



To fellow therapists: ethical non-monogamy is a valid way of relating

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There are more and more people interested in relationships that are not (entirely) monogamous, and who want to approach this with care, awareness, and professional support. At the same time, the number of therapists experienced in working with ethically non-monogamous clients is staggeringly low. As a therapist, how do you respond when clients mention they are wanting an ethically non-monogamous relationship? And what exactly is ethical non-monogamy?

Ethical non-monogamy (ENM) is considered an umbrella term used to describe any ethical relationship style that involves either the openness to, or the act of having consensual, intimate relationships with more than one person at the same time. Intimacy can take various forms: from romantic intimacy to sexual intimacy to other forms of intimacy. Ethically non-monogamous is, for example, a couple that agrees that they can sometimes kiss others while staying emotionally monogamous (monogamish), to three people who have a relationship and are exclusive with each other (polyfidelous triad) to couples who have uncommitted sex with others (swingers), to polyamory, to many other forms.

Polyamory is a form of ethical non-monogamy, and usually refers to the ability to want or have romantic, emotionally engaged

relationships with multiple people at the same time. The emphasis is very much on open and honest communication, consent, and equality.

Ethical non-monogamy as a choice, or as a part of one's identity

Some people view ENM more as an optional relationship style or a *choice*. It might be said that these people *practice* ethical non-monogamy and consider the benefits of certain aspects, such as the freedom to engage in multiple sexual contacts, rather than seeing ENM as part of their identity.

Other people *do* consider the underlying philosophies of ENM as part of their identity or worldview.

Philosophies often mentioned are for example:

- The belief that love is not a finite resource. For polyamorists, love is not something that is depleted or decreases in value if it happens to be given to more than one person.
- The desire to be fully oneself and the desire to support your partner in being fully themselves. One does not try to define any expressed need as bad or wrong, but only as what it is: a need of an autonomous person, which can be discussed openly and honestly. This also includes attraction to others.
- Seeing any fears and jealousies that arise either as an invitation to engage in a learning process and understand deeper insecurities, or as an underlying need to request loving care. For many polyamorists, this is preferable to, for example, structurally limiting a partner's freedom ("this makes me insecure, so you can't do that").
- Being able to decide for yourself which form of relating suits you best, and to be able to create that in openness and honesty with the people you relate with, instead of feeling like one *has* to follow the dominant narrative.

Underlying assumptions in monogamous culture that don't necessarily work for everyone

Simply put, the dominant narrative in our society is: love is real love if you find one person with whom you share all expressions of love and sex, preferably for the rest of your life. Along with this story, there are also many conscious and subconscious assumptions about what a relationship "should" look like. Part of this is, for example, that you "should" at some point in your life, move in together or have kids. Less obvious assumptions in monogamous culture are that jealousy might be treated as a measure of how much your partner cares about you, that if you are attracted to someone else, there is something wrong in your current relationship, or that your life partner should be able to fulfill most, if not all, sexual, emotional, and other needs that you have. For many people the rigidity of this story will cause friction in one way or another, at some point in time, but couples often feel very little space to discuss these things.

Just like the fact that monogamy looks different for each couple, ethical non-monogamy looks different to everyone as well. People may prefer different forms of relating for different reasons. Characteristic of ENM is that people can structure the relationship exactly as befits the people in the relationship(s), being able to dream from scratch what they desire and would want to create. Many ENM people have had to discover this form of

relating from the ground up, because most people have grown up with the idea that love take a very specific shape: namely that of (serial) monogamous love.

Polyamorists are still a marginalized group at risk of facing discrimination and prejudice

People who share with those around them that they are non-monogamous, often compare this to coming out with a different gender or sexual orientation and often risk systematic prejudice, incomprehension and discrimination.

Examples are:

- It is believed that one is incapable of showing commitment (it takes a lot of commitment to work through deep insecurities and fears with a partner).
- It is said that one has ‘just not met *the one*’ (in ENM one has more freedom to accept partners as they are, rather than expecting one romantic partner to fulfill most of one’s needs).
- People think it’s only about superficial sex and disapprove of this (for many people it’s about deep connection and being allowed to be fully themselves – both sexually and otherwise).
- People are judged as irresponsible or compared to people who cheat (priority is given to honest, open communication and action).
- Polyamorous people do not have the same legal rights or protection in our heteronormative, monogamous society, where couples usually enjoy most benefits. Polyamorous people may face risks of losing their jobs, children, or housing, amongst others.

