



Trauma

Informed

Polyamory

Introduction

I have complex PTSD, structural dissociation, and disorganized attachment. Which, you might say, is just three different ways of saying the same thing. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and many physical and sexual assaults. I also come from a home where there was explosive rage and emotional absence, two things which definitely contributed to my trauma as much as the more overt abuse I experienced.

I am currently 36 and very far along on my journey of recovery. I have been in therapy pretty much consistently since I was 24, as well as spending many years in 12 step programs, pursuing many avenues of recovery and healing, and psycho-educating myself at length. I have read many, many books intended for therapists because I felt so crazy and was in so much pain for so long and I really wanted to heal.

I am polyamorous and have been so consistently for almost 7 years. I have a partner I've been with for 6 and a half years, a partner I've been with for just over 2 years, a partner I've been with for about 8 months, plus some others I'm dating or crushing on. I practice a form of non-hierarchical polyamory or, you might say, relationship anarchy, in which relationships are built in different ways, outside of the context of the relationship escalator. I don't live with any of my partners and I don't follow a primary/secondary model. My partners have other partners. I'm planning to have a baby with one of my partners soonish.

When I first started trying polyamory seriously in my mid-twenties, I had a mental breakdown. It was more than extremely hard. I had nightmares, intrusive thoughts, explosive outbursts, suicidal ideation, a relapse on self-injury, and very little control of my moods or my

behaviour. All of this despite choosing and wanting polyamory for myself. At that time, I was only a couple years into my recovery from complex ptsd, but I was more stable than I ever had been in my life, and I couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I read everything I could get my hands on about polyamory but these resources mostly just triggered me more. They talked about jealousy and sitting with your feelings and letting them pass. I could not sit with my feelings and let them pass. My feelings were urgent and all-consuming and I genuinely felt like I was going to die. I was acting in ways I hated and felt deeply ashamed of, I was destroying my relationship with my partner, but I couldn't stop. And none of the resources on polyamory were helping me.

I started writing about my experiences and trying to understand what was happening to me. My partner at the time and I decided to temporarily go monogamous but I continued to try to understand what was going on because I ultimately wanted to be polyamorous. I left that relationship after two and a half years of unhappy monogamy and started dating again intentionally non-monogamously. In not too long I fell in love with one of my current partners, a very slutty, very polyamorous person, who practices non-hierarchical polyamory / relationship anarchy.

Through all this time I worked on my attachment issues. First my debilitating distress at my partner's other connections. Then on my own inability to easily find other meaningful connections. Along the way I was in therapy, reading everything I could, and learning through doing. If you are interested in my personal reflections on my journey with polyamory and complex PTSD / disorganized attachment, you can find them in my zines *Love Without Emergency* 1 and 2. *Love Without*

Emergency is my best-selling zine ever, having sold more than 10 000 copies.

During all of this I made a workshop called *Trauma Informed Polyamory* that taught basic nervous system and attachment skills for a polyamorous context. That workshop became quite popular and I would travel around to different cities teaching it and talking to many people about their experiences with trauma, insecure attachment, and polyamory. I learned a lot and kept refining my workshop. In 2020, during the pandemic, I recorded an online version of the workshop which you can still find at my website: clementinemorrigan.com.

In the years since I have learned so much. A lot of that learning was documented in *Love Without Emergency 2* but I have had a lot of major breakthroughs since then. I am finally successfully and securely dating multiple people, who are also dating other people, in a way that feels really good and fulfilling. I have thought about updating the workshop to include these new learnings.

Instead, I have decided to make a zine that teaches the earlier learnings from the workshop along with the things I've learned since. This is that zine. It is a combination of trauma informed polyamory 101 skills and tools, along with higher level reflections and orientations that have broken me open in the best way.

Please feel free to take what's resonant and come back later to look at other stuff when you feel ready. It took me a long time to get where I am and I needed a lot of grace and compassion for myself along the way. Don't feel like you have to take it all in now.

You are in charge of your own journey. Only you get to decide which, if any, of these offerings work for you and your context. I share them because they are what worked for me, and because I've had a lot of positive feedback from others who have found them useful. I'm not a therapist, an expert, or an authority. I'm just a severely traumatized person who went on my own long quest to claim the relationship style I desire, and now I'm here to share what I learned with you.

I Want This but I Feel Like I'm Going to Die

The subtitle to my zine *Love Without Emergency* is “I want this but I feel like I’m going to die.” This is an accurate description of my initial experience of polyamory. And after talking to many people about this topic, I have discovered that this is a common experience. Polyamory resources that tell people to simply sit with and observe their jealousy to learn what they can learn from it do not understand the intense, visceral experience that polyamory can bring up for people with attachment trauma.

In *Love Without Emergency*, I introduced the language of ‘distress’ as a more accurate way to describe what people with attachment trauma go through when they attempt to navigate polyamory, than the traditional framing of jealousy. This distress can include: extremely intense nervous system reactions that feel like a life-or-death emergency, impulsive behaviours, post-conflict hangovers that literally feel like you were drunk when you were triggered (there’s a reason for this), rumination, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, panic attacks, relapses on destructive behaviours, lashing out in regrettable ways, inability to function or do basic life tasks, and suicidal ideation.

All of this is obviously extremely awful to go through, but what’s more is that most resources on polyamory assume that everyone is entering polyamory with generally good mental health and a secure attachment style. This is starting to change, but the majority of resources on polyamory do not acknowledge or address the very severe distress that I

am talking about here. This leaves people feeling alone and ashamed. It also leaves people feeling there is no possible way they could successfully be polyamorous.

In this zine I will remain agnostic on whether or not you personally should be polyamorous. I will leave that as an open-ended question that you are free to explore and come to your own conclusions about. You are also free to change your mind. Deciding that polyamory is not for you is not a failure and there is no inherent superiority in either monogamy or polyamory.

That being said, I want to assure you that if you are experiencing extreme distress while trying to be polyamorous, you are not alone. This experience is much more common than most people realize. Because this level of distress is stigmatized and treated as embarrassing, most people who experience it are not open about it. Because I do work on this issue and because I am a compassionate, non-shaming person who is not afraid to shine a light on the entirety of human experience, people tell me the truth about this. And the truth is – a lot of people are acting totally fucking crazy.

I, too, used to act totally fucking crazy. And now, I no longer do. It is possible to go from extreme polyamory related distress to feeling confident, secure, and fulfilled in your polyamorous relationship(s). But the first step is being with yourself where you are now.

In order to get anywhere on this journey, you need to start with mustering as much compassion for yourself as you can. What you are experiencing is a totally understandable, and relatively common, human experience. Humans are social animals who require deep attachment

relationships. Feeling that your attachment relationships are in danger can be absolutely terrifying. If you did not develop a secure attachment style in childhood (which many people did not) or you have a history of trauma, emotional neglect, or distressing, negative relationship experiences, it makes sense that a perceived threat to your attachment relationship could send you into extreme distress.

Approach yourself with as much compassion as you can. Stop treating this as a horrible problem that you need to fix. Slow down. Put the polyamory books in a box and close the lid if they are making you feel worse. Be gentle. Remind yourself that you are a human being having a human experience. You are not a failure or a problem. Many have walked this path before you and found solutions that work.

Whatever happens, you will find a way of building loving relationships that feels secure and fulfilling and works for you. I'm not going to lie to you and say this is an easy path. There is a lot of pain, confusion, conflict, and stress that you will need to work through on this path. But you absolutely can.

I believe in you.

Social Animals with a Monogamy Hangover

Human beings are social animals who evolved in small groups. Attachment relationships with our close people are biological necessities for us. We cannot thrive in safety and health without feeling securely attached to a small number of people. Feeling securely attached means deeply trusting the connection, being able to depend on it, and being known, seen, understood, and responded to. In adult relationships attachment is reciprocal – meaning that both people must see and respond to the needs of the other. In childhood, attachment needs flow one way, where the parent sees and responds to the needs of the child.

Because our relationships with others have always been fundamental to our survival, threats to our close relationships are perceived by our nervous systems as threats to our survival. This is especially true for people with a history of trauma and/or an insecure attachment style. If we did not learn to expect our connections to be secure and dependable, we will be more likely to perceive threats to our connections. If we learned that danger is common, we will be even more dependent on our connections for safety but also more likely to fear that our connections are not secure.

Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, authors of *Sex at Dawn*, argue that human beings are not a monogamous species. I agree with them on this assessment. No other highly social, highly intelligent group of Great Apes are monogamous. Despite our species frequently deciding to place monogamy as an ideal, we regularly fail to live up to that ideal even

when there are great consequences enforcing it. I am of the same mind as the *Sex at Dawn* authors that we are probably similar to our close species-cousins, the Bonobos, in our desire and capacity to use sexual intimacy to secure social bonds and attachment relationships. Polyamory – close loving relationships with multiple people that include sexuality and romance – is natural for our species.

