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First, Question the Monogamy Mandate: Seven Tips for Wannabe Sexual Adventurers

It's not always easy to defy the cultural taboo against non-monogamy, but the authors of Designer Relationships say there are many benefits from at least exploring the possibilities. (One big surprise: It'll bring you closer together.)

New York, NY (August 2015)—You're no prude and neither is your partner. You both like sex *a lot* and you're pretty open-minded. (Otherwise you wouldn't be reading this, right?) Your mindset is "the more adventurous the better" *in theory*—but *in practice* the story's a little different. As much as you like the idea of trying new things (and okay, let's be honest, new *people*), there's a huge gulf between where your relationship is now and where your erotic imagination longs to take it—and you have no idea how to cross it.

Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson, who are nationally known sex educators as well as a nonexclusive happily married couple, say this problem—call it involuntary sexual conservatism—is far from uncommon.

"We live in a culture that tells us pure, traditional monogamy is the only way, and anything that strays outside that ideal is just wrong," notes Michaels, coauthor along with Johnson of [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com). "That conditioning seeps in. Even if you don't REALLY believe it, you kinda sorta do on some level. And obviously this puts a damper on your sexual spirit of adventure."

"The irony is that monogamy is difficult to define, and in fact any two people you ask are likely to understand it differently—yet it remains a default mode that society tells us cannot be examined, let alone questioned," adds Johnson. "That's BS! You're adults; you and only YOU get to decide how expansive you wish your sex lives to be."

Too bad about those hang-ups: Sexual adventuring is good for all couples—whether they

intend to slip the bonds of monogamy or not—and not just because it’s a lot more fun. There are some things you will never know for certain unless you actually experience them. Moving beyond your preconceptions about your own sexuality can open you up to surprising insights.

“Deliberately exploring and expanding your sexuality together will place you in situations that are optimal for growth,” write the authors. “When this is done well and intelligently, it can strengthen your partnership and build deeper, more enduring trust, especially since trust is not only built but also earned.”

“In a designer relationship, even the difficult, troubling, or unpleasant experiences can be an opportunity to go deeper,” Michaels points out. “Contrary to the almost universal idea that non-monogamy and ‘going deep’ are antithetical, conversations that are open, honest, and transparent about outside sexual encounters can provide an opportunity to deepen your connection.”

Of course, becoming more sexually adventurous doesn’t mean you’re definitely going to open your relationship. It just means you’re going to take steps in that direction together and see where those steps take you—with the knowledge that either of you can put the brakes on at any time.

“Take your time,” advises Johnson. “Moving slowly will help you avoid emotional backlash and regret. Sexual exploration can be thrilling, but don’t let excitement consume you. Stay focused on your connection and strive to build deep and abiding sexual trust in one another. Initially, make ‘checking in’ a priority, rather than ‘checking out’ others you find sexy.”

The authors share a few guiding tips:

First, put monogamy in perspective. Monogamy has only recently become the dominant model, and the way it is practiced in America has changed dramatically over the last two or three generations. Openly discussing and choosing the relationship that is right for you is not cheating, it’s not unnatural, and it’s not even anti-religious. Learning the truth about monogamy and non-monogamy (and debunking the myths) may help you overcome a lot of misgivings.

“Conservative” religious models of marital relationships partake of a similarly ahistorical worldview and a selective reading of scripture. Polygyny is commonplace in the Old Testament and was even divinely mandated in the case of levirate marriage (marriage to a brother’s widow if there was no heir). Polygyny is also accepted in the New Testament. In the early years of the Church, it was banned for religious officials but not for all believers, and it was sometimes even permitted into the early modern period.

“The point is that ‘traditional’ religious beliefs about marriage are not traditional at all,” notes

Michaels. “For the most part, they are founded on nineteenth- and twentieth-century conventions—an insular couple, a house full of children, with the man in charge.”

Realize, also, that designer relationships are becoming more and more accepted. There’s no denying we’re in the midst of a new sexual revolution. A decade ago, it would have been hard to imagine that marriage equality would be the law of the land and most Americans would support it—or that *Time* would feature a transgender TV star on its cover and call the trans movement “America’s next civil rights frontier.” A similar shift is taking place in cultural attitudes toward alternative relationship styles, note the authors.

