

Before you dismiss the idea of open marriage as aberrant, consider that it's on the rise, especially among couples of a certain age

# TO LOVE, HONOUR AND STRAY

BY Anne Bokma  
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When Jill Barrett's\* close friend

Marguerite Palmer\* lost her husband after a lengthy illness, Jill was there to offer support in any way she could: going to the funeral, coming over to cook meals, and planning shopping trips as a diversion from the loneliness that had seized her friend. Jill's husband, Leonard\*, was also there for Marguerite: helping to repair a dripping faucet, taking her out on the lake in his boat, holding her and letting her cry in his arms.

As the months passed, Marguerite and Leonard found themselves attracted to each other and longed to move beyond consoling hugs to sexual intimacy. But instead of starting an illicit affair — the discovery of which carried the risk of ruining both a solid marriage and a long-standing friendship — they talked openly about their feelings.



Leonard told his wife about his sexual desire for Marguerite. Marguerite told Jill she was lonely, had gone a year without sex and longed for the loving touch of a man she could trust. And Jill? She gave the pair her blessing to go forth and fornicate, to enter into a sexual relationship without any guilt, shame or fear of getting caught. “My own feelings surprised me,” says Jill. “But the fact is, I trust my husband and I trust my friend. Life is short; why should I stop them from having this experience?”

It’s safe to say Jill’s reaction isn’t typical: Accusations of betrayal, tears, screaming and a suitcase thrown to the curb would be more like it. But Jill, an athletic 41-year-old mother of three children, age seven to 12, and a successful tax lawyer in southern Ontario, says she took a clear-eyed view of the situation and believed the strength of her 14-year marriage and her

healthy self-esteem would not be threatened by this sexual dalliance. Besides, she wanted her friend to feel better and she believed her husband should be able to indulge his desires. “I’ve had lots of good things happen to me. What happened to Marguerite — losing her husband at such an early age — isn’t fair. Who am I to say she shouldn’t have some nice stuff in her life, and if I can enable that even a little bit, that’s a good thing. As for my husband, I wouldn’t want to get to the end of our lives together without him having had this fun.”

You might think Jill is incredibly altruistic (or sadly naive) for allowing her husband to find pleasure in the arms of another woman, for taking a chance that he might fall in love and choose to leave her. But could she simply be more evolved than the rest of us in her ability to move past the petty feelings of jealousy, possessiveness and insecurity that cause us to demand our partners be bound only to us for life?

Before you label this couple an anomaly, deluded or deviant, consider that the open marriage Jill and Leonard are practising is far more common than you might think.

“**ETHICAL NON-MONOGRAMY**” or “polyamory” (literally translated as “many loves”) means having loving, intimate relationships with more than one person with the full consent of everyone involved.

The phenomenon is on the rise in North America, including among

midlife couples seeking new sexual adventures and emotional connections after being with the same partner for many years. Some believe this type of marriage has such broad appeal that over the next decade it will become accepted as a viable lifestyle choice. A recent *Newsweek* report, noting an estimated 500,000 Americans are practising polyamory, proposed that it could be “the next sexual revolution.” And in Canada, there are online polyamory support groups in every province.

Two new books have recently hit the shelves: *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* by New York sex educator and writer Tristan Taormino and *Open: Love, Sex and Life in an Open Marriage* by Jenny Block, a 39-year-old writer in Dallas, who, three years into her marriage, realized she wanted to explore other relationships and has done so with the support of her husband. “There’s nothing unusual about people who choose open marriage, except perhaps that we opt to tell the truth to ourselves and to one another,” says Block, who believes there are legions of marriages that may seem traditional to outsiders, but are actually much more unconventional than they appear. “The majority of us may be in hiding, perhaps out of fear of being judged or misunderstood.”

## OPENING WIDE?

### Polyamory might be for you, if...

**...you trust your partner** “It sounds like a contradiction, but one of the most profound things I have learned from people in non-monogamous relationships is how confident and content they feel about the strength of their partnerships,” says Tristan Taormino, author of *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*.

**...there is mutual consent** Sometimes one partner may put undue pressure on the other to open the marriage, but both need to be ready and willing.

**...you aren’t the jealous type** The thought of your partner having sex with someone else doesn’t make you want to reach for a shotgun.

**...you have good communication skills** You feel comfortable discussing the mechanics of how your open relationship will work and can talk honestly about your feelings with multiple partners.

**...you have the time and energy to devote to other people** You’ll need good time management skills and enough emotional energy to juggle the demands of having more than one partner.

**...you know the risks** Increasing the number of partners in your life also increases your risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections, so you’ll need to educate yourself about safer sex practices. Because of the social taboo of polyamory, you may feel you have to live in the closet — or face disapproval from friends, family and co-workers if they find out. And there’s always the chance you won’t be able to manage your emotions the way you thought you could. “Sometimes people fall in love. Once you open up your relationship, this is always a risk, since the way people connect and the depth of emotions that arise cannot be predicted,” says Taormino.



## It's desire without deception, amour without anxiety. Or, some might say, having your cake and eating it too.

It sounds like the best of both worlds — having a loving, long-term relationship with your partner and relieving the familiarity of monogamy by spicing it up with sexual trysts on the side — all without the risk of hurting your spouse. It's desire without deception, amour without anxiety. Or, some might say, having your cake and eating it too.

**POLYAMORY IS NOT SWINGING**, swapping or an orgiastic free-for-all. Nor is it what Jillian Deri, a PhD candidate at B.C.'s Simon Fraser University who is writing her thesis on polyamory and jealousy, calls "poly-shaggery," the practice of indiscriminately sleeping around. "Some folks seem to think that polyamory is like having your cake and then having more cake — endless cake forever," she says. "I'm all for the cake buffet, but polyamory involves negotiating agreements, processing emotions with multiple lovers, and honest communication — not as much cake as you can eat."