But even though we are naturally polyamorous, we are under the influence of pervasive and profound cultural programming that monogamy is the only natural, normal, and real way to express love and build secure attachment. If you spend every day of your life hearing the message that real, trustworthy love is always monogamous, and that nonmonogamy is selfish, dangerous, and threatening, of course your nervous system is likely to perceive nonmonogamy as a threat to your attachment relationship(s), and therefore also your life.

We require deep, consistent, and profound connection. Given the way our species evolved, we are used to experiencing these connections with a small number of other humans in a group. In more recent human history, we have inherited the cultural teaching that monogamy is the only true way to build secure loving relationships. This teaching is the reason why we experience so much distress around polyamory. If we believe nonmonogamy makes attachment relationships inherently unstable or precarious, we will be very very afraid in polyamorous relationships and react to that fear with all the survival strategy our nervous systems can muster.

Fortunately, our history as promiscuous apes is much longer. Our bodies are literally made for close, attuned, secure attachment with multiple other humans. The fear we feel that our loved one's other loving

connections are threatening to us is an unnatural fear that we have learned from our cultures of compulsory monogamy. It is definitely possible to unlearn the teaching of compulsory monogamy, heal our trauma and insecure attachment, and build secure, loving relationships in the context on polyamory. It's something our species has done for a very, very long time.

Finding a Therapist

In order to do a lot of the work described in this zine, I recommend that you have the support of a therapist. Finding a therapist can be daunting so here's a basic 101 on finding a therapist that works for you.

Write a form email that you will copy and paste that includes what you're looking for, what your needs are, and if you need sliding scale pricing. Many therapists have a sliding scale with cheap options so definitely ask if you need that. You can ask for whatever you need and should mention specific traumas, areas of focus, and if you need knowledge / sensitivity around certain issues. Definitely mention that you need a polyamory competent therapist.

For example: "Hi. My name is _____. I'm looking for a therapist who has experience treating people with complex trauma and a history of child abuse. I'm working on relationship issues and building a secure attachment style. I need a therapist who understands queer and trans issues (including the use of they/them pronouns) and is supportive of polyamory (this is very important). I also need a sliding scale. Let me know if this seems like it could be a good fit." You should obviously change this so that it fits you and your specific needs.

Find a list of therapists. Psychologytoday.com is a great resource that lists therapists in many locations. There are also many other local lists. Many cities also have lists with queer and trans specific therapists, and these are also more likely to have knowledge and experience regarding polyamory. Once you've found a bunch of therapists you can email out your form letter to a whole bunch of them.

If a therapist says they don't have room in their practice or don't fit your requirements ask them if they have any recommendations. They often will have recs. Email your form letter to all the recs.

If they do match your requirements and have space in their practice, they will usually offer a phone call or free short session to meet and see if it feels like a good fit. If it feels good keep seeing them, if not keep emailing. Once you find one, remember that you can always change if something feels really off. Therapy can be challenging but sometimes therapists are just not a good fit. That doesn't mean therapy isn't for you.

Many cities also have various free therapy programs that are worth researching and looking into. They usually have a limited number of sessions but can be a great start if you're broke.

Green Flags

If you have trauma, you may really struggle to discern whether or not a person is trustworthy. Because we live under compulsory monogamy, we are constantly being taught that the desire for nonmonogamy is, itself, a red flag for not being trustworthy. This can send a lot of people, especially those with anxious or disorganized attachment, into a tailspin, trying to figure out whether or not they can trust their partner or new love interest. We can only decide if someone is trustworthy through the process of getting to know them, and nothing is 100 percent guarantee against the risk of betrayal, but there are green flags you can look for that indicate that a person is trustworthy and worth trying to develop a secure attachment with.

- They are respectful, kind, and speak well of others.
- They don't talk shit about other people behind their backs.
- They never behave in ways that are cruel or dehumanizing to others.
- They don't insult you or belittle you.
- They ask you questions about yourself and express interest in you.
- They do what they say they are going to do for the most part, and apologize if they accidentally miss a commitment.
- They own their side of things in conflict and apologize when they've acted outside of their integrity.
- They don't try to push you on your stated boundaries.
- They make space for you to talk about your feelings and are relatively forthcoming about their feelings as well.
- They advocate for their own needs, listen to yours, and are open to compromises.

- They talk about their other relationships, whether that be friends, family, or other partners.
- They're happy to introduce you to people and include you in things.
- They practice good attunement and consent skills, and are open to communication about how to navigate the vulnerability of sexuality together.
- They reach out. Neither of you is mostly or only initiating all the contact.
- They can handle differences of opinion and don't need you to think in exactly the same way as them.
- When they reflect on conflicts in their life, they don't paint the other person as "the bad guy" and are also able to talk about their part and role in the conflict.
- They take basic care of themselves.
- If they have trauma, attachment, mental health, or addiction issues they own that, and are working to get help and support for it.

People can be messy and still working through their shit while still being a safe and responsible partner. And – there are certain baselines that are necessary for a safe, secure, and healthy relationship. If you are unsure if someone is trustworthy, talk to a therapist about it.

Nervous System 101

The first tool to introduce to your trauma and attachment informed polyamory toolbox is basic nervous system literacy.

The term fight/flight response was first coined Walter Bradford Cannon in the 1940s, and the various nervous system responses to perceived threat have been studied and explained at length by many thinkers. Polyvagal theory is one model that explains the basic nervous systems states and their relationship to each other. Other nervous system and trauma researchers, and therapists, have researched, explained, and discussed nervous system responses at length. There is some disagreement in the field about the exact mechanisms of nervous system responses, but there is general agreement that we have distinct nervous system states. You don't need to become an expert on the nervous system, but basic literacy will take you far.

Here are the basic nervous system states:

Safe and Social: In the Safe and Social state people feel present and can easily make connections with others. They feel generally at ease and can take authentic, spontaneous action. They are open to what is happening, adaptable, empathetic, and curious. Laughter, eye contact, and a relaxed posture in the body are signs of being in Safe and Social. When we are in Safe and Social, we are using our prefrontal cortex, the part of our brains that allows for complex and nuanced thoughts.

When danger is perceived, the nervous system moves out of Safe and Social, shifting the focus from connection to survival. Our prefrontal

cortex becomes less active because complex and nuanced thinking is not important when we are simply trying to survive. This is why spending time in our Fight and Flight responses can feel like being drunk. When we are drunk our prefrontal cortex is also not operating at full capacity.

Flight: In the Flight nervous system state the impulse is to get away from the perceived threat. There is mobilizing energy in the body that can feel like fear or anxiety. The full expression of the Flight response is to physically run away, but that isn't always possible, acceptable, or appropriate so Flight can be expressed in other ways. These include avoidance, busyness, or frantic behaviours.

Fight: In the Fight nervous system state the impulse is to directly confront the perceived threat. There is mobilizing energy in the body that feels like anger or rage. The full expression of Fight response is to physically fight off the threat, but that isn't always possible, acceptable, or appropriate so the Fight response can be expressed in other ways. These include arguing, yelling, expressing aggression or contempt, or lashing out.

Appease: Appease is an attachment strategy. Because we are social animals, and many of the perceived threats we experience are about our attachment relationships, Appease is an attempt to resolve the threat by repressing our authentic responses and tending to the relationship instead. Appease looks like people pleasing, codependence, and crossing our own boundaries.

Freeze: Freeze happens when Flight or Fight are not believed to be viable options but mobilization energy against the perceived threat is still active. The Freeze response includes mobilizing energy and collapsing energy simultaneously. This can look like intense feels of

stress or anxiety and racing thoughts while feeling stuck or immobilized. Freeze can also include feeling unable to speak.

Collapse: Collapse happens when there is an embodied sense of resignation to the perceived threat. Fighting or fleeing feels impossible so the mobilizing energy is totally repressed. There is a sense of immobilization and lack of energy in the body.

If we have a history of trauma, we may find that we spend very little time at all in Safe and Social. It may not be our baseline. If this is the case for you, don't worry. You can build your capacity to be in Safe and Social through creating situations where you feel safe and getting good at noticing cues for safety. A therapist can help with this.

In a polyamorous context, we may regularly perceive major threats to our attachment relationship(s), causing our nervous systems to fly out of Safe and Social all the time. Before developing nervous system literacy, we may have no idea what is happening to us or why we feel so out of control when we move out of Safe and Social.

Conflict, hard conversations, and difficult experiences are best approached in Safe and Social because we are more present, flexible, adaptable curious, open, empathetic, and capable of complex thought. And yet, these experiences are most likely to send us flying out of Safe and Social, especially if we have a history of trauma and/or an insecure attachment style.

