

LEARNING MADE EASY



# Polyamory

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A **Wiley** Brand



Discover your poly  
potential

Navigate your first  
polyamorous relationship

Get help opening up  
an existing relationship

**Jaime M. Grant, PhD**

Author of *Great Sex: Mapping Your Desire*





# Polyamory

**by Jaime M. Grant, PhD**

*Author of Great Sex: Mapping Your Desire*

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**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
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## Polyamory For Dummies®

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# Introduction

**A**lthough monogamy is often championed as the *one and only true* way to have loving, successful relationships, polyamory has been around for thousands of years and is currently enjoying an explosion of popular interest.

Why the current rush toward multi-lover relationships? This book takes up this question and dozens more, including:

- » What do I say to dates or crushes about my interest in polyamory?
- » How can I tell my partner that I want to open our relationship?
- » How can I deal with my lover falling in love with someone else?
- » And most importantly, where are we going for the holidays, and with whom?

Even though much of the book addresses fears you might be holding as you consider polyamory, don't lose sight of the main point: For many, polyamory is a transformational, freeing, and joyful way to relate to their lovers and build family life.

In these pages, you can dig deep into the story of your relationship history, desires, and intimacy needs. Here, I hope you find all the tools and support you need to strike out on whatever love and relationship path is right for you.

Because you're the expert on you. And *anyone* telling you that they have the one and only true way for you is a danger.

## About This Book

*Polyamory For Dummies* is for everyone on the journey to finding and building amazing relationships. Perhaps you've heard a lot about polyamory lately and wonder what the hype is about. Maybe you've left yet another monogamous relationship and are wondering why it doesn't work for you and what it is about you that is so wrong (spoiler alert: *nothing*). Maybe your friends are exploring polyamory, and they seem happy and vibrant in ways that make you want to know more.

Relationships are demanding. Commitments to anyone, over time, involve sacrifice, conflict, and hardship. This is true regardless of the relationship form you choose. *And* love and relationships bring so much meaning and verve to your life. They drive, nurture, and feed you, all at once. They're well worth the work.

This book takes up key relationship questions as they relate to polyamory:

- » How do people move beyond hypothetical or utopian ideas about polyamory to actually make it work?
- » What key social and emotional skills do you need to be a good poly partner?
- » How do you manage jealousy and the emotional demands of multi-partner relationships?
- » How do you deal with time constraints, housing, finances, parenting, the negative opinions of friends and family, and other high stakes issues?
- » What are some of the best practices for creating poly agreements and setting limits that take care of everyone?
- » How can you do polyamory when your trust has been broken?
- » How will you manage aging, illness, and other long-haul issues as a poly person?
- » How will you know if polyamory is right for you?

Although a lot of polyamorous literature and self-help books talk endlessly about processing in poly relationships, not anywhere near enough of them cover the joy of discovery and the astounding rewards of creating a life where new sexual partners and new intimate and emotional connections are presented over and over again. So prepare to be wowed.

Also prepare to have me talk about lovers and partners interchangeably, because some poly people have lovers, others have partners, and some have both. As long as everyone involved is cared for and supported, it's all good.

## Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I make the following assumptions about you, dear reader:

- » You're curious enough to question the myth that monogamy is universal and the only true way to have caring, sustaining relationships.



- » You aren't naïve enough to believe that having more than one partner will solve all your relationship problems and eliminate sacrifices.
- » You reject the idea that you must have a particular sexuality, religious or spiritual belief, family background, gender, or political affiliation to be polyamorous or consider polyamory.
- » Just as you question whether monogamy works for everyone, you're skeptical about the idea that polyamory is better than monogamy or any other way of relating.

If there's one core idea you get from the book, I hope it's this: I'm thrilled to share my expertise on polyamory, and I offer it to support you in your quest to find the relationship path that's right *for you*. Whatever that is.

## Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book you'll see the following icons to draw your attention to important possibilities, concepts, and practices:



TIP

This icon highlights information that deserves special attention.



REMEMBER

This icon gives you great ideas to consider and reinforces an important point.



WARNING

This icon cautions you about bad thinking and roadblocks on your journey to self-discovery.



ACTIVITY

This icon introduces an interactive exercise that can help you figure out what your needs, values, desires, and next steps might be.



