to spoon, tickle, pat and snuggle each other. It requires facilitators because cuddle parties come with 40 minutes' worth of rules on how to snuggle respectfully.

The two of them aren't sitting anywhere near each other; in fact, LaVasseur is demonstrating proper cuddle etiquette

with another woman, one old enough to be his mother.

Victoria looks on contentedly; she catches his eye and they smile.

They seem ridiculously in love.

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