We can develop skills, through curiosity and practice, for noticing what nervous system state we are in and for moving us back into Safe and

Social more quickly once we have left. To start developing these skills, answer these questions.

It can be helpful for your partners, metamours, and friends to answer these questions for themselves too. When everyone has better nervous system literacy, conflict and hard conversations go way more smoothly. It can also be helpful to share your answers with each other, both so you can better understand each other and so you can share possible strategies and ideas for coming back into Safe and Social.

Working through these questions with a therapist can be very generative and help you develop answers if you are finding answering these hard.

How do I know I am in Safe and Social? What are the signs in my mood, thinking, energy, physiological responses, body language, tone of voice, posture, and style of relating? What helps me to stay in Safe and Social? (It's useful to come up with strategies that you can do with others and strategies you can do on your own.)

How do I know I am in Flight, Fight, Appease, Freeze, or Collapse? What are the signs in my mood, thinking, energy, physiological responses, body language, tone of voice, posture, and style of relating? Answer for each nervous system state separately. What helps me to move out of Flight, Fight, Appease, Freeze, or Collapse, and back into Safe and Social? (It's useful to come up with strategies that you can do with others and strategies you can do on your own.) Answer for each nervous system state separately.

Trauma 101

Trauma is created when a person has such a profound experience of overwhelm that the nervous system can't cope. The experience is so overwhelming that it is not integrated into the system and properly stored in the memory as something that happened in the past. The body and mind continue to live as if the profoundly overwhelming experience is still happening, making behavioural adaptations to the perceived experience of continued threat. This causes a huge amount of stress because the feeling of emergency is ongoing, and the human body is not equipped to survive such long-term emergency. It takes a massive toll on health and wellbeing. A lack of social support, connection, and attunement increases the likelihood that a profoundly overwhelming experience will result in trauma. Community, connection, and attunement can sometimes help process overwhelming experiences so that a return to safety and connection is felt, and lasting trauma does not develop. Assault, accidents, and witnessing violence are some things that can result in trauma.

This understanding of trauma was codified into the DSM as PTSD, but for decades therapists and trauma researchers have been sounding the alarm and petitioning the DSM to acknowledge that this basic understanding of trauma is incomplete. This standard definition of trauma assumes that the extremely overwhelming event is an intrusion onto the person's existing relatively safe and connected life. Starting with Judith Herman's classic book *Trauma and Recovery* which was published in the 1990s, and carried on by trauma researchers like Bessel van der Kolk, there is an ongoing fight for the recognition of a different and pervasive kind of trauma called complex trauma (C-PTSD),

developmental trauma, or even, attachment trauma. These related terms refer to trauma that is still extremely overwhelming but, instead of being an intrusion onto an otherwise safe and connected life, makes up the basis of life as it normally is.

Complex trauma develops when experiences that profoundly threaten the person's sense of safety, bodily autonomy, and/or belonging are regular, ongoing, and inescapable. This can include any abuse or neglect experienced in childhood where the child is utterly dependent on the caregivers for safety and connection. It can also include more seemingly minor experiences, like lack of attunement from a caregiver, because humans are profoundly social animals who absolutely require social connection. For a baby or a child, consistent attuned connection is a matter of survival, and not receiving that, even without overt abuse, can result in attachment trauma. When complex trauma develops in childhood it is called developmental trauma and/or attachment trauma because the trauma is happening as we are developing our capacity to be in the world, and building the model for attachment that we will carry into our adult lives. Complex trauma can also develop in adulthood in any experience of extreme overwhelm that can't be escaped, such as intimate partner violence, living in a war zone, or living in a very violent neighbourhood.

Trauma is a spectrum of multiple dimensions. Some people have very serious, acute shock trauma, which will likely result in a PTSD diagnosis. Some people have debilitating complex developmental trauma that will be diagnosed as PTSD but acknowledged by most psychiatrists to be C-PTSD. Some people have relatively minor attachment trauma that mostly doesn't affect their day-to-day life but can flair up dramatically when their attachment relationships are threatened.

Trauma researchers and educators like Bessel van der Kolk and Gabor Maté are showing the world that trauma is absolutely common. Most of us, if not all of us, have some degree of trauma, because our profound human need for secure and abundant connections, especially in childhood and also all throughout our lives, is really hard to meet in this dysfunctional culture.

Maybe you know you have C-PTSD and are trying to recover and cope with your intense symptoms, while also trying to be polyamorous (that was my experience). Or maybe you don't have a diagnosis of any kind, are relatively functional, but feel insanely dysregulated when trying to navigate polyamory and don't understand why. For people like this, it can feel very confusing and frustrating, because they may not have any overt trauma in their life to point to that helps make sense of their experience. This is very common. For those of us who have some form of attachment trauma, our symptoms will mainly or only come up in relation to our attachment relationships.

If you are experiencing mood swings, overwhelming emotions, inability to regulate, panic attacks, rumination, suicidal ideation, numbing, shut down, explosive conflict, inability to trust, or any related extreme disruption to your emotional and social wellbeing, it is extremely likely that some form of trauma is at play.

Attachment Theory 101

Attachment theory is a framework first put forward by John Bowlby in the 1950s, and then further developed by Mary Ainsworth in the 1970s. The framework has been further developed and popularized by many thinkers since. Attachment theory explains the importance of our attachment relationships to our health, happiness, and wellbeing throughout our lives, and explains how our patterns of attaching are developed in early childhood.

There are four attachment styles. Each attachment style is a reflection of what we learned about attachment in our early years with our caregivers. Each attachment style reflects nervous system patterns and strategies that play out in our close relationships. It is absolutely possible to change your attachment style as an adult. We change our attachment style by working consciously with our nervous systems and by having new attachment experiences as adults.

The attachment styles:

Secure Attachment: People with a secure attachment style are comfortable both with closeness and with space. They trust the ebbs and flows of closeness in relationship. They are not threatened by their partner being away from them or having other connections. They trust that their attachment relationships will be relatively dependable and consistent. They don't feel the need to change themselves or repress their authenticity in order to secure attachment. They are comfortable being clear and direct about their desires and boundaries. They are comfortable advocating for their needs, hearing no, and compromising.

They have a strong sense of themselves and have a number of close, important attachment relationships (whether partners, friends, and/or family).

Secure attachment develops when there is ‘good enough’ attunement to the child’s needs on the part of the caregiver. Attunement is the practice of deep listening to all forms of communication and responding well to that communication. Good enough means, relatively consistent and dependable, most of the time. When a baby cries out and is met with eye contact, concern, touch, curiosity, and a rigorous attempt to find and meet the need that caused the crying, and this attuned response happens most of the time, the baby will likely develop a secure attachment style. When a caregiver gazes into the baby’s eyes, prioritizes time together and skin to skin contact, pays close attention, and responds to the baby, the baby will likely develop a secure attachment style.

The other three attachment styles are all insecure attachment styles.

Anxious Preoccupied Attachment: People with anxious preoccupied attachment highly prioritize closeness and connection with their attachment figure. They feel deep and distressing anxiety about whether or not the relationship is secure. They hyper-vigilantly obsess and ruminate, looking for evidence that there might be a threat to the security of the relationship. They have a hard time focusing and being present. They use “activating strategies” to maintain a sense of closeness to their attachment figure: this can look like compulsively thinking about, talking about, contacting, looking at pictures of, or generally trying to remind themselves of their attachment figure. These activating strategies are an attempt to soothe the anxiety and remember what it's like to feel connected to the attachment figure, but they tend not to work for long.

The anxiety often leads to a sense of urgency, driving them to action in search of reassurance that the relationship is secure. When they discover perceived threats to the relationship their nervous system can go into overdrive causing them to act in destructive ways: pushing boundaries, starting fights, and acting in ways they later regret and feel ashamed of. The search for connection with their beloved feels like life and death. They often express this urgency through the fight response and may alternate between desperate anger at their attachment figure, desperate longing, and unbearable anxiety.

Anxious preoccupied attachment develops when a child's attachment needs are inconsistently met. When a child's communication is sometimes attuned to and responded to, but often not, the child becomes obsessed with figuring out what kind of communication will result in the need being met. Because cries for attachment seem to work sometimes, the child will keep trying and trying, turning up the volume and intensity on the attachment cry. When the cry is not met and the need is not responded to the child feels anxiety and anger, wondering if their need will ever be met and desperately trying to make it happen.

