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Relationship Anarchy Basics

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16–21 minutes

What is relationship anarchy?

Relationship anarchy is a lifestyle, a way of doing personal relationships. Relationship anarchy is a philosophy, specifically a philosophy of love. A relationship anarchist believes that love is abundant and infinite, that all forms of love are equal, that relationships can and should develop organically with no adherence to rules or expectations from outside sources, that two people in any kind of emotionally salient relationship should have the freedom to do whatever they naturally desire both inside their relationship and outside of it with other people.

When, where, how, and by who did relationship anarchy get started?

It's unclear. Very few resources exist about relationship anarchy at this point, but it's definitely a philosophy that's recently evolved out of the polyamorous community. [Andi Nordgren](#), a Swedish queer person, developed their own ideas about RA through discussion on a blog they ran during the early 2000s. (Andi discusses relationship anarchy in Deborah Anapol's excellent [Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners](#).) In the last couple years, more poly individuals have begun to explore the idea of relationship anarchy, but at this point, it's a very new idea.

See the Wikipedia entry for relationship anarchy [here](#).

How does relationship anarchy differ from polyamory?

First, let's define polyamory.

Polyamory is the practice of having more than one romantic relationship at the same time, in an open and honest way that

requires the consent and knowledge of all people involved.

Polyamory, which is different from **polygamy**, is a fairly recent social phenomenon in Western civilization that is sometimes traced back to the “free love” movement of the 1960s. Polygamy, which is an ancient and worldwide practice of having multiple marriages, is based in religion and usually only allows a man to have more than one wife while prohibiting women from having multiple husbands. Polyamory is not about marriage or religion. Polyamory is a secular movement about expanding and increasing consensual romantic-sexual love, an alternative way to build family and community.

Awesome polyamorous glossary [here](#).

Relationship anarchy goes further than polyamory in its departure from the monogamous norm. Relationship anarchy does share with polyamory an overall rejection of sexual and romantic monogamy, its common rejection of legal/institutional marriage, etc, but it also seeks to completely break down what I like to call the Romantic Sex-Based Relationship Hierarchy by erasing relationship categories determined by the presence or absence of sex and/or romance.

Relationship anarchy consequently creates equality of all personal/intimate relationships, behaviorally and emotionally. The freedom to interact and value one’s relationships starting with a blank slate, distributing physical intimacy, sexual intimacy, emotional intimacy, etc. according to one’s desires rather than preexisting rules and categories of relationship types, is an expression of this equality.

A polyamorous person can be and often is just as much a sex supremacist or a romance supremacist as a monogamous person. That means, just like the vast majority of monogamists, a poly person can make their romantic and/or sexual relationships superior to their nonsexual/nonromantic relationships, solely on the basis of sex and romance. A polyamorous person can and often does separate romantic-sexual relationships from their friendships by restricting intimacy and certain behaviors to their romantic-sexual relationships.

A relationship anarchist does not assign special value to a relationship because it includes sex. A relationship anarchist does not assign special value to a relationship because it includes romance, if

they even acknowledge romance as a distinct emotion or set of behaviors in the first place. A relationship anarchist begins from a place of assuming total freedom and flexibility as the one in charge of their personal relationships and decides on a case by case basis what they want each relationship to look like. They may have sex with more than one person, they may be celibate their whole lives, they may live with someone they aren't having sex with, they may live alone no matter what, they may raise a child with one sexual partner or multiple sexual partners, they may raise a child with a nonsexual partner, they may have highly physical/sensual relationships with multiple people simultaneously (some or all of whom are not sexually and/or romantically involved with them), etc. Relationship anarchists recognize that no behavior is inherently romantic, and the only behavior that is inherently sexual is actual genital sex. What determines the nature of a given act is the individual's feelings behind it.

For monogamists and many poly people, a "partner" is someone you are both fucking and romantically attracted to, and only that kind of relationship can be a space for commitment, for long-term cohabitation, for childrearing, for profound emotional intimacy and vulnerability, for financial interdependence, for sensual touch and nongenital physical affection, etc. For these people, a "friend" is not as important as a partner because they're neither the object nor the source of sexual desire and romantic attraction. Normative friendship does not allow for commitment, for long-term cohabitation, for childrearing, for complete emotional intimacy, for financial interdependence, for sensual touch and nongenital physical affection, for legally binding agreements, etc. Monogamists rank their relationships in a very obvious, rigid fashion, and many polyamorous people follow the same basic ranking system by putting romantic-sexual relationships above nonromantic/nonsexual relationships and sometimes also ranking their polyamorous romantic-sexual relationships too. (Thus, the idea of "primary" vs. "secondary" partners—a tenet of what some call [polynormativity](#).)

