

How to Make an Open Relationship Work

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Relationships are hard to navigate. Entertaining dynamics that tradition hasn't informed us on make things all the more difficult. And that's not exactly great news for those currently treading around the today's dating pool. A 2015 study published in the *Journal of Sex Research* finds that searches for terms related to open relationships have been rising steadily for the past 10 years. In a follow-up study, the same group of researchers found that more than one in five Americans have engaged in a non-monogamous relationship at some point in their lifetime. Expressions of romance are evolving. This is a good thing. And for those who are up for it, non-traditional romances have a lot of benefits.

But, even those on board with open relationships can have a hard time figuring out how to execute them. How, exactly, do you approach the conversation? What are the best ground rules to lay down for couples who want to try a new arrangement? What are some missteps to avoid? To help answer questions, we spoke to a variety of experts as well as those with first-hand open relationship experience to provide some advice for anyone considering the arrangement.

No one knows exactly why certain people gravitate towards certain kinds of relationships. Some say they're simply not wired towards monogamy. Others say past betrayals have led them down the non-monogamous path. At the end of the day, *why* someone practice

certain relationship styles isn't what's important. It's *who* they practice them with that matters.

Anyone who is considering the option should think long and hard about whether they and their partner are capable of handling the challenges that open relationships invite and enthusiastic about the perks they provide. If they are, well, then it might be worth looking into the option — especially if they find themselves in a situation that caters towards that kind of relationship. Maybe they feel secure in their relationship, but still feel compelled to connect with others sexually. Maybe they've fallen in love with someone with whom they aren't sexually compatible. Maybe they're bisexual and would appreciate the ability to connect with different bodies. Once they've interrogated the process, they should get involved in the world.

"When a couple has decided to open up, I'd suggest reading up and learning more about the open relationship world," says Dr. Carol Queen, resident sexologist over at Good Vibrations. "Get a sense together of how you would like it to go, and what kind of 'open' you want to be."

One of the most common questions about open relationships involves comparisons to cheating. To be clear: the two are not the same. Cheating operates around concealment. Open relationships are all about transparency. Before opening things up, it's important to have a conversation concerning what rules should be in place.

"Once a married couple agrees to try an open marriage, it is imperative that they discuss boundaries before anyone crosses them," says Maria Sullivan, relationship expert and Vice President of Dating.com. "People's emotions can run high when it comes to outside relationships, so determining what is okay and what is not, will make the open marriage more likely to be successful."

With respect to this step, it's important for couples to get as specific as they can. Maybe there should be a cap on how many times a partner can sleep with someone else. Maybe they decide it's okay to build emotional ties to someone outside of the relationship. Maybe they want to connect to lovers on social media. Maybe they don't.

Whatever it is, it needs to be discussed at length as it's important to figure out what might cause problems beforehand to avoid any future surprises.

"Don't spring things on each other, talk things out, make sure to discuss time management, what it means to prioritize your existing relationship in the face of new experiences and new people, and boundaries, including safer sex agreements and anything else that seems like a deal breaker issue," says Queen.

Entering into an open relationship might sound like an indulgent pursuit to some, but the reality is they demand a lot out of those involved. The more people individuals connect with,

the more feelings they have to cater to. Still, a primary partner should remain a priority here and they need to be checked in with often. At the same time, it's worth weighing what information they need to know, and what information they can live without.

"I would advise that open couples stay away from talking about any relations they have had outside of the marriage," says Sullivan. "If you agree to an open marriage, you are welcoming the fact that your partner may sleep with someone else. Knowing all of the will just keep you up all night and do way more harm than good. Some things are better left unsaid."

Of course, it's also important to pay attention to outside partners. Make sure to disclose the status of a relationship to new playmates because not everyone wants to be party to non-monogamous arrangements. And if there are kids in the mix, well, couples have to take them into consideration as well.

"It's really important to think about the situation from the point of view of a child," says Queen. "Just as one must prioritize their primary partner in whatever way you agree keeps your relationship solid, you have to prioritize your kids. And if you have conservative family, live in a conservative area, have a conservative ex — child custody could be at stake, so think about how you maintain your privacy and their safety in that way too."

It's normal to experience a few hiccups when entertaining this kind of dynamic. That's why it's important to remain flexible. If part of the original arrangement isn't working out, then tweak it. Queen discovered this trick early into her first open relationship. "I was off-and-on consumed by jealousy. And because I didn't have much information about how to actually do this, I felt pretty ashamed of feeling that way," she explains. "We really had to try to dial in what worked for us, and I think that's very natural." For her, learning to say "no" to certain dynamics she wasn't completely comfortable helped better the relationship. If a partner is struggling with something, they shouldn't feel ashamed to admit it. The same goes for any other issues. Open relationships aren't anything without open communication.

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