Avoidant Attachment: People with avoidant attachment don't feel like there is space for them and their needs in relationships. They feel overwhelmed by other people's needs, find disappointing people intolerable, and always feel like they are disappointing people. They find closeness to others overwhelming, threatening, and sometimes unbearable. They try to create space between themselves and their attachment figure. They use "deactivating strategies" to dampen the feeling of attachment: this can look like internally criticizing their partner, wondering if they are "the one", comparing them to an ex or some other unavailable attachment figure, and blaming their partner for

the problems in the relationship. They can be distant, private, and aloof, wanting to keep as many things in their life for themselves as possible. They can be afraid of commitment, always keeping their options “open.” They find criticism unbearable and they often feel criticized. In conflict they can become very rigid, refusing to compromise, or they can go into appease to try to end the conflict as soon as possible. When overwhelmed, they can shut down, go into freeze and stop being able to talk. This is often read as ‘the silent treatment’ but it is something different. The silent treatment is an intentional attempt to punish someone by withdrawing connection. The avoidant who goes into nonverbal freeze is doing so out of extreme overwhelm, not because they are intentionally trying to punish their partner. The avoidant wants connection as badly as the anxious preoccupied does, and is equally afraid of it. They just express it in different ways.

Avoidant attachment develops when a child’s attachment needs are rarely met or when there is a consistent lack of attunement on the part of the care giver. If the child is left to “cry it out” they may develop avoidant attachment. If the parent is constantly distracted and not paying close attention to the child, not making eye contact, not having skin to skin contact, and generally leaving the child feeling alone and unresponded to, the child will likely develop avoidant attachment. Avoidant attachment results from the child repressing the attachment need, and authentic expressions of that need, shutting down, and retreating into themselves.

Disorganized attachment: People with disorganized attachment often experience extreme mood swings, alternating between intense emotions like anxiety and anger, and total shutdown and numbness. People with disorganized attachment may struggle to make sense of their own

behaviour or discern what they want, because their behaviours and changing moods and thoughts feel confusing even to themselves. They may alternate wildly between anxious and avoidant strategies in one relationship, in different relationships, or throughout the course of their life. Their behaviour can sometimes be diagnosed as borderline personality disorder because they do the characteristic “I love you, I hate you, don’t leave me” thing. They can be volatile or totally shut down or both. Their partners and loved ones often feel very stressed out and confused by their unpredictable behaviour.

Disorganized attachment develops when a child is afraid of their attachment figure. If the caregiver is emotionally dysregulated, unpredictable, addicted, experiencing their own trauma and/or insecure attachment, outright abusive, or otherwise frightening to the child, the child will likely develop disorganized attachment. The disorganized child finds themselves in an impossible predicament: they require attachment for safety and survival, but they also must get away from their attachment figure to achieve safety and survival. The internal desire to both come close and move away results in a disorganized, chaotic, and confusing style of relating. There is no coherent strategy. Rather, there are mixed and often contradictory attempts to attain a felt sense of safety.

All insecure attachment styles can have a hard time with polyamory. Anxious preoccupied and disorganized people can be extremely volatile and overwhelmed by the intensity of their emotions. Avoidant and disorganized people can struggle to feel close to anyone even when being in multiple relationships, and may really struggle to meet the competing needs and potentially intense feelings of their various partners.

People with avoidant attachment and people with anxious preoccupied attachment often end up dating each other and playing out the familiar pattern of withdrawal and pursuit. This is a problem even in monogamy and can get particularly complicated in polyamory.

Avoidants get a very bad rap. Anxious preoccupieds are often encouraged to put all the blame on avoidants instead of understand that both people are equally contributing to the dynamic. Anyone can develop a secure attachment style with care, persistence, and attention, in the context of a relationship where the other partner is willing to put in the work too. You don't need to be dating a secure person in order to develop secure attachment. Two insecure people can also develop secure attachment.

Secure Attachment

We can develop secure attachment whether or not we were lucky enough to have it modeled to us in our childhoods. It's hard work. It can feel stressful, and scary, and overwhelming. It can be messy and full of learning curves. It requires showing up and consistently practicing being in relationship with others, and with ourselves, in new ways.

We need to learn and practice nervous system awareness, build our skills for self-regulation, work on our capacity to co-regulate, and try to navigate conflict and hard experiences from as grounded a place as we can. This isn't easy but it gets easier with practice.

We need to learn to communicate with each other about our needs, desires, boundaries, fears, and hopes, without blaming, shaming, or condemning each other. We need to seek out compromise and middle ground with our partner(s). Relationship is always about compromise and middle ground: it's the place where two sovereign, separate beings come together and try to create something that works for both of them. By showing up to conflict with good faith, curiosity, vulnerability, and an open mind, we begin to rebuild trust with ourselves and within the relationship.

If you are stuck in a cycle of repeated conflict in your relationship, it can feel totally overwhelming and fill you with despair. Take heart, even couples who are caught in a cycle of destructive conflict can find their way out. It takes skill building, intention, practice, and care, but it can be done. Whatever you do, no matter how bad the conflict is, be careful not to treat your partner with contempt. Do not mock them, belittle them, or

throw things they shared with you in vulnerability in their face. Contempt is very hard to repair and come back from. If contempt has already taken place, own it, stop it, and work to repair it.

The book I would most recommend if you are caught in a negative cycle of destructive conflict with your partner is *Hold Me Tight* by Sue Johnson. It's a book that's meant for monogamous couples but the skills and strategies can definitely be applied to a polyamorous context. This book will provide you with a roadmap from destructive conflict to repaired intimacy.

If you lean anxious preoccupied, you need to get better at clearly and directly asking for what you want, instead of hiding your true desires, pretending to be 'chill', and then exploding when you can't handle it anymore. You need to get good at discerning what the underlying need is (for example: I need to feel that I'm important to you, or, I need to feel I can trust you) and then get creative about the many ways that need can be fulfilled in your relationship. If you are too rigid about the specific way you want that need fulfilled you may miss evidence that the need is being fulfilled in other ways. For example, if you decide that your partner texting you after a date with someone else is how you will get your need to feel important met, you may overlook the many other expressions of that need (the time your partner spends with you, how they remember what food you like and don't like, how they tell their friends about you, how they reach out and initiate contact, etc.) and you may freak out when your partner is unable or unwilling to text you after a date, because you've decided that means you don't matter to them.

You also need to practice hearing no and compromising, being vulnerable and honest, and exploring your gigantic feelings in safe and

productive ways. Letting go of obsessive activating strategies and rumination, learning to trust your connections, showing up to conflict with generosity and curiosity, and saying no to what doesn't work for you are also on the menu.

If you lean avoidant, you need to learn to tolerate saying no and disappointing people instead of being secretive to avoid conflict. You need to learn to tell your partner when you need a break during conflict instead of going into nonverbal freeze. If your partner doesn't want to give you that break, you need to be firm but loving and explain that breaks allow you to show up better, and you want the break because you want to show up, because you care. You need to be careful not to use having multiple connections as a way to protect yourself from the overwhelming vulnerability of letting yourself get actually close to someone.

You need to get better at revealing yourself to your partner and telling them what you need, and what makes you feel seen. If your partner is anxious preoccupied the focus can be so heavily on their needs and whether or not they feel met, that you can feel like you're disappearing into the background. Tell your partner how you like to be loved and what helps you feel closer to someone. Work on discerning the difference between healthy, necessary boundaries and running away from intimacy all together.

If you are disorganized you will need to work on a mix of these things, and probably also do a lot of work in therapy on trauma, learning how to trust people, and learning how to feel safe in your body and in the world. Resources for both anxious preoccupied and avoidant people will be

useful for you in different contexts, so will resources about trauma, and structural dissociation.

In all cases, I strongly recommend getting a polyamory competent, attachment focused therapist to help you do this work. You don't need to (and also can't) wait to have secure attachment to get into a relationship, or even to try polyamory. We develop secure attachment in relationship, and a lot of that is through learning how to have generative conflict and repair. Polyamory gives us lots of practice.

Reminders of Security

If you have an anxious preoccupied attachment style, or a disorganized attachment style with anxious leanings, you will really struggle to hold onto the idea that your relationship is secure, even if it obviously is. You may be able to access those feelings when you are currently receiving attention from your partner, but you likely struggle to stay connected to that feeling of security when your partner is not currently available to you. And this will become even harder when you know they are currently giving attention to someone else. This can make polyamory really challenging.

There is nothing wrong with asking your partner for reminders of security. You can definitely ask your partner to tell you about how much they love you. But – it isn't always possible to get direct reassurance from our partners in the moment. A desperate desire to receive reassurance can lead those with anxious preoccupied attachment to “blow up” their partner's phones, becoming more and more triggered when they don't get a response, even when they know their partner is busy.

Building tolerance for being away from your partner, and knowing your partner is currently with someone else, gets easier with practice and as you build a more secure attachment style in yourself and in your relationship. But at first, it can be really really hard. One simple tool is to create reminders for yourself that your relationship is secure.