Relationship anarchists do not rank personal, loving relationships.

They do not see any set of behaviors as innately restricted to romantic and/or sexual relationships, which certainly makes it difficult to elevate romantic-sexual relationships to a superior position above nonsexual/nonromantic relationships. RA's see all of their personal, loving relationships—meaning, any relationship that isn't professional or casual in nature—as equally important, unique, fulfilling different needs or desires in their life, and as possessing similar or identical potential for emotional/physical/mental intimacy, love, and satisfaction. A relationship anarchist does not place an emotional ceiling on nonromantic/nonsexual friendship or on a sexual friendship that's devoid of "romance." A relationship anarchist does not limit physical/sensual affection in their nonsexual relationships just because they're nonsexual or nonromantic. A relationship anarchist does not expect to spend most of their time with just one sexual partner/romantic partner or with their romantic/sexual partners in general, nor does an RA assume that the romantic/sexual relationships (if they have any) automatically deserve or get more time and prioritization than the nonsexual/nonromantic relationships.

How can or does relationship anarchy apply to asexuals, aromantics, mixed orientation sexual people, and celibates?

Relationship anarchy, far more than polyamory, can actually be a philosophy of love that's highly compatible with celibate asexuality, aromanticism, and mixed orientation sexuality. By being a celibate asexual or an aromantic person who rejects traditional couple relationships or a mixed orientation sexual person seeking to do relationships according to the split in your orientations, you've already made a major departure from the normative relationship system that the vast majority of people live within. You may have already rejected the Romantic Sex-Based Relationship Hierarchy, you're already in a position that questions the validity of monogamy (whether sexual or "romantic"), you're already in a position to blur or erase boundaries between "friendship" and "romantic (couple) relationships," etc. just because of who you are. You're already in a position to challenge the romantic-sexual majority's ideas of what makes a "romantic" relationship, a life partnership, a family, etc.

Romantic asexuals can certainly be polyamorous, whether they're celibate or sexually active, and just like poly people who are allosexual, these romantic aces can pretty much abide by most of the same rules that monogamous allosexuals play by: creating a hierarchy of relationships in which romance is superior, restricting most forms of intimacy to their romantic relationships, viewing romantic relationships as the only bonds that can be primary or life partnerships, etc.

On the other hand, a celibate asexual, whether romantic or aromantic, can very easily practice a nonsexual relationship anarchy that's particularly radical. What relationship anarchy hinges on the most, for me, is the equality it seeks to create across the relationship board, so that sexual relationships are not superior to nonsexual relationships and "romantic" relationships are not superior to nonromantic friendships, and that equality means that a nonsexual and/or nonromantic friend has the same amount of access to love, intimacy, physical affection, support, etc. That means a nonsexual/nonromantic friend is just as likely to become an RA's life partner or one of their life partners. Relationship anarchy provides the kind of respect, security, opportunity, equality, and love that a celibate asexual needs, especially if they are single or they're not necessarily looking for just one romantic life partner to fulfill all of their major needs in a traditional romantic relationship.

Relationship anarchy should be important to the asexual community because it is the only method of relationships that removes sex as an indicator of relationship value, of a partner's value, and as the line of separation between important, serious bonds and less important, casual bonds. Relationship anarchy should be important to aromantics because it is the only philosophy of love that strips romance of its supremacy and power, that creates the freedom for nonromantic companions to experience a deeper emotional intimacy and physical intimacy than what mere common friendship allows. Relationship anarchy should matter to mixed orientation sexual people because it is the only method of relationships, that supports the idea of having both nonsexual romantic relationships and nonromantic sexual relationships and creating equality between

those two groups of relationships in a person's life.

I think an aromantic person who still wants a life partner or who wants multiple life partners, none of whom they're romantically attracted to or involved with and maybe even none of whom they're sexually involved with, is already something of a relationship anarchist. I think a mixed orientation allosexual who actually goes out of their way to separate romantic relationships from sexual relationships, who can genuinely pull off a nonromantic sexual friendship or a nonsexual romantic friendship, who wants to build a family or a life partnership with a nonsexual partner, is already something of a relationship anarchist. I think in a way, an asexual who is both celibate and polyamorous is already something of a relationship anarchist.

The polyamorous community can be extremely focused on sex and on the sexual aspect of having more than one romantic relationship at the same time, and this can feel isolating to poly asexuals in general, especially celibate aces. Relationship anarchy, because it isn't just about romantic/sexual relationships but about all personal/intimate relationships, can feel more asexual-friendly (and aromantic-friendly) right off the bat and thus provide a more comfortable context for aces and aros to explore nonmonogamy and alternative ways of loving, organizing relationships, etc.

