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Married, with several relationships on the side

Rose Fox describes how she and her husband make their marriage work when they both have separate partners

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By ELISE McINTOSH
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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It's difficult for Rose Fox to watch romance movies. At the end, she is always disappointed when the protagonist is forced to decide between two love interests. She wonders: Why not choose both?

Ms. Fox, 29, is polyamorous. She lives with her husband in Manhattan, speaks weekly to her long-distance girlfriend in Portland, Ore., and currently is "feeling out" another love prospect. Her spouse, Josh, 36 -- who requested only his first name be used -- recently has fallen for a younger woman, who herself has a fiancée.

"They're stupidly in love; they are so cute together," Ms. Fox says about Josh and his semi-new flame.

Practicing polyamory, Ms. Fox and her husband believe in having sexual, loving relationships with multiple partners simultaneously, with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved.

As "primaries," Ms. Fox and her husband "come first in each other's eyes," but have an agreement in which they can develop relationships outside the marriage.

Their only rules include, says Ms. Fox: "Don't get anyone sick or pregnant and don't damage the relationship." Everything else is pretty much fair game.

What makes the situation work, she notes, is a lot of trust, openness, loyalty and negotiation.

According to Ms. Fox, polyamorous relationships are very fluid, and it is really up to those involved to define the dynamics.

"There are a lot of different configurations," she explains. "Triads work; quads work, but are hard to do."

There are those who are "polyfidelitous," faithful to the poly group, who act very much like a family. Others prefer a "V" configuration, in which the "arm" partners are not as close to each other as each is to the "pivot" partner.

"It's really a 'roll your own' relationship," explains Ms. Fox, who got involved in her first open relationship at age 14 while dating her first boyfriend.

"We were randy teen-agers and thought it'd be kind of cool to date other people while still being together," Ms. Fox recalls.

"The first time was when I was out of town [during summer vacation]," she continues. "He called me for our weekly phone call, and he told me he met this girl. The bottom jumped out of my stomach."

But when she got back, she realized it would be OK. Her boyfriend was eager to tell her about this new girl and still very much wanted her to be a part of his life.

But, "I do get jealous, and I do get insecure," Ms. Fox says, revealing how she recently felt toward her husband's current interest.

Right now Josh is experiencing a lot of "New Relationship Energy" -- the euphoria every person has when falling in love -- and Ms. Fox is having a harder time coping with it than usual.

But, "my jealousy is my problem," she says, pointing out, "Josh has done nothing wrong."

She believes her jealousy is a sign of her own insecurity and something she needs to address herself.

Eventually, she realized the reason she was feeling a bit shut out was because she wanted more of a role to play in the relationship, even if that simply means "playing hostess" and welcoming this woman into her home.

Today, she says her jealousy has been replaced by "compersion," or the joy of seeing how happy her husband is with this other woman. It is a feeling many polyamorists report having.

"They are deeply in love. You look at them and think, 'This one is for the ages; they're beautiful,'" Ms Fox says about Josh and his new lover, without a trace of envy.

Ms. Fox and her husband married two years ago. Not a legal ceremony, the wedding was a celebration of their love, to signify they are "first in each other's lives."

Ms. Fox remembers at the wedding: "I caught my father flirting with my girlfriend."

"All these people here, you either were dating, are dating or will be dating" was his response to her.

For the most part, Ms. Fox had to agree.

Yet when it comes to sex, the Manhattan resident says, "I can take it or leave it."

"Contrary to the stereotype [about polyamorists], I do not have a ravenous libido."

It's true: Many in the polyamory community have a huge appetite for sex, and it's very hard for one woman or man to keep them satisfied, says Ms. Fox.

That's why she and her husband regularly get tested for STDs, and are careful about protecting themselves during sex.

There is one thing polyamorists cannot protect themselves against: The heartbreak of getting dumped. Because breakups in polyamorous relationships are very personal, they sting even more, says Ms. Fox.

It's not like they're breaking up because there is "someone else" -- polys are encouraged to date other people -- so the reason really has to do with you.

Ms. Fox recalls how painful it was when one partner broke up with her.

"I am sorry. I don't know how this happened, but I am not in love with you anymore," she recalls him as saying.

Ouch.

For a while, it was weird, she says. But, at least she had her husband's shoulder to cry on.

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