In the early days of polyamory, I kept a folder on my phone with cute pictures of me and my partner. Every time my partner said something

loving to me over text, I would screen shot it and put it in the folder. Whenever I was extremely overwhelmed and unable to remember the feeling of being loved by my partner, I would read through the texts and look at the photos to remind myself.

Parts Work 101

One of the most effective frameworks I have found for working with extreme feelings is parts work. There are different styles of parts work but they are all organized around the premise that we all have different parts of ourselves, and these parts can have different perspectives, desires, and fears. Rather than simply being a coherent, singular “I”, all of us are made up of a variety of different parts that can sometimes have very different goals, feelings, and ideas about what’s good for us. This is reflected in the common expression “A part of me wants....”

People with trauma tend to have more “extreme” parts that are more dissociated from each other. This means that people with trauma may have what seems to be extreme mood swings, black and white thinking, and sudden changes in what they feel, believe, and want. This is called structural dissociation. It used to be thought that structural dissociation only happens in Dissociative Identity Disorder, in which there is amnesia between the parts (one part does not remember the experiences of another part). But structural dissociation actually exists on a spectrum with Dissociative Identity Disorder being on an extreme end of the spectrum. In an important paper titled *Dissociation: An Insufficiently Recognized Major Feature of Complex PTSD*, Onno van der Hart, Ellert R.S. Nijenhuis, and Kathy Steele argue that structural dissociation is a standard feature of complex trauma, and is often present in people who receive PTSD and BPD diagnoses. Disorganized attachment, with its characteristic alternating attachment strategies, is also reflective of structural dissociation.

Richard Schwartz has developed and popularized a parts work model called Internal Family Systems that is a useful framework for everyone whether they have structural dissociation or not. He outlines this model in his book *No Bad Parts*. Janina Fisher explains more about parts work in the context of structural dissociation in her book *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*.

In many models of healing and recovery the goal is to get rid of symptoms. In parts work, the symptoms are actually the communications and strategies of parts who are doing their very best to keep us safe. The goal is not to get rid of parts and when we try to get rid of them, they can tell and feel further blamed, attacked, or abandoned. The goal is to listen to parts, to understand them, to offer them compassion, and get them to trust what Richard Schwartz calls the Self, the part of us who is able to stay grounded in our safe and social nervous system state while exploring difficult emotions.

In mindfulness practices we are often encouraged to simply witness difficult emotions and wait for them to pass. Richard Schwartz writes “It’s not compassionate to passively watch suffering beings parade by.” Parts work is an active process. We don’t just witness parts. We try to help them. We get curious about them, find out what they’re scared of, find out what they need, develop trust with them, and show them that their needs can be met in more effective ways.

One of the most important basic tools of parts work is called unblending. When we are being driven by a part, we are blended with that part. We feel the part is our entire “I” instead of just being one part of us. This is why, for example, you might be in your grounded Self and give your partner your blessing to go on a date with someone. You know

it might be hard for you but you also genuinely want them to go. Later, when they're on the date, you may feel visceral panic, terror, and rage, and not be able to remember how you ever felt okay with this. In this example, you are blended with a part who is terrified of abandonment and feels extremely angry at all the times you were left alone with your overwhelming feelings, never knowing if your attachment figure would ever really come back to you.

In order to work with parts like this, we need to first unblend from them, so that the Self can listen to the part and try to meet the part's needs. When we think the part is all that we are, we don't have enough distance from the part to work with it. The goal in Internal Family Systems and other parts work is to speak "for the part, rather than from the part." The idea is to actively work to help the part without letting the part "drive the bus." When parts are running the show, we will act out survival strategies that we learned as children that are no longer the most effective ways to get our needs met.

We begin to build the skills to unblend from parts by getting used to talking and thinking about them as parts. We can say "a part of me feels..." instead of saying "I feel..." We can begin to notice and name when parts are active.

Another important thing to know about parts is that we all have multiple parts and those parts can have totally opposite strategies for keeping us safe. You might have an appease part that is constantly repressing your boundaries and needs in order to maintain connection, a flight part that wants to run away from all connection, and a fight part who wants to start shit and create conflict. So, not only is it likely that the parts don't trust the Self, they also don't trust each other and are constantly

jockeying for control of the system. Parts work often includes getting the parts to talk to each other, understand that they are all trying to help in different ways, and finding solutions that work for everyone.

You can do parts work on your own, but if it seems like you have extreme and dissociated parts I really recommend you find a therapist who can do parts work with you. This work can be an absolute game changer.

The Monster on the Hill

“Sometimes I feel like everybody is a sexy baby and I’m a monster on the hill.” – Taylor Swift

For many women there can be an added layer of difficulty when practicing polyamory. Women are socialized to believe that our lovability, our ability to hold onto our beloved, is directly linked to our desirability, to how “hot” we are. This may seem like a small or silly thing, and a lot of women brush it off or feel embarrassed to talk about it, because they feel they should “know better.” But the reality is that this is a major psychic wound for a lot of women that holds a lot of pain.

Women are used to being ranked – literally ranked with numbers on a hierarchy of “hotness.” We are expected to put huge amounts of effort into our appearance and develop whole complex skill sets to do our hair, make up, and styling. We are supposed to look effortless but put together, sexy but not too sexual, forever young, and a whole host of other (weirdly changing and often contradictory) expectations.

So many women, when they enter into polyamory, fixate on the appearance of the women their partner goes on dates with. The ritual of finding her Instagram and staring at the pictures, feeling panic or a deep ache in the chest, is a common one. None of us like to admit this, because we are supposed to be beyond this, because it seems superficial and insecure and against our politics. But I’ve talked to lots of women about this, and it’s widespread.

Polyamory, much more so than monogamy, will make us face our grief, pain, and anger at being ranked, objectified, and pitted against other women in competition. Even if our partner is explicitly not ranking or comparing their partners (which they obviously definitely should not be doing) we may still have a lot of baggage about this that we need to unpack and heal.

I remember early in my polyamorous days being in absolute agony over this. My partner has broad and expansive taste, which actually made it even more difficult. I couldn't figure out what my partner thought was the "most hot" and so I didn't know what to be. I obsessively stared at pictures of the other women my partner was dating – hotter, more punk, more tattoos, smaller breasts, younger, really good at make-up whereas I don't wear any. Even though it's absurd, I was convinced that any of these factors might be the thing that proved my worthlessness and took my partner away from me.

There was a lot of internalized sexism there that I needed to unpack and heal. I thought about men from my past who had literally ranked me (I was apparently a "6"), guys who had made cruel comments about my body, my sexual expression, or my value as a person. There was a lot of trauma there. And even without those explicit traumatic experiences, there was a lifetime of being hyper-saturated in images of women's bodies, women who were stripped of their specific humanity and treated as beautiful objects to be stared at. I felt I could never measure up.

My partner has this mild synesthesia thing where they experience words as having a colour. They once told me that my name was see through blue to them. One time when I was spiralling out and talking to them about my fears of not being enough, not comparing, I told them about

the ranking thing. I told them about how I had been ranked and how I was so scared of being ranked and how I felt like I could never measure up. They told me “Clementine, on a scale from one to ten, you are see through blue.”

It took me a long time to get it, but polyamory really truly helped me see, that there is no other Clementine. There is only me. I can't be compared. I can't be ranked. I can't be replaced. Love, and even real desire, does not look through such heartless and objectifying eyes. Anyone who deserves to be with me is looking at me, the whole, precious, irreplaceable person.

If you are struggling with this type of pain, don't turn away from it. Be with it. This type of pain represents a deep wounding to our sense of belonging and worthiness. We need to tend to it. And we need to let ourselves receive the real love and real desire of people who see us as the full, complex, three dimensional, and absolutely irreplaceable beings that we are.

Agency

When we are triggered, in our fight/flight/freeze nervous system responses, feeling the full extent of our insecure attachment, and ruled by parts who believe we are in great danger, it is very difficult to connect to the reality that we are adults today who have the power to advocate for ourselves and choose circumstances that work for us. When we are caught up in the flood of old stories and old emotions, we can feel absolutely powerless and helpless. The feeling of being powerless and helpless feeds back into the distress, increasing our pain and our panic and making us feel even worse.

It is so fucking important to connect with our agency. Agency is the ability to act on our own behalf, make choices about our circumstances, and make decisions for ourselves. Agency is the opposite of powerlessness and helplessness. It is the heart of empowerment and the sense that we are capable and in control of our own lives, regardless of the external circumstances. Cultivating a sense of agency is extremely important for our mental health and wellbeing.

