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Gay relationship experts Alan Downs and Joe Kort answer your questions

THIS MONTH: DR. JOE KORT ON OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

'Should we have a threesome?'



Dear Attitude,

I was having sex with my boyfriend one night when he drunkenly suggested getting a third party in for a threesome – and I went bananas. I've always made it clear that I would never, ever consider it. I know that it often splits relationships up, and I just find it a bit degrading that gay couples always seem to have to get a third person in. So I had a real go at him about it. But the thing is, I actually like the idea. I'm just nervous that the guy will be fitter than me, with a better body and cock and that I'll feel insecure and my boyfriend will realise what he's missing and go off with other guys. I'm very confused and not sure what to do, or what to tell him.

CARL, NOTTINGHAM

Dear Carl,

Open relationships are controversial, to be sure. Many gay men enjoy monogamous relationships and take them very seriously. The choice to be monogamous can ensure security and that you and your partner are both sexually and emotionally exclusive.

Many heterosexists – and some gay men – don't believe that homosexual men can be monogamous, and they are wrong. They believe it is impossible for gay men to be sexually faithful to a partner because they have bought into the myth that gay male couples cannot, and do not last. The truth is that gay men do maintain long-term sexually and emotionally exclusive relationships.

You don't sound confused, Carl. Your thoughts sound clear when you say you believe that threesomes often split up relationships and find it a bit degrading, as well as your concerns about the third person having a better body and better cock and that you will feel insecure and lose your boyfriend. Those are appropriate things to be discussing with him if you are considering a threesome – before you go ahead with it. Before making any decision a dialogue needs to occur with both of you talking about the advantages and disadvantages about opening up the relationship to other sexual partners.

You might be surprised to learn that there are an increasing number of heterosexual couples deciding to have open marriages for a number of different reasons, and the success of these couples keeping their relationship intact is high.

Historically, it was believed, and still is, that if a couple was open to bringing in others for sex, that was the beginning of the end of their relationship. But too many happy and successful relationships, both gay and straight, have open contracts around sex.

Every couple is different, and while some

couples can have an open relationship and enjoy it, others don't and it is the demise of their relationship. The most important thing is emotional fidelity. In their 1984 book *The Male Couple*, David P McWhirter and Andre M Mattison write that among male couples, 'Sexual exclusivity . . . is infrequent, yet their expectations of fidelity are high. Fidelity is not defined in terms of sexual behaviour but rather by their emotional commitment to each other.'

Gay couples often report that what works best for them is to engage in sexual encounters based on sexual attraction only and not emotion or affection. It is about sex and nothing more. They avoid getting to know temporary sexual partners at any deep level, to avoid turning the encounter into something emotional that might develop into a full-blown relationship. In other words, any sexual inclusion is simply behavioural in nature, not relational.

Research is showing that humans are not biologically wired for monogamy. It is not in our nature to be with only one partner sexually over a lifetime. That doesn't mean we can't make the decision to be sexually monogamous. We can. The current research is showing that monogamy is a social experiment at best.

Meanwhile, some monogamous couples struggle and disintegrate for not being willing to open up their relationships at all. Yours doesn't sound like this is an issue; it sounds more like it would be something novel and fun to do if you decide to do it at all.

While it is true statistically that many gay male relationships are open and non-monogamous, the same research shows that many are successful. These couples have shown that what makes it work is ongoing dialogue and rules about what they do, how they do it and when they do it. Rules and boundaries are the most valuable tools in keeping a relationship intact and the openness fun and exciting.

Those couples who are successful at open relationships are those who value their relationships.

Develop a mutually agreed-upon contract

Never assume there's a contract on sexual exclusivity. Any couple should understand that by itself, being married and/or in a relationship isn't enough to ensure monogamy. Each may have different ideas about what 'marriage' and 'relationship' mean. So it's vital to agree mutually on a contract stating an agreement about monogamy, or non-monogamy.

Keep the agreement fluid

If one or both of you feel that there is a problem with the open relationship, then be willing to close it for a while and check in with each other and the relationship. Perhaps there is too much disconnection occurring, which can happen over time in any relationship, and you need to reconnect. Successful couples always close the relationship whenever one or both members are becoming uncomfortable.

Staying true to contract

Each partner agrees to open the relationship in ways satisfactory to both. Some partners prefer not to know about their partner's sexual behaviour outside the relationship; others want to know, and many insist on knowing. Rules are important here. I have heard gay male couples say, 'We only do it on vacation,' or 'only with people we don't know'. Working this out is imperative.

Playing safely

When sexually playing outside a relationship, gay men are (or should be) very cautious about STDs and use condoms. The idea is to assume that everybody else is HIV-positive and act accordingly. It's neither appropriate nor realistic to hope the person you're with is telling you the truth, or how recently he may have been tested. Play safe, no matter what.

Wait three to five years

Many gay couples say they waited an average of three to five years before opening up their relationship. This gives them time to move

past the romantic love part of their relationship (which typically lasts six to 18 months) and sexual desire towards each other begins to decline. After five years, they have bonded and 'nested', and an open relationship is more likely to be a success.

Knowing what problems can occur with non-monogamy

When couples open their relationships, jealousy is bound to rear its head. I've heard couples, gay and straight, voice their anxiety that their partner liked the other person more, enjoyed some sexual behaviour from the other person more, and so on. Resolving this, again, requires dialogue between the partners. Knowing in advance the kinds of issues that an open relationship may present can help prevent some of these conflicts in the first place.

And remember most of all, safety and trust are imperative to all relationships. This is why contracts and dialogue are essential, no matter what the topic.

THINKING OF THREE?

- 1. Agree with your partner what your relationship means.**
- 2. If you do want to have an open relationship, then agree on rules - and stick to them.**
- 3. Honesty is the only way to make it work.**
- 4. Assume everyone is HIV-positive and play safe.**

Email us with your relationship or sexual problem to advice@attitude.co.uk

Dr Joe Kort is a licensed clinical social worker and board-certified sexologist. He is best known for being the author of *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives*.
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