

Relationships

How To Know If Ethical Non-Monogamy Could Work For You

“It confronts you, inevitably, with your deepest fears.”



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Monogamy isn't for everyone. In fact, a 2020 YouGov poll of 1,300 U.S. adults found that a third of people say their ideal relationship is non-monogamous. Millennials were more likely to say this over Gen Xers and Boomers, and they were just as likely to say they wanted non-monogamy as they were to say they wanted complete monogamy. You may have even noticed an uptick of people looking for ethically non-monogamous (ENM) relationships while you were swiping through profiles on Tinder or Bumble. But what exactly is an ENM relationship, and is it right for you? According to experts, there are a few key things you should know.

“Ethically non-monogamous relationships are those that are not entirely exclusive between two people,” psychotherapist Sarah Kaufman, LMSW, tells Bustle. Swinging, polyamory, and open relationships all fall under the umbrella of ethical non-monogamy. “What makes ENM different from infidelity or cheating is that all parties involved have consented to whatever arrangement or rules have been set. And that’s an incredibly important part of ENM: defined, communicated, and agreed-upon rules.”

For instance, a rule might be that only one partner is free to be with other people outside of the relationship. Another rule might be that all romantic and sexual interactions with people outside of the relationship must be done together as a couple. For some, sex is OK, but making a romantic connection is not. Some couples may decide to have “need-to-know basis” rule, where they only tell their partner about outside hookups if the situation calls for it. Others may choose to tell each other everything.

“There isn’t a one-size-fits-all model for ethical non-monogamy,” Sydney Chin, a polyamorous sex educator based in Philadelphia, tells Bustle. As long as there is clear consent and open communication within the relationship structure you’ve agreed on, an ENM relationship can work.

How Do I Know If An ENM Relationship Will Work For Me?

If you’re curious about ENM, start by doing your research. Chin suggests following non-monogamy educators online, joining communities like Remodeled Love, and reading books like Jessica Fern’s *Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy*. Before making your decision, it’s important to have a thorough understanding of what ENM is and isn’t.

For instance, Anlacan Tran, a psychologist and relationship therapist who writes about ENM relationships, tells Bustle that it’s not about cheating, nor is it not a cop out for avoiding intimacy with someone.

“People often wrongly think that being ENM means you're not committed to someone, but if anything, people in these circles spend a lot of time exploring their inner worlds and

insecurities, and spend almost inordinate amounts of time communicating their needs and boundaries,” Tran says.

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Taking time to self-reflect and journaling about how you feel about monogamy is something you may want to do to get a better understanding of your needs. You can ask yourself questions like, does monogamy excite me? Do I feel like I could extend my relationship beyond the one I’m currently in? Does the thought of that give me joy? If it does, then it might be something worth exploring further.

“More than anything, embarking on a journey of discovery means you get to [find] *your* truth,” Tran says. “Instead of blindly following the story of ‘you can only love one person, and you're only successful if death do you apart,’ you get to write your own story. And it can be whatever you (and your partner(s)) want it to be.”

Would Ethical Non-Monogamy Suit Your Current Relationship?

If you’re currently partnered, opening your previously monogamous relationship has its share of risks and rewards. For instance, people are often surprised to discover that the ability to be so completely open and truthful towards each other creates a whole new level of intimacy. For many, ENM actually ends up deepening their love and dedication towards each other. “You might feel joy in being able to connect with your partner in an incredibly intimate way, accepting them completely for who they are and being accepted completely for who you are,” Tran says. “It's refreshing and incredibly valuable to have a place between you to express your full truth.”

On the other hand, being ENM also means you may have to wade through a lot of uncomfortable feelings like jealousy, insecurity, and fear. “It confronts you, inevitably, with your deepest fears,” Tran says. “It means facing inner demons, it means breathing through discomfort, it means finding new ways to relate to each other with many people at the ready to judge you.” Opening up your relationship is “very, very hard work.”

If this is something you and your partner want to do, be prepared to have a lot of raw, honest conversations. According to Tran, “There's a saying in the polyamory world: ‘Swingers have sex, polyamorous people talk.’”

Ask yourself, what are you and your partner looking for out of an alternative arrangement? Is this something you can do together, or is it something you have to do apart? Most importantly, how well do you two communicate?

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“Typically, ENM works best with people who have a solid communication dynamic, a willingness to tolerate some strong emotions (yes, non-monogamy is always an opportunity to explore how people experience jealousy!), and the desire to experience more people in an intimate way,” Christina Miller-Martinez, licensed marriage and family therapist, tells Bustle.

If there are already communication issues within the relationship, making an ENM relationship work is going to be challenging, and opening things up isn’t going to automatically solve all the problems between you two: It may even make things worse. Typically, it’s best to have a conversation about exploring ethical non-monogamy when your relationship is already in a good place.

Once you’ve decided to try it out, remember that you can change your mind. According to Kaufman, “The important thing is to identify what feels right and ethical for all partners and then adhere to those boundaries. Check in and communicate regularly about those boundaries because it’s possible for them to change. Changing your mind is allowed.” Again, there isn’t a set way to do things — that’s the ethos of ethical non-monogamy, after all. It’s totally up to you and your partners. As long as the lines of communication remain open, you can create the relationship dynamic that truly fulfills you.

Sources

Sarah Kaufman, LMSW, psychotherapist

Sydney Chin, sex educator

Christina Miller-Martinez, licensed marriage and family therapist

Anlacan Tran, psychologist and relationship therapist