I start the Trauma Informed Polyamory workshop by asking people to answer the question: What do I desire about polyamory? Connecting with our own desire for polyamory connects us to our agency; it reminds us that we are making an active choice to explore polyamory, because we want to, even if it's hard. I encourage you to answer that question for yourself and write down all the reasons. Navigating polyamory can be really difficult for those of us with a history of trauma, or insecure attachment, and reminding ourselves why we want this can make doing that work easier.

You can connect to your agency in lots of ways. You can be clear and direct about asking for what you want in your relationships. You can advocate for yourself and try to work out compromises instead of appeasing or always deferring to what the other person wants. You can also use your agency to change your circumstances even when it's just you. When you're having a really bad time of it, you can ask yourself: Is there anything I could do that could make me feel even a little bit better? Could I take a shower, go for a walk, watch a show I love, ask a friend to hang out, cuddle my dog, make a good cup of tea? Taking action on your own behalf is exercising agency, and that is regulating and soothing in and of itself.

You are not helpless and powerless, even when it really feels like it. Those are feelings that come from the past, and in the present, you have the power to act on your own behalf, make decisions for yourself, and choose a lot about your circumstances.

Surrender and Control

Polyamory requires a huge amount of surrender and letting go.

Practicing polyamory when you have trauma or insecure attachment requires a willingness to face gigantic emotion states and move through them with intention, attention, curiosity, and compassion. If our desire is simply to get away from the overwhelming feelings or make them stop, we will miss the profound opportunities for growth inside those feelings. But facing this stuff is really fucking hard, and it makes sense that parts of us want to do anything they can not to feel it.

One common strategy for avoiding painful and hard feelings in polyamory is control. People will come up with rules, restrictions, and agreements that limit what type of connections are “allowed”, with whom they are “allowed”, when they are “allowed”, how often they are “allowed”, etc. People will make agreements that say that sex is okay but falling in love is not, that the partner must always text before a date or immediately after, that the partner must ask permission before dating someone new, that each partner maintains the right to “veto” a protentional new date, that dates can’t happen at the shared apartment, that dates can’t happen in the same friend group, and on and on. There are endless possible rules and agreements.

I’m not saying that all agreements are unhelpful. We do need boundaries and limits in our lives and we do need clear communication and agreement about what we are committing to. But there is a difference between agreements that are about defining the relationship and the commitments you are making to each other, agreements that are about basic boundaries and wanting your own space, and agreements that are

actually about maintaining a sense of control to avoid facing the huge feelings that come up from the vulnerability of loving in such a free and open way.

There is no right or wrong way to organize your relationships, as long as everyone is consenting, but what I have learned from hard experience is that most of the agreements I wanted were about protecting myself from my own feelings, and when I faced those feelings and moved through them, I was transformed.

I know that early on in my polyamory journey I would have found this part of the zine extremely triggering and probably thrown it away. That's why this piece is in the second half of the zine, where we are facing big feelings, and after finding and developing our tools. If you're currently having a strongly negative reaction to what I'm saying, that's okay. It's okay to keep working with the skills and frameworks I've discussed so far: building security, doing parts work, getting to know your nervous system, developing agency, working on all of this in your relationships, with yourself, and with a therapist. But when you're ready to hear this piece, I think it's worth hearing. So come back to it.

When you're creating and revisiting agreements in your relationships, it's worth asking what those agreements are for. Sometimes an agreement is about the level and type of commitment you're bringing to the relationship. That type of agreement is great and important. People should be on the same page about what commitments are being made in a given relationship. Sometimes agreements are about carving out space for yourself so that you have areas of your life that remain boundaried. This is also really important. It's obviously okay if you don't want your partner to date your best friend or your other partner. I will give two

caveats to this type of boundary – one, life is messy and complicated and sometimes people accidentally get feelings for people who they agreed are off limits. I would encourage you not to take this as a horrible and profound betrayal if your partner is generally trustworthy and is honest with you about it. Whether you have flexibility on that boundary is something only you can decide, but once feelings are there, even if those feelings are inconvenient, others will have feelings about your boundary. Two, try not to be seduced by the legitimacy of this type of boundary into using these boundaries as a secret back door to control. For example, if you say your partner is not allowed to date any of your friends and then define friends as your entire social circle, it makes it hard for your partner to date in your probably shared social world.

Sometimes boundaries are just an expression of our desire to control who and when and how our partners can date and these types of boundaries are an attempt to protect ourselves from the huge feelings that come up when we face the vulnerability of our hearts. When we love someone, it is fucking terrifying to open our grasp, give them our blessing, and let them do what they want to do. It can be really hard to trust that they will continue showing up to the relationship and loving us even when they can do whatever they want. Giving our blessing to a partner to date a friend can feel profoundly overwhelming because there's feelings to process on both sides, and because it feels less contained and less easy to ignore. Wanting our partner to tell us about their dates at a certain time or in a certain way, or making rules about what they can do, or where or when they can do it, can feel like a lifeline, an anchor in the gigantic ocean of our huge and vulnerable feelings.

I have cut the cord on my anchor and I am now floating in the great blue sea. I used to be really preoccupied with rules and agreements. I considered anyone in my social circle a friend who is therefore “off limits.” For a couple years I asked my partner to tell me pretty much immediately after they had a date with someone so I always knew who they were going on dates with in a given week. These rules gave me a sense of control and therefore helped me feel safer in the huge vulnerability of my heart. But they also put me in a state of monitoring what my partner was doing and dictating who they could date (my entire “social circle” is a lot of people). Whenever we came up against the edges of these rules – they accidentally matched on tinder with someone I know, or they forgot to tell me about a date, for example, a fight would ensue.

Once a friend of mine texted me expressing interest in my partner. My heart started to race and simultaneously slammed shut. I sent back a rude text saying that my partner doesn’t date my friends. I didn’t tell my partner about it. I felt jealousy from both sides, anger, helplessness. I wanted to feel control so I said NO. And that felt good, but it didn’t protect me from the vulnerability of my heart. After more work and more realizations, I found the courage and the surrender to text the friend back and apologize for my rudeness, explain that I was acting from insecurity and fear, and give them my blessing. I also gave my partner my blessing. And now they are dating, and I did not die. I was able to face and feel with the vulnerability of my heart and my relationship is secure and strong and trustworthy.

I now practice a type of polyamory that is probably most accurately called relationship anarchy. There are different levels of commitments in different relationships, but it’s not expected that one relationship is

“primary,” that there is only room for one relationship with big level commitment, or that relationships need to look any specific particular way.

The only agreements I have in my relationships today are: no dating each other's family members, probably no dating each other's roommates, very close friends, or other partners (but this one could be discussed if it really needed to be), checking in before making a move on a friend, disclosing who you're dating (but there's no specific time requirement for when that needs to be disclosed), and honouring existing commitments when making new commitments to new people. That's it. Along with this is the expectation that everyone will do their best to move with kindness, care, respect, and generosity.

I don't try to manage my partners or my vulnerability by making lots of rules. I try to be really open and generous. I extend kindness and grace. When my heart wants to contract, I try to expand it instead. When my heart slams shut, I attend to the parts of me that are hurting and slowly open my heart back up.

My relationships are more secure than they've ever been. And not spending my time and energy focusing on and trying to manage my longest partner's other connections has opened up so much more space and freedom for me. This has resulted in me having way more success in creating my own other connections.

In order to let go of control and practice an expansive heart I needed to skill build. I needed to know how to be with all of me, my gigantic feelings and the parts of me that were in so much pain. Now I can.

Rage

“Anger’s core message is a concise and potent no, said as forcefully as the moment demands.” – Gabor Maté

When people with anxious preoccupied leanings feel threatened in our attachments we feel extreme panic, urgency, fear, and pain. We also often feel rage. While we are usually very aware of our pain and our fear and are constantly trying to get our beloved to see and understand them, we may have a more dissociated relationship with our rage. We may disavow it, feel ashamed of it, or fail to really face it and name it as rage. We may deny that we are acting in ways that signal rage because to us what feels most present is desperation, urgency, fear, or pain.

It is important for us to face, name, and work with our rage. If we don’t, we can act in ways that we deeply regret. Yelling, making ultimatums, and speaking with contempt are all things that can come out of unchecked rage and can deeply damage our relationships. If rage is present for us, rage is our responsibility to face and work with so that we don’t hurt other people with it. Rage holds a huge amount of power, energy, and information. All of our parts have things to teach us. Every part of us holds precious aspects of who we are that, when worked with consciously, contribute to the full expression of our unique being. Rage parts are the expression of our fight response. They hold active energy to fight on our behalf, to stand up for ourselves, to advocate for our needs, to set our boundaries, and to survive.

Our fight parts may have been severely repressed. We may have learned that we need to be appeasing and repress our own desires, needs, and

boundaries in order to maintain our attachment relationships. These old stories from childhood can continue to play out all throughout our adult lives, and they can be amplified in a polyamorous context.