POLYAMORY  
STORY

This icon introduces a personal story or example from one of the experienced poly contributors in my network of sex educators, activists, and poly enthusiasts.

# Beyond This Book

This book is full of helpful information, analysis, self-reflection exercises, and resources about polyamory. But even more is available online! Just go to [dummies.com](http://dummies.com) and search for “Polyamory For Dummies Cheat Sheet” for additional support on your journey of learning about and considering polyamory.

## Where to Go from Here

If you’re completely new to all of this, as many *For Dummies* readers are, just start with the first segment of the book and find context, definitions, core ideas, and opening reflection exercises. If you get confused by any terms, go to Appendix A for help.

If you’re already exploring polyamory, use the table of contents or index to find the topics you really want to know more about. Appendix B has some additional ideas and next places to go. Get help on the issues that matter the most to you right now.

Remember to breathe. Considering polyamory can go against a lot of foundational ideas in families and religious traditions. It can draw big reactions from your friends, lovers, or partners. Breathe some more. Give yourself a break.

You may want to keep a journal as you go through this book. I often ask my coaching clients to start a journal and have a dedicated space specifically for their desire explorations. Doing so can create some safety as you ask yourself big questions. It can also give you process a place of honor.

It’s okay to question things — even *big*, fundamental things. It’s okay to be curious and to seek information, supportive conversation, and resources as you figure out who and how to love as you create the family of your dreams.

# 1

## **The Basics of Polyamory**

### **IN THIS PART . . .**

Understand what polyamory is, beyond all the myths and chatter, and how people manage it.

Sift through and explore common practices in modern polyamory.

Start to think more deeply about your own desires for intimacy, sex, relationship, and family, and consider what relationship forms might work for you.

Take in the many different ways that polyamorous people are creating partnership and family.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering what more love means
- » Thinking about what's holding you back
- » Taking your first steps on a journey of joy and discovery

## Chapter 1

# Finding More Love, More Pleasure

In a time where your social, economic, and even geological security seems to be evaporating, polyamory holds out a tantalizing promise: *more love*.

Perhaps that's why the pushback against it is so strong: *Polyamory is just a fancy term for cheating*. Polyamorists can't commit. You use people. You spread disease and leave a trail of broken hearts in your wake.

Except, oops, you can name a dozen monogamous people you know who have acted in any of these ways, leaving their lovers and partners devastated.

This chapter serves as your jumping-off point into this book, where I take up a lot of your unanswered questions about this creative, expansive form of loving and making family. By day, I'm a sex and relationship coach with a doctorate in gender and sexuality. At home, I've practiced polyamory for more than 40 years. I'm also blessed to live in a vibrant community of people who have created all kinds of open, polyamorous relationships. Here, their stories bring all the theories and mysteries of polyamory to life.

What does it mean to be in love with more than one person? How do you do it without creating emotional train wrecks and hurting yourself and your beloveds? Buckle up. Here's how.

## Encountering Polyamory

Polyamory literally means: *the love of many*. This expansive relationship form rests under a larger umbrella of a variety of non-monogamous ways of relating like hooking up, swinging, having threesomes, and participating in party or conference sex, but it's distinguished by the desire to create more significant bonds. People who are polyamorous often have a constellation or family of lovers, whose members may or may not be intimately, romantically, or sexually involved with each other. The following sections give you a brief overview of polyamory.

### Recognizing what polyamory is

A hallmark of polyamory is the nurturing and maintenance of multiple, significant relationships, at the same time. And another core facet is that these relationships are all out in the open — everyone in them knows about everyone else. And all people involved are held with respect and care, even if their roles and functions differ greatly.

Although some poly people enjoy hooking up and have fleeting sexual encounters, people who describe themselves as polyamorous often inhabit a complex web of relationships that grow and shift and deepen over time. Chapter 2 discusses the historic practices of polyamory and what specific characteristics define this modern version.

### Assessing whether polyamory is for you

How can you decide whether polyamory is something you can handle? Being in love with — or intimately connected to — more than one person sounds like a lot to deal with emotionally. And it is.

Chapter 3 helps you figure out why you picked up this book and what's going on with you, in your relationships, that makes you curious about polyamory. There, I offer a lot of reflection exercises so that you can start to dig around in your thinking and feelings about monogamy and polyamory.