And women in their forties and fifties — freed from the bonds of child rearing, flush with a sexual confidence they might not have had in their younger days and secure in their long-term marriages — may be especially ready to forge new intimate relationships at this stage of life.

Jill Barrett says age definitely had something to do with her willingness to try an open marriage. "I'm much more comfortable with the idea at 40 than I would have been at 30," she says. "As you get older, you're often more willing to experiment, go outside your comfort zone and maybe realize it's a lot wider than you thought."

As vast as that comfort zone might become, those who practise polyamory work hard at dealing with jealousy. They believe it's possible to not only tame the green gene, but actually experience its opposite — something called *compersion* — taking joy in the pleasure your partner receives from another person. "It's like the happiness you feel when a friend has something good happen to them," says Deri. "Buddhists talk about this concept all the time. It's the opposite of self-sacrificing — it's

self-elevating." Author Taormino says jealousy is a learned behaviour, not an instinctual one, and that it can be overcome. "The first step to achieving compersion is to work on unlearning jealousy — letting go of feelings of insecurity, possessiveness and fear. You are striving for a shift in consciousness."

But does this type of clinical approach work when it comes to regulating matters of the heart? William Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul and a marriage and family therapist who wrote *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World that Pulls Us Apart*, doesn't think so. Women, he says, are especially vulner-

able to emotionally attaching themselves to a new lover — and putting their marriage at risk. "A woman's heart tends to follow her body; men are more capable of sex without strong attachment." He's

against the idea of open marriage primarily because of the risk of marital breakdown and the negative impact this has on children. "These people are putting their relationship in danger for something that's completely optional — a variety of sexual partners is not a core human need." Why then do we feel a biological desire for people we aren't married to? "Of course we are attracted to multiple people, but if we followed up on all of that, we'd be ruined," says Doherty. "We have impulses in other areas too — to lie, to cheat, to steal and kill. And we know those are wrong."

**CERTAINLY THERE ARE THOSE** who have experimented with polyamory and were unhappy with the results. Samantha Thorson\*, a 53-year-old Vancouverite, was in a relationship with a man who'd been in an open marriage with his wife for 26 years. "We fell deeply in love with each other in a way that we felt came along once in a lifetime. Since I was single, he became my primary relationship, and I began to want the normal things a primary partner has." But the man did not want to get a divorce and Samantha felt he put his wife ahead of her. "He deferred a lot to her. When he and I were alone or with my friends, we got along great. When we were around her, it wasn't fun." Samantha recently ended the relationship and says from now on she'll opt for **Continued on page 116**

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monogamy. “I found that dating a married man who is poly has the same shortcomings as dating a married man who is supposedly monogamous.”

Yet there are also plenty of poly success stories. Maureen Marovitch, a 40-year-old Montreal filmmaker and mother of two, is one of them. Marovitch and her partner David have been together for 18 years, and for the past 12 years she has also been involved with Wil, a botany professor in Wisconsin who also has another girlfriend. They see each other about once every three months and are in regular contact by phone and email.

Marovitch, who produced a documentary about their relationship, *When Two Won't Do*, which premiered on TVOntario in 2002, says she plans to grow old with both David and Wil. (Even though Marovitch says David is free to experiment, he has chosen to remain monogamous.) Her kids call Wil “uncle” and he’s considered part of the family, a regular presence during holidays. He sleeps in a guest room when he visits and she often ends up in his bed. Her children, ages six and four, don’t know that she and Wil are lovers, but she expects she will tell them when they are teenagers. “People who question polyamory always ask about the effect on the children, but there are all kinds of families out there — stepfamilies, gay families, single-parent families,” says Marovitch. “I think kids benefit from seeing stable relationships, having people around who care for them and love them and pay attention to them. And that’s what we have.”

One of the strategies couples in open marriages use to resist jealousy is to develop specific ground rules about how they will conduct their

multiple relationships. These might include having veto power over whom your partner is intimate with (none of your friends, for example), deciding what types of sexual activities are acceptable, and how much contact you or your partner will have with lovers. Many polyamory websites even post sample “relationship contracts.”

Author Block takes offence at the idea that some people view open marriage as morally wrong, subversive or deviant and says it should be considered just another lifestyle choice. “Maybe you simply find yourself wanting something more or someone other than your spouse when it comes to sex.... Maybe you’re ready to let biology and reality, as opposed to religious dogma and social expectations, guide your way of life.”

Jill Barrett says opening up her marriage brought her closer to her husband. “Some of my friends are in marriages that aren’t happy and they aren’t doing anything about it,” she says. “It wouldn’t even cross their minds to explore something like this, but I’ve come to see that this is a very mature approach to love and sex.”

That said, she recently asked Leonard to end his six-month sexual relationship with Marguerite because his time with her was starting to make Jill feel resentful. It wasn’t jealousy, she insists, it was having her husband — a salesman who already travels three or four days a week — away from home one more day a week to make the two-hour trip to visit Marguerite. “Things at home weren’t getting done and I was feeling a bit like a single parent. I needed him here more,” says Jill. “When all this started, it seemed like a fun experiment and I didn’t think it would be a long-term thing.” Although Jill admits the breakup has been difficult for Leonard (“He definitely felt torn”), it hasn’t had any ill effects on her marriage or her friendship with Marguerite. “I haven’t changed my views on open marriage — I think there are some people who can make it work and more power to them. I would never say it’s a bad thing or that I regret anything.” **M**

\*Names changed by request