The amount of 'easy' and 'chill' that you perform will likely be matched by a proportionate amount of repressed, unprocessed rage ready to explode when the easy and chill façade can no longer be maintained. Rage is an extreme emotion but if you follow its thread, you will find out a lot about where you feel hurt and unseen, and where you were too afraid to ask for what you really want and need.

Rage can also hold deep memories about times when you were helpless and powerless and unable to maintain your boundaries. Survivors have rage from experiences where our autonomy was violated and our natural desire to fight was thwarted and crushed. That rage can rise up in other situations, situations where anger is warranted but rage is not. We need to work with the material that rage is leading us back to.

Anger is a healthy and natural emotion that shows us where our boundaries are. Rage results when we don't allow anger to flow naturally.

Space for Desire

One thing that can happen for people with anxious preoccupied leanings in polyamory is that we can be so focused on our intense anxiety about our partner's other connections that we have no emotional space or sustained energy to pursue our own other connections. We may also have a secret, subconscious fear that having other connections of our own could threaten our attachment relationship so we may be secretly, unintentionally sabotaging our other connections. This is more common than you might think.

What can end up happening in these situations is that, on top of the intense distress about your partner's other partners, you are also distressed about the extreme imbalance. You may feel that polyamory is all work and no fun: all you do is process and cope with your extreme distress but you get none of the benefits of fun other connections. Sometimes people respond to this by trying really hard to date because they feel like they have to. They feel like the imbalance is embarrassing. They feel like it's causing stress in the relationship. They feel huge pressure to "even the scales" and have an outside dating life of their own. Unfortunately, approaching it this way backfires because it makes dating into a chore, a stressful responsibility instead of something fun and exciting and expansive.

So – if you're here, the first thing you need to do is accept the imbalance. It is actually fucking fine if your partner has other partners and you don't. It's fucking fine if your partner is going on lots of dates and you aren't. It's fucking fine if your partner is having lots of sex and

you aren't. Ground zero of your liberation is going to be radical acceptance of this.

Polyamory is not a contest. No one is winning or losing. You are not the same person as your partner. Your journey will not be the same as your partner's. Constantly comparing yourself to your partner can also have the weird effect of making you try to pursue dating in the same way as your partner, or making you try to have the same types of other connections as your partner does. This stifles your possibilities from the start.

Give yourself spaciousness. Take the focus off what your partner is doing and put it on your own life. Pursue things that feel good, fun, exciting, or fulfilling – whether that be friendships, your work life, creative practice, time alone, hobbies, or adventures. Do what you love. Get to know yourself. And if you feel like dating, then go on dates, but take the pressure off of it.

In this way you will begin to make space for what it is that you truly desire. And you may find that your style of dating, ideal number and type of connections, pace, and timeline look nothing like your partner's. That is okay.

Sexual Trauma

Another reason dating might be harder for you than your partner is sexual trauma. If you have sexual trauma – sex, sexuality, and relationships will be harder for you. If your partner does not have sexual trauma then sex and dating will likely be easier for them. This is not fair and it is normal and healthy to feel grief about it. You are not a failure if you have sexual trauma. You are not broken. You are not less than. Something horrible happened to you and you deserve time, support, tools, and tons of care, compassion, and grace on your journey to reclaiming your birthright: your sovereign and sacred sexuality.

I remember having a threesome with my partner and another woman, one of the first times. Watching how sexually responsive the other woman's body was filled me with profound and pervasive grief. For most of my life I had a lot of sexual numbness. It was very hard for me to get into my body and very hard for me to feel what was happening during sex. I compared myself to the other women, felt so deeply envious, and also wondered if my traumatized sexuality was as desirable to my partner as the other woman's easier access to pleasure.

This, plus my disorganized attachment, meant that I found dating more stressful than fun most of the time. Sex was not uncomplicated pleasure and joy. It was vulnerability and work. Intimacy was scary and stressful and I pushed it away even though I longed for it. When I stopped obsessing over my partner's dating life and started showing up to mine, I found that everything was very hard and often painful. I would try and try and then give up for long periods and then try again.

I have done so much healing work in this area. First, I had to completely accept and love myself where I was. I had to accept and believe that my partner loved me exactly as I was and didn't need me to be differently. I had to trust that my partner was on the sacred path of healing my sexuality with me, and they were. I had to do tons of work in therapy. I had to keep trying and trying. I had to learn to be vulnerable and honest. I had to give up all sorts of narratives about what I thought sex and dating were "supposed" to look like and create experiences and relationships that actually work for me.

I had to build my agency and my capacity to trust myself. Only when I built a strong relationship of trust with myself and knew that I was capable of asserting and maintaining my boundaries did I feel safe enough to begin to open to sensation. My body would not feel if it did not feel safe to feel and it did not feel safe to feel if I didn't trust myself to be able to advocate for my needs and boundaries.

I also took part in four ayahuasca ceremonies which was extremely life changing for me and really solidified so much of the healing work I was doing in therapy and in my relationships. I have reclaimed my sovereign sacred sexuality, and you can too.

The Stranger You Love

“Eroticism requires separateness. In other words, eroticism thrives in the space between the self and the other. In order to commune with the one we love, we must be able to tolerate this void and all its uncertainties.” – Esther Perel

I recommend *Mating in Captivity* by Esther Perel as the number one book that polyamorous people should read, above and beyond any specifically polyamorous resource, and it's not even a book about polyamory. It's a book that is directed at monogamous people about the very common death of eroticism in long-term relationships.

I really can't recommend enough that you read the book, but I will say a bit about it here. Esther Perel's argument is that romantic love has two basic drives in it: one is for safety, security, consistency, dependability, and all that good stuff that we need to feel safe and trusting, the other is for adventure, excitement, novelty, mystery, and all that good stuff that turns us on and makes us feel alive. We all want both.

At the beginning of a new relationship when we are flooded with new relationship energy, our beloved is still a mystery to us. Everything is new and exciting. There is a lot of uncertainty and that is electric. Desire is very much alive. The more attached we get, the more we want to feel secure. We get to know each other and become less mysterious to each other. We start to share more and more of our lives and build commitments that we can trust and depend upon. We develop secure, deep, lasting love, but somehow the spark is gone. Our love becomes secure and eroticism dies. Esther Perel looks at the phenomenon of

infidelity in monogamous relationship, among other things, as an expression of the deep longing for newness, excitement, mystery, all of which is absolutely necessary for the erotic to flourish.

What Esther Perel argues is that our partners never stop being mysteries; we just stop seeing the mystery. In our quest for security, we become overly confident that we know all there is to know about our partners. Bright Eyes has a line in a song that says “You say that I treat you like a book upon a shelf, I don’t take you out that often because I know that I’ve completed you, and that’s why you are here, that’s the reason you stay here, how awful that must feel.” This heartbreaking line expresses what happens in long term love when we think we know all there is to know about our partners.

The truth is that our partners remain sovereign, separate beings whose inner worlds are entirely opaque to us and will forever remain that way. We see only glimpses of the rich inner landscape of who they are. On top of this, they are always changing, growing, transforming. Your partner isn’t who you fell in love with – no, they are someone else. Who is this mysterious being that you share your life with?

Keeping the eroticism alive in a long-term relationship is not about spicing up the bedroom, having date nights, or trying a new technique. Any of that can be fun, but that is not what creates eroticism. What keeps the erotic spark alive is our recognition of our partner’s sovereignty and separateness, when we remember that our partner is this entire being with their own inner life, who we can never fully know and we can definitely never own. Ursula le Guin wrote “Love doesn't just sit there like a stone. It has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.” When we approach love like this, we keep eroticism alive.

But approaching love like this can be scary. Especially if we have insecure attachment. We want to lock it down. We want certainty. And it's true that long term love cannot survive without dependability, consistency, security, trust, and deep knowledge. It's true that we develop a deep deep knowing and a profound intimacy in long term relationships. The key is to hold that deep deep knowing alongside all we can never know, to hold the trust and security alongside a recognition of our partners' separateness, sovereignty, and freedom. Sometimes we find this recognition so terrifying that we try to run from it, crush it, ignore it, or we simply refuse to see the stranger in the person we love.

Part of this recognition of our partners' separateness is a recognition that their erotic life extends past us. Eroticism is an energy and a life force inside all of us. Eroticism is huge and layered and deep. Even in monogamous relationships a person's eroticism extends outside their relationship. They have an entire sexual history from before the relationship. They have attractions, fantasies, and desires that don't include their partner. They have an entire inner erotic world that they share with their partner that does not belong to their partner. Esther Perel argues that we all must face and integrate this truth if we want secure, healthy, erotic relationships, even if we are monogamous. She calls this recognition "welcoming the third."