“Consider that a recent Gallup poll showed that the percentage of people who think ‘polygamy’ is not morally objectionable increased from 7 to 16 between 2001 and 2015,” says Johnson. “It’s easy to see why. Shifting social attitudes free people up to develop partnerships based on their own sexualities, understandings, and agreements. Unlike the patriarchal forms of polygyny practiced in Islam or the Church of the Latter Day Saints, consensual non-monogamy is deeply empowering.”

“At the 2014 American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists’ (AASECT) annual conference, sessions dealing with non-monogamy were very well attended,” adds Michaels. “It seems likely that growing public acceptance of marriage equality is playing a role, as Jay Michaelson suggested in *The Daily Beast*, since pair-bonded but nonexclusive relationships are commonplace in the gay male community. In one recent study, nearly 50 percent of long-term gay couples were in some form of consensually non-monogamous relationship.”

First, take “Oh, Baby” steps. (Start small.) Perhaps it’s time for you to turn your fantasy life up a notch. You and your partner are no doubt comfortable with erotica in general, but maybe there’s a type of specialty porn (BDSM, perhaps) that interests you and that you’ve always been too inhibited to watch. Or maybe you’ve never tried enacting a scene from one of your favorite movies but have secretly wanted to. Or perhaps you wish to consider taking something you’ve already done together in the privacy of your home to the next level.

Start these conversations playfully and casually, the authors advise. There’s nothing unsexier than having a serious sit-down discussion. As you continue to talk, you’ll get a feel for your partner’s interests, as well as which subjects might be a little uncomfortable. Stick with the fun and inviting topics at first. If you feel a bit ashamed or vulnerable, begin by addressing the activity in the abstract or discuss a scene you recently saw in a movie. This will make it less personal. If the discussion goes well, you might comment, “Wow, that was interesting, and I have to confess I am a bit turned on. How do you feel?”

“Engaging in this kind of narrative fantasy and role play is also very valuable because it can remind us that sex is powerful and profound and also profoundly silly,” says Johnson. “Playing the French maid may feel forced and goofy, especially at first, but that is perfectly fine. Enacting your fantasies is somewhat different from acting out a fantasy—really stripping in a club or actually having a sexual encounter with a stranger. You don’t have to go to deep, dark places and explore forbidden, repressed desires. There’s ample room for childlike enjoyment. Fantasy can

be a goof, and goofiness can be a turn-on.”

Then take your sexuality out for a walk. There are many options for being sensual in a more public setting. For instance, many retreat centers offer couples’ workshops. Some of these focus on discussing sexual techniques. They may include demonstrations with varying degrees of explicitness and afford you the opportunity to practice later in your own room. Or you may opt for a sensual massage workshop, in which you practice together in the same room as other attendees.

“The idea is to ease your way into ‘going public,’” says Michaels. “You’re not doing anything too extreme but it’s usually enough to tell whether relating sexually in a more open setting is tantalizing or just too much. Some people find that while taking this step is a fun fantasy, the reality just isn’t what they thought it would be. Others love it and are eager to take a bolder step.”

Graduate to visiting a polyamory or kink event or swing club (but just to observe). This can either be an “off-premise” event or an “on-premise” one, depending on your comfort level. The former is usually a cocktail party where people will openly flirt and dance with one another; there may be partial nudity, but explicit sexual activity does not take place in a public setting. The latter is a club where most or all of the sexual activity takes place in back rooms. You can still attend and remain in the public area. It’s unlikely that you’ll be pressured to participate.

If you’re interested in learning more about kink or polyamory, there are numerous gatherings, ranging from meet-ups to weekend retreats that you can attend; as with swinging, there’s no requirement that you participate. Many of the weekend retreats—whether focused on swinging, polyamory, kink, or a combination thereof—include an educational component. They can be a great way to dip your toes into the water and learn about these lifestyles (and develop some skills).

“Here and at every step, be sure to defer to the comfort level of the more hesitant partner,” says Johnson.

Finally—and only if you’re truly ready—try interacting with others. People meet others in a variety of ways—swinging websites, Craigslist, OkCupid (which is popular among the polyamorous), or FetLife (which is kink oriented). They may meet and hook up at events, some of which have bulletin boards enabling people to make contact in advance; or they may find a circle of like-minded friends by attending meet-ups, “munches,” or gatherings like Michaels and Johnson’s Pleasure Salon, a monthly social gathering in New York City.