REMEMBER

Your reasons for considering polyamory are uniquely yours. And, in my practice as a coach, people generally arrive at my doorstep with a handful of pressing motivations, such as:

- » You don't know who you are. You've been living others' expectations for so long — your parents, friends, church, or partner — you don't even really know what your honest sexuality or relationships would look like. You've been covering over your true self for a long time.
- » You're a serial cheater, or a serial failed-monogamist. You're unhappy with or even ashamed of your relationship history. You don't know how to break out of repetitive, destructive patterns. You wonder whether monogamy is right for you.
- » You've lost a part of yourself along the way in your partnership. You don't know what your needs are anymore or how you got here. You feel trapped and may not have had sex or felt desirable for some time.
- » Your partner wants to open your relationship and you don't, or vice versa. Often, there has been a breach of trust — an actual affair or an emotional affair. This is a period of crisis and great hurt, and it takes some time to sort through whether healing is possible (see Chapter 13), and if polyamory makes sense for you as a couple (see Chapter 10).
- » Some kind of crisis or huge shift has happened in your life that makes you question many things that have just always been a given — and monogamy is one of those givens that needs reexamining.

## Dreaming Your Polyamorous Dreams

Engaging in personal reflection activities can help you stretch out into your polyamorous dreams. These activities assist you in figuring out what you aren't telling even yourself about your desire and needs in your relationships and what you've always wanted to try but have held yourself back.

If nobody was looking or commenting, how would you conduct your intimate and sexual life and partnerships? Chapter 3 leads you through some activities to answer these questions for yourself. Chapter 4 gives you examples of how many others have already done so, creating joyful polyamorous practices and family life.

# Focusing on Polyamory's Foundations

While the emotional and intimate rewards of polyamory are enormous, its demands are also significant. Communicating openly and honestly with multiple lovers — so that everyone has the same information, and you aren't hiding yourself, or manipulating partners through the omission of certain truths, or performing rather than relating to them — can be hard work! That's especially true when you're new to polyamory.

Developing your communication skills — by assessing what kind of communicator you are, developing new tools, and finding peers and poly community — can help you build the capacity for sustaining a polyamorous life. The following sections give you a quick overview.

## Communicating with your partners

If you can start to identify and assess your core behaviors as a communicator, you can begin to appreciate your strengths. You also might be able to see where you've struggled with communication in your past relationships, so you can start to build a plan for getting more support and growing new skills. Chapter 5 looks at all kinds of foundational aspects of communication — introversion and extroversion, fight-or-flight responses, and neurodivergence among them.

## WHEN I KNOW, YOU KNOW

One of my favorite polyamorous practices is: when I know, you know. When people are struggling in their relationships, they tend to mystify basic truths. A partner will say that they're confused or something is complex when the truth is, they aren't ready to say the hard thing that they already know. They're afraid of the consequences of their truth — whether a crush on a coworker, a realization that they don't want to be monogamous anymore, or an epiphany about how their sexual needs aren't getting met and they need a change. A common path from this kind of dodge is for a distressed or frightened partner to then make a series of bad decisions solo and then come to their partner with their often disastrous results — a breach of trust, an affair, or a series of lies.

Relationship coach Asha Leong, one of the many contributors whose stories you'll read in this book, notes that this poly practice is her most cherished. Everyone struggles to figure themselves out. But holding back what you know because you don't want to deal with a partner's feelings, or are worried their response won't align with what you want, isn't honest. In the end, it doesn't protect or help anyone and only reveals a kind of selfishness or disregard that is very hard to recover from. A foundational poly practice then: *When I know, you know.*



## Becoming skilled at creating boundaries

Boundaries are to polyamorous relationships as breathing is to life. If you don't know where your edges are around what you can and can't handle emotionally and intimately — if you don't know how to ask for what you want and can't say no when you need to — then polyamory is going to be chaotic and painful for you.



TIP

In fact, many of my clients seek polyamory as a reprieve from painful communication patterns in their monogamous relationships. But polyamory isn't an escape from being unable to articulate and honor your needs. Chapter 6 offers exercises and tips to assess your skill at speaking your truth and setting and maintaining boundaries. You can also find activities and resources to help grow your capacity in this crucial arena.