Polyamory forces an absolute reckoning with this truth. In polyamory welcoming the third is extremely literal. Rather than simply facing that our partner has fantasies and attractions that don't include us, we face the reality that our partner has relationships, and real sexual and romantic experiences that don't include us. This can be terrifying and put the parts of us seeking security into overdrive. But, if we can learn to hold on to an embodied sense of trust and safety in the relationship,

something that becomes possible when we develop secure attachment, then polyamory can be an incredible opportunity to experience both the security and sovereignty that makes long term love stable and erotic over time.

And, importantly, Esther Perel's insight means that monogamy does not free us from having to do this work. If we want love term love that maintains its eroticism, we will have to face our partner's irrevocable separateness and sovereignty, their freedom and their mystery, and we will have to welcome the third.

So – even if you choose monogamy, all of this work is still necessary. And, if you want polyamory but find this work daunting, know that monogamy won't offer you respite from its necessity, so you might as well do it in the relationship style you want. There's no wrong way to build relationships, but whatever style you choose, this work is waiting for you.

When we begin to get good at holding both security and separateness at the same time our anxiety transforms and we open into deep trust in ourselves, our relationship, our partner, and the world. We trust ourselves to face the mystery, to love without certainty. We don't need certainty to trust. And in this open space we can feel wonder and awe that we get to love this separate being.

Jealousy and the Erotic

“Jolene, I’m begging of you please don’t take my man. Jolene, please don’t take him even though you can.” – Dolly Parton

Jealousy holds deep love and longing, with deep fear and vulnerability. When surrendering to jealousy with an open heart, some people find that it holds a potent charge that can be experienced as erotic. This can feel super confusing, and even shameful, and may cause people to immediately turn away from the erotic charge of jealousy.

Esther Perel explains that the erotic is a space where we work through deep emotional material that sometimes can’t be worked through in other ways. The content of our erotic fantasies are windows into deep longings, pains, fears, and hopes, without necessarily being straightforward representations of our desires.

BDSM is an obvious example of this. People can desire the experience of full power or full submission, of helplessness or total control, without wanting to live these things in their day-to-day life. BDSM and other types of erotic fantasy play allow us to work with our rich inner emotional landscapes in a way that might not be accessible to intellectual interventions.

I find the song Jolene by Dolly Parton extremely hot. There’s a way in which it represents total submission to me, total surrender, giving up and letting the other woman be the desirable one, and experiencing the full vulnerability of that admission. This set of feelings, while I can

experience them as very scary and overwhelming, I can also experience them as erotically charged and hot.

Writer Lina Dune of askasub.com writes about “cucking,” a type of BDSM in which one partner watches the other partner have sex with someone else. This fantasy can play out in many ways but the heart of it is the erotic charge of jealousy, of surrendering to the experience of watching your partner choose someone else. I find this fantasy very hot and have even put it into action in various ways.

I learned from Esther Perel that is safe for me to work through big emotional material in the space of the erotic, and sometimes, working through those things in the erotic gives me more space to breathe in my day-to-day life. When I learned to relate erotically with my jealousy (which, to be clear, I did after I had already done a lot of work on resourcing and building trust and stability within myself and my relationship) I found that jealousy took up a lot less space in my day-to-day life.

This path isn't for everyone, and it's totally fine if it's not for you. But if you do feel an erotic charge to jealousy, you might find working through jealous feelings in an erotic container to be generative and helpful.

On Metamours

Metamours are our partner's other partners or dates.

While we work through our jealousy and giant feelings at the level of the nervous system, the erotic, or however else we choose to work through them, it is important to remember that our metamours are not symbols, or parts of our own process, but are autonomous human beings who we are in relationship with.

We are always in a relationship with our metamours whether we choose to acknowledge that relationship or not. Choices that you make effect your metamour and choices your metamour makes effect you. Even if your relationship to each other is entirely mediated through your shared partner, you have influence and impact on each other's lives.

Facing the reality that your metamour is a person, not a symbol of your pain and fear, and that you two have a relationship already, whether you like it or not, is important work.

I like to reach out to my metamours, extending good will and kindness, and showing that I recognize our shared vulnerability. I do this in a boundaried way – it can be easy to overstep and assume a level of intimacy that isn't really there because you both share intimacy with the same person. The goal for me is to establish some form of direct communication so we don't only communicate through the shared partner, and to show that I care and am extending kindness, regardless of if I have my own struggles with polyamory.

I find that humanizing my metamours by getting to know them and getting to a place where it feels like we are on the same team is really good for my experience of polyamory.

Choose Your Own Adventure

One of those most empowering things about this polyamory journey for me was getting to a place where I was secure enough to start having real intimacy with people. Finally, I was in a position to enjoy the benefits of polyamory: multiple loving, sexual, and/or romantic relationships. When I was super anxious, I was hyper-fixated on what my partner was doing. When I got more secure, the world started to open up to me.

What I love about polyamory is that I get to “choose my own adventure.” I get to explore each connection that develops in my life on its own terms. I have completely abandoned the relationship escalator or any prescribed scripts for how my relationships should be. I have a lot of different important relationships in my life, and in each one we decide together what it is that we want to share and commit to.

Some possibilities are: friendship, co-habitation, shared community, physical intimacy, sexual intimacy, going on adventures together, travelling, collaborating, political work, intellectual work, creative work, taking care of each other, meeting each other’s families, seeing each other frequently, seeing each other infrequently, staying in touch regularly, not staying in touch regularly, raising a kid together, etc. etc.

Because I was so anxious before I always assumed I would “want it all.” I always saw relationships in a hierarchical way, with more always being better. But now I see that each yes is also a no, each addition is also a loss. Certain intimacies are possible when you live together that aren’t possible when you don’t – and vice versa. It’s not about always choosing

more of everything but about finding the kinds of intimacy, connection, and commitment that work for *this* relationship.

And this goes for all relationships – friends, family, collaborators, partners, dates, lovers, metamours. I have a partner I see regularly and talk to every day, collaborate with, am very entwined with, and am making huge future plans with, and we live separately. I have a friend who I live with, bought a couch with, share my life with, talk every day with, and plan for the future with. I have a partner I don't talk to every day and see only a few times a month, but have a steady, solid, romantic, and hot connection with. I have a partner who is planning to move away in two years and I don't know what the relationship will look like then. I have had metamours that turned into deep connections and close friends, metamours I deeply love, and metamours I maintained a friendly and polite but rather distant relationship with. I have relationships that are still unfolding and taking their forms.

After all the hard work I put in, developing my capacity for secure attachment in a polyamorous context, I now have the freedom and capacity to have a whole bunch of different kinds of connections and relationships in my life. My life feels rich and full. My partners like each other and are kind to each other. I like my metamours and am kind to them. I am open to new experiences and new connections and also feel a deep sense of commitment and security in my long-term connections.

Wherever you are on this journey, take heart. You can be where you are. You can feel frustrated, angry, sad, full of grief, panicked, terrified, lonely, or whatever it is that you are feeling. You can be with the process as it unfolds. You can learn from everything you're experiencing. You can build skills to help you do this work of loving with an open heart

and open hands. You can build the life that you want, with relationships and connections that work for you. Be with what's here. Let it unfold.

Resources

No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model by Richard Schwartz

Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation by Janina Fisher

Dissociation: An Insufficiently Recognized Major Feature of Complex PTSD by Onno van der Hart, Ellert R.S. Nijenhuis, and Kathy Steele

The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, & Healing in a Toxic Culture by Gabor Maté

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk

Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence — from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror by Judith Herman

How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence by Michael Pollan

Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving by Pete Walker

Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence by Esther Perel

Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá

The Power of Attachment: How to Create Deep and Lasting Intimate Relationships by Diane Poole Heller

Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love by Sue Johnson

Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life by Emily Nagoski

Compersion: Meditations on Using Jealousy As a Path to Unconditional Love by Deborah Anapol

Anxious Obsessing Makes You Unavailable (Insecure Attachment) by
Alan Robarge

Soltara.co – where I took part in ayahuasca ceremony

About the Writer

Clementine Morrigan is a socialist-feminist writer, educator, and public intellectual based in Montréal, Canada. She writes popular and controversial essays about culture, politics, sexuality, and trauma. A passionate believer in independent media, she's been making zines since the year 2000 and is the author of several books. She's known for her iconic white-text-on-a-black-background mini-essays on Instagram. One of the leading voices on the Canadian Left and one half of the Fucking Cancelled podcast, Clementine is an outspoken critic of cancel culture and proponent of building solidarity across difference. Find more of her work at clementinemorrigan.com and follow her on Instagram [@clementinemorrigan](https://www.instagram.com/clementinemorrigan).

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