The prejudice that ethically non-monogamous people often face, does not only come from their immediate environment, but sometimes even from the therapists they turn to for help and support. One of my client mentions: “I find it very difficult to mention that I am polyamorous. I have experienced on several occasions that therapists did not respond well to this. I felt a I as if I had to arm myself before every session to defend myself for my life choices.” Another client says, “I eventually stopped working with my previous therapist after a few sessions, but it really damaged my confidence in asking for help.” This is incredibly harmful. Coming to therapy is already such a big step, which requires a lot of courage. People deserve to feel safe and accepted.

As a therapist, how do you deal with your own prejudices?

As a therapist, you naturally have the interests of your clients in mind. We want to help people with their challenges and improve their quality of life and well-being. We want to guide people from unhealthy behaviors that do not contribute to their well-being, to healthy, sustainable forms of behavior. To arrive at ‘healthy’, a therapist must have a definition of what constitutes healthy behavior and a theory of what constitutes unhealthy behavior. The words ‘open relationship’ or ‘polyamory’ still give rise to prejudices for many therapists, sometimes based on real concerns.

Of course as a therapist you want to become aware of a person’s motives for entering into a certain relationship. Can someone recognize and express their limits? Is someone open to a committed relationship and secure attachment, or are there certain elements that block that? Are there

traumatic events that affect a person's self-image or world view? Can a person access their emotions? These are all important considerations.

However, this applies to both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. Secure attachment does not only depend on the way a relationship is structured. Otherwise, all monogamous relationships would result in secure attachments. Feeling safe in a relationship has to do with how accessible, responsive and engaged you are in your continuous everyday interactions with each other. It is about remaining open, vulnerable and loving in a coordinated dance with your loved one. **This is the case for all relationships, even if the relationship is structured differently.**

We cannot avoid operating within certain norms and values, even as therapists. The culture and society in which we grow up colors us and instills in us an idea of good or bad. But as healthcare providers, I believe we also have the responsibility to recognize that there are different ways to meet human needs. It is our job and our responsibility to create awareness of our own blind spots and the context in which we operate. As a therapist, do you recognize where the line is between scanning motives in service of the client, and when you are looking for confirmation of your own prejudices? Particularly with such normalized ideas and beliefs as monogamy, and clients who deviate from the norm, it is important for therapists to slow down to allow for any unconscious biases to come up. In this way we can contribute to not further marginalize and traumatize minority groups, and to approach people with the respect and care they deserve.

As (EFT-)therapists, our values are to be collaborative, respectful and inclusive.

ICEEFT, arguably the leading organization for therapists working with interpersonal connection, states on their website: *"Within EFT, we strive for a climate of inclusiveness. An environment where everyone can feel safe, valued and cared for and is given the opportunity to make meaningful connections. In all facets of our work, we strive to embody what we hope to see in the world – a just, loving humanity and community in which people are free to be fully themselves. (...) The humanistic approach to EFT is collaborative and respectful. We create a safe place for people and treat them as a person, not as a problem or type. Our approach is not pathologising in practice and our values are inclusive."*

As a therapist you are also entitled to your own standards and values, your beliefs and limits. If at any point you notice that you find a client's informed life choices too difficult or incompatible with your own choices, it may be a good idea to **refer** these clients to other therapists, or to learn more about the specific topic. Be it religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender expression, relational preference, physical ability or any other factor, people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Awareness and acceptance of the context and motives of the client are crucial in this.

Are you practicing ethically non-monogamy or interested in this form of relating, and would you like to discuss this with a therapist?

Then it is important that you can trust that you will end up in safe, non-judgmental hands. You may want to ask a therapist what they think about non-monogamy, and whether the therapist also has practical experience

*working with non-monogamous people and relationships. You could also consider attending polyamory-friendly drinks or events that are organized in various cities (see, for example for Dutch resources: www.meerminners.nl, www.plukdeliefde.nl). Interesting books to read include *Polysecure* by Jessica Fern or *The Ethical Slut* by Easton and Hardy.*

Are you an EFT-trained therapist and interested in peer group supervision with other EFT-trained therapists who have experience working with ethical non-monogamy? Please feel free to contact me at connect@ethically-open.com.



Creating safety for honesty in ethically open relationships

📅 February 9, 2022

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