## Building trust with your partners

*Attachment theory* (a psychological theory that examines early experiences of attachment and abandonment and their impacts on adult relationships) offers a great window on why boundaries might be difficult for you to set in your relationships. And why it might be hard for you to trust yourself and your partners. In Chapter 7, you can discover what kind of attachment disruptions you might be carrying from your childhood that impact your day-to-day relationships. Then, you can consider how might they play out for you as you consider polyamory.

## Living with trauma while poly

Today's culture is steeped in violence — emotional, social, physical, and sexual. Many people have experienced frightening, coercive, or controlling experiences in their youth, and many have survived physical and sexual abuse. Accordingly, as you figure out what kind of barriers you face as a communicator in intimate relationships, appreciating your history of exposure to coercion and violence can be very helpful. Past trauma can get reactivated in emotionally taxing situations and being in love with multiple partners who may have conflicting needs or very different ways of being is challenging. Chapter 8 can help you identify and affirm your needs as a trauma survivor and chart a path to developing the skills and relationships you want.

# Loving Your Polyamorous Life

The foundation of your happy polyamorous life rests on a set of co-created agreements about how you and your partners are going to operate, to care for each other. For some, building these poly structures is a process of complex, detailed

collaboration. For others, it involves a simple conversation with a clear, shared framework. Part 3 gets into some of the joyful and creative ways that people form their poly families. In this section, you can find many ideas about how to poly and also look at some of the big decisions you might make, like opening up your monogamous relationship or coming out to family members.

## **Establishing agreements and limits**

Poly people love their relational maps. Chapter 4 includes several contributors' illustrations that describe their swirling poly formations. Some poly webs are deeply interconnected, and others aren't. Some polyamorists want to share everything with all their partners, and others want to keep their relationships separate, and the intimate activities they engage in with each partner private. Still others create a mix of privacy and integration among their partners and sexual practices. Only you know what you want and what kind of relating meets your needs and desires. In Chapter 9, you can consider what kind of agreements you want to make with your partners to support your desired constellation or web of relationships.

## **Going from monogamous to polyamorous**

As a coach, a top reason people reach out to me is because they need help opening an existing monogamous relationship. Doing so can be tricky and tender work. Often one partner wants to do this more than the other. Sometimes promises have been broken by the time people make contact. And most often, a couple is on the precipice of monumental change — they're rethinking a fundamental agreement they made to be exclusive, and it can be shattering, even when everyone agrees to the way forward.

If you're considering opening an existing monogamous relationship and finding it difficult, you're in the right place. Chapter 10 moves through this often fraught territory with care and lots of resources.

## **Telling others that you're polyamorous**

Coming out polyamorous is no small thing. Many people who are vocal and forthright about complex or controversial topics aren't out about being polyamorous, and for good reason. Poly people often experience social and economic consequences when coming out. In Chapter 11, you can assess your risks and vulnerabilities as you consider coming out and think about who your best supporters might be as you build your best polyamorous life. An important part of coming out is fortifying your support network, so Chapter 11 also provides an exercise where you can chart your pod of champions.

# Dealing with Life's Many Changes

If you're like me and you choose to live a poly life over many decades, you'll run into a lot of challenges and changes. Change is a constant in any type of relationship, but in poly life, you must navigate these with multiple partners. Part 4 covers some of these challenges and changes, such as:

- » **Parenting while poly:** Chapter 14 addresses some important considerations, including aligning around core parenting values, deciding who has parenting responsibilities, and navigating whether or not to come out to the kids. Refer to the nearby sidebar as well.
- » **Breaking up while poly:** Chapter 15 explores breakups in interconnected poly constellations, helping you figure out when a relationship is really over and what to do if your other lover doesn't want to break up with the person you're breaking up with. This chapter also helps you think about how to navigate all this emotional complexity.
- » **Major life changes:** Chapter 16 examines all types of life changes, like aging, libido shifts, geographic moves, illness, and disability and walks you through managing big changes in poly relationships over time.

Life in any relationship form is full of change and unfolding obstacles. Polyamory offers many people a creative, freeing, and joyful way to relate to those challenges, and to build the life you want.

## DANGER, WILL ROBINSON

You may be familiar with the sci-fi, *Lost in Space*, in which the family robot constantly alerts the young hero, Will Robinson, when danger is afoot.