Your initial interactions could simply be flirting, dirty dancing, or making out with someone. A step beyond this is “soft swap,” which usually refers to sexual activity that stops short of genital intercourse but may include hand jobs or oral sex. To reiterate, it’s important to move slowly and open up just a little at first so that you don’t have regrets later.

“There may be some regional variations, but soft swap usually refers to all sexual activity excluding anal and vaginal sex, and full swap usually pertains to genital intercourse, but may

also include anal sex,” explains Michaels. “As much as we don’t like the way these terms rely on the outmoded and misleading ‘wife swapping’ paradigm, they do reflect the reality that genital intercourse with someone other than a primary partner, perhaps in the presence of that partner, is a very big step for many people.”

Throughout this process, keep your focus on communication, mutual trust, and respect.

First of all, make a plan, decide your limits in advance, and be clear about your agreements. Michaels and Johnson encourage people to be very intentional as they explore and suggest writing up a statement of purpose that sets forth what they love about their relationship, what they hope to strengthen, any concerns they may have, and how they plan to address any challenges that might arise. In addition, they advise reaching firm, clear agreements about what kinds of sexual activity are acceptable (although these can be renegotiated) and what safer sex practices will be used. (Putting these in writing isn’t necessary, although some may find it valuable to do so.)

Here are a few examples of agreements for interacting with others:

1. Making out and touching are okay.
2. Oral sex is okay, but not PVI.
3. Genital contact is okay, but no open-mouth kissing.
4. No ejaculation, male or female, inside the mouth.
5. We will interact with others only if we are in the same room.
6. We will not interact with others in the same room.
7. Same-sex interactions are okay but opposite-sex interactions are not.
8. Barriers are required for all forms of potentially risky sex.

During your sexcapades, stay connected and check in often. It is also a good idea to save discussions for the next day (unless there’s something truly urgent that you need to address). This will give you some time to absorb what you’ve experienced and perhaps glean some insights. Next-day discussions, even when things have not gone particularly well, can lead to deeper bonding and more trust. It may take a while for you to experience this, and in the beginning it’s very important to recognize that you can always pause and reassess.

“Make frequent eye contact and find additional ways to stay connected,” says Johnson. “Check in with each other verbally during any activity at the first hint of discomfort. Sometimes this is all the reassurance that’s needed. If one of you is feeling overwhelmed or distressed, extricate yourselves politely, and if something has triggered anger or jealousy, postpone discussing the issue if possible. Our rule is to avoid intense conversations while you’re in the heat of erotic excitement or immediately thereafter.”

Once you try some of these things, you may feel that you want to go even further. That’s fine. It’s also fine to know your limits and not venture beyond them. The important thing is that

you do all your explorations *together*, and that caring, mutual respect, and reinforcing your trust in each other are central.

“This is not about one person getting something at the other’s expense,” says Michaels. “The partner who’s eager for more should never pressure the other or insist on anything. Remember that you’re collaborators, partners in crime. No one wins, no one loses, and there’s always next time.”

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About the Authors:

Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson are the authors of the new book [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015). A devoted married couple, they have been creative collaborators—teaching and writing about relationships, sexuality, and Tantra—since 1999. In addition to *Designer Relationships*, they have written *Partners in Passion* (Cleis Press), *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality* (Llewellyn). They are also the creators of the COVR Award-winning meditation CD set *Ananda Nidra: Blissful Sleep*.

Internationally known as experts in sexuality, Michaels and Johnson have taught throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe, and Australia. They have been featured on television and radio and widely quoted in numerous publications. They are cofounders of the Pleasure Salon, a monthly gathering in New York City that brings together sex-positive people and pleasure activists from a variety of communities.

Michaels is a graduate of New York University School of Law and holds master’s degrees in American Studies from NYU and Yale. Formerly a playwright and translator, he has translated, adapted, and cowritten various works for the stage. Johnson is a retired professional operatic soprano who toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and South America. She currently works in turtle conservation; she is certified in reptile monitoring by the Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation and is a New York state-licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

About the Book:

[*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com) will be available in September 2015 at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.