Okay, this sounds really complicated and confusing. Could you give me some concrete examples of relationship anarchy in action?

1. Jessica's a heterosexual and a relationship anarchist. She has sexual relationships with men, as many as she desires at the same time. Sometimes, she may develop more than friendly feelings for a sexual partner, but all of her sexual relationships are open and none of them are on the [Relationship Escalator](#). Jessica also has a cohabiting partner named Tracy, who she isn't sexually attracted to or involved with, and Tracy spends just as much or more time with Jessica as her sexual partners. Jessica has made a commitment to her Tracy that they will continue to live together as long as they're happy doing so, and no sexual relationship with a third party can challenge that commitment (though maybe they would consider inviting a sexual

partner to join them in their home). Jessica and Tracy plan on raising a child together. They have a physically intimate relationship—they cuddle and hold hands and kiss each other on the cheek and sometimes sleep in the same bed—and they're also both physically intimate with their sexual partners and with other friends they're not sexually involved with.

2. Joe's a homoromantic asexual. He strongly prefers celibacy. He has a romantic relationship with Taylor, a gay man who has sex with other people but not with Joe. Joe also has a friendship with a woman named Rachel who's just as important to him as his male partner, and he figures Rachel into all of his major life decisions and plans. Joe and Rachel love to be physically affectionate with each other. Rachel has her own romantic and/or sexual partner(s). Joe has a romantic friendship with another man named Paul who he loves just as much as Taylor. Joe and Paul's relationship looks very similar to Joe and Taylor's relationship, but it's a little different simply because Paul isn't interested in dating or having sex with Joe in the first place. Paul's straight.
3. Gina's an aromantic asexual. She will not have sex with anyone, and she's not interested in traditional romantic relationships. She lives with her partner and best friend, Ruby. They have separate bedrooms and they're not overly physically affectionate with each other but they love each other to the point where they want to spend the rest of their lives together. Ruby's a heterromantic asexual, and she has a nonsexual romantic relationship with Don. Don's a bisexual guy, and he has a sexual relationship with his boyfriend. Don and Ruby do not plan on living together; they like living apart. And Ruby will not move out of the home she shares with Gina anyway. If Ruby decides to have a child or children in the future, both Gina and Don will be co-parents (assuming Don's still in the picture).

What's the point of relationship anarchy? Why go through the trouble of figuring out how to organize so many deeply involved relationships and juggle the needs and desires of so many people at the same time?

I think each Relationship Anarchist is going to be different, perform their version of RA uniquely, and probably come to RA for different

reasons..... But if I'm speaking for myself, all I can say is that this is simply the way I am and the way I've always thought, since childhood. There is no natural or distinct difference to me between "romantic" love and "nonromantic/friendly" love. I've always idealized gray-area friendships that take on a lot of the properties of normative romance, without actually including romantic attraction or sex. It doesn't make any sense to me to limit intimacy or love to one romantic-sexual relationship or to romantic/sexual relationships in general. It doesn't make sense to me to prohibit physical or emotional intimacy and affection in nonromantic friendships or to make one couple relationship superior in any way to all other relationships in a person's life. It doesn't make sense to me to draw an arbitrary line in the sand and announce that if you love someone "this much," then that's friendship, but if you love someone "that much," it's "romance" (and sex, by default).

I'm an RA because I think the idea of having a life overflowing with real love and real intimacy, a life in which everywhere you go you have at least one person to love and support you and give you whatever attention you need, is beautiful. I'm an RA because while I don't love many people, my natural tendency is to love every person I love with passion, to want physical/sensual intimacy with all of them, to want one-on-one quality time with all of them, to experience emotional vulnerability with all of them. Not just one person who stands in a culturally-designated role of "Romantic Partner." I'm an RA because the Romantic Sex-Based Relationship Hierarchy is deeply offensive to me as a celibate asexual who seeks and values passionate friendship above anything, and because conventional monogamy—with or without sex—sounds and feels very limited, narrow, and suffocating to me on an emotional level. I want to be free, I want to love freely, and I want to be able to follow my natural impulses in all of my personal relationships, not just one special relationship. I'm an RA because I like making my own rules, rather than following someone else's or mainstream society's. I want love to be abundant in my life, and I want to love as much as I can, as many people as I can, as freely as I can. Relationship anarchy is the only way of life that offers me that freedom and abundance.