If only you had a danger-discerning robot in your family! When you've invested deeply in a partner or lover, you might struggle with recognizing or tell yourself the truth when you've chosen someone who is a danger to your children. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children is rampant in this country, partly fueled by authoritarian parenting mores that silence children and teach them to submit to various kinds of authorities — be they parents, clergy, teachers, or coaches.

For many years, a lot of abuse prevention in the United States centered around the risks presented by strangers. But thanks to women's and racial justice movement organizing and research over the past 40 years, the research shows that the most common perpetrators are people the children know.

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Who you bring into your household matters so much. And the best way to prevent abuse of your children is to have a handle on your own abuse history — to fully understand the emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in your story, to take in the harm done, and to invest in your healing process. Only then can you be awake and aware enough to be able to interpret risks to your child's well-being.

As a survivor of childhood abuse myself, creating a household free from violence for my children has been an incredible joy. But I had to grow the capacity to listen to my intuition again, because it had been silenced by my abuse. And then I had to commit to staying awake, regardless of whatever new tantalizing crush crossed my path.

Over the years, I've stopped seeing a number of people who were attractive and interested in my family. People who were outwardly loving, but who also activated my intuition around my safety. Sometimes it was because I could see inconsistencies between the values they espoused and the ways they operated with other people, all while being very cherishing toward me. Sometimes it was because they seemed to need to improve me or control things as we were just getting to know one another.

These were red flags that people often miss in the early days of having great sex or a wonderful crush. And I'm grateful to have lived in a community of survivors invested in our healing over many years because I was able to recognize early on that these behaviors were problematic. That recognition helped me decide not to invest. The truly astonishing thing is that I now have my own, internal robot: *Danger, Jaime Grant*.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering the unique facets of modern polyamory
- » Pondering what poly life might look like for you
- » Considering the key drivers of polyamory's popularity today

## Chapter 2

# Laying Out What Polyamory Is

When I was growing up, I never heard the word “polyamory” because it didn’t exist yet. As a teenage girl in Boston in the 1970s, what I did hear constantly was that sex was dirty and dangerous. That if I had sex before marriage, I’d destroy any possibility for a good life. That girls who had sex with anyone — *but especially more than one person* — were sluts: destined to be outcast. The only road to a good life was monogamous marriage after years of careful, chaste dating.

And here was an important detail: All I had to do to make that happen was to sit attractively still and wait for the right man to pick me out of the crowd.

What my Irish Catholic immigrant community didn’t tell me — and likely didn’t know — was that polyamory was common among our Irish ancestors. Colonization and Catholicism had suppressed these practices and covered over our history. And that this erasure had been common across cultures and nations around the world over the last 400 years.

## COMPULSORY MONOGAMY

Like my Irish forbearers, First Nations people in North America practiced various kinds of non-monogamous and polyamorous family-making before colonization; English settlers deemed these practices savage and forced monogamous marriage onto the New World order. Peoples of the African continent were met with similar violence by their Dutch, Belgian, French, Portuguese, and English colonizers, suppressing multiple partner marriages and other non-monogamous familial arrangements.

My parents couldn't have anticipated that I would be growing up in the decade that ushered in an era of free love. They were unprepared for the explosion of social movements that pushed back on all kinds of authority. Throughout my childhood, the anti-war, civil rights, Black power, American Indian, LGBTQ+, and women's movements broke away from many long-held views of what was proper and acceptable.

It was out of these movements for peace and social change that a range of inter-racial, interfaith, cross-cultural, queer, binary-busting, and non-monogamous ways of relating emerged, including polyamory, a term coined within the West Coast Kerista commune in 1990.

This chapter looks at polyamory and examines the current explosion of interest — how did polyamory move from communes to your kitchen table? What does polyamory mean and look like at this moment in time and why is everyone talking about it?

## Defining Polyamory: More Love

*Polyamory* literally means the love of many. A subcategory within the broader concept of non-monogamy, polyamory is distinguished by the desire to have more than one significant other, intimate, or lover as a core part of one's family.

You can think of non-monogamy as the big umbrella — under which a whole range of open-relationship arrangements and activities lie, including hook ups, swinging, don't-ask-don't-tell, extramarital sex on business trips, birthday free-passes, and threesomes.



REMEMBER

Although people in polyamorous relationships may choose to have hookups or other casual encounters in addition to their core partners, polyamory describes a relationship constructed by and for multiple, committed partners over time.