

Open Marriage - Understanding This Unique Marital Lifestyle

Contributed by
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An introductory and informative article written by J.C. Sregge that clearly and briefly explains OPEN MARRIAGE as an alternative marital lifestyle.

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“open marriage n. : A marriage in which the partners agree that each is free to engage in extramarital relationships. The American Heritage Dictionary

“The noun open marriage has one meaning: a marriage in which each partner is free to enter into extraneous sexual relationships without guilt or jealousy from the other. - WordNet

COMMENTARY

Often after extensive mutual soul-searching and personal research, many married couples that consent to have an open marriage do so under the belief that their marital relationship is strong and secure enough to avoid the pitfalls of a non-exclusive arrangement.

Typically these couples feel that total honesty, acceptance, and communication can make such an open relationship work and in many such unconventional marriages they do. However, the captivating erotic appeal and highly sensuous relationships with others can sometimes unexpectedly bring on the destructive forces of jealousy, selfishness, and mistrust that could possibly threaten the primary (marital) relationship.

However, by clearly understanding how these harmful influences can occur, and importantly, by continuing to build on the love and trust on which they had originally built their life together, couples can successfully overcome such damaging forces through determination and commitment to their marriage.

Having a non-exclusive marital relationship is very seductive, stimulating, and liberating, and if good choices are made selecting discreet and trustworthy people outside the marriage for playful sex, often beneficially brings on the experience of catharsis, growth, and other positive changes to one's life in having both enjoyable and satisfying encounters with such sexual playmates.

What Is An "Open Marriage"

In its meaning and usage, an open marriage is a marital relationship where both spouses agree to allow various kinds of sexual relationships for one or both outside the marriage, without regarding this as sexual infidelity. Often this may include "dating" activities without both married partners automatically being present or sexually involved as a shared experience.

The term for this non-exclusive arrangement originated and achieved certain popularity with the 1972 publication of the book "Open Marriage" by Nena and George ONeill that originally sold over 1.5 million copies. The greater part of the book's subject matter is on non-controversial approaches to revitalizing marriage in areas of communication, trust,

role flexibility, identity, and equality, but chapter sixteen - "Love Without Jealousy" - was focused on the intriguing proposition that an open marriage could beneficially include some forms of sexuality with outside partners. To the expressed regret of these respected mainstream authors, it was this chapters uniquely dynamic concepts that still remain in the cultural consciousness over thirty years later. As a result, the open marriage idea and term over the years had gained a life of its own where today it is still viewed as unconventional and highly controversial - many more married couples are avidly and happily engage in this alternative sexual lifestyle that they find significantly liberating, gratifying, and beneficial.

Currently with many committed couples not immediately choosing or wanting formal marriage, but desire such sexual liberties within their own mutual partnership, the new synonymous term presently used for both married and committed couples is open relationship. Moreover this fashionable term for the concept of being sexually open versus closed also applies to triads and other companion bonding groups larger than two.

Open relationships are sometimes considered as a form of polyamory (involvement in loving relationships, of a sexual kind, with more than one person), but regarded broader in concept than polyamory by including sexual play outside the context of loving relationships. Even so, naturally there is potential in overlapping these alternative sexual lifestyles.

With regard to the sexual option of swinging, there is difference of opinion as to whether marital or committed couples involved in this specific alternative sexual lifestyle are in open relationships. Swinging involves sex with one or more persons within a particular group context. While swingers may "swap" or exchange partners, they usually do not have dates and sex with others entirely separate from their partner who is customarily nearby. However, quite the opposite is true for those in an open marriage (open relationship) where typically there are outside activities (such as dating, etc.) separate from the spouse or committed partner. Again, there is a natural propensity for many couples to overlap sexual concepts and their involvement in other sexual lifestyle communities.

OM Lifestyles Expectations

While the arrangements for each open marriage (open relationship) are defined by the individuals involved, they usually tend to have explicit expectations such as:

• Other relationships or sexual activities are supplements or enhancements to the marriage, not replacements for anything in the marriage.

• There is honest and open communication between the primary couple about what is allowable and what is not - and a trust that both partners will abide by those expectations.

• There is mutual consent from both partners to the type of open marriage chosen.

• The nature of an open marriage, along with the rules that could apply to it (see below - "Mutual Tenets And Agreements"), often changes over time as each person and their relationships grow or change, or to adapt to new circumstances that arise.

Sometimes in this type of relationship only one spouse has "permission" to have sexual encounters with others, while the

other partner expectedly remains monogamous (sexually exclusive). The monogamous spouse may be indifferent to their partners experiences with others, or may derive sexual satisfaction from watching, hearing, or simply being aware of them. In other open relationships, egalitarian rules for both partners are a crucial component.

In certain societies, such as Nepal, this practice is somewhat socially acceptable. However, in the United States and Western Europe, open marriage is much more controversial and generally not socially accepted.

Considering Emotional Issues

Like other relationships, including "normal" marriages, open relationships are subject to emotional stresses and inter-personal issues. Those who have attempted open marriages often say it either brings the couple closer together on many levels and strengthens the marriage and the trust, friendship, and respect for each other, or leads to jealousy and damages the marriage. Those both successful and unsuccessful, often refer to the challenges of "New Relationship Energy" ("New Relationship Energy") that can be confused with love for a third party and damage the marriage.

There is the potential of many emotional pitfalls for couples who experiment with open marriage, as well as many potential benefits for those who are successful. In cases where this type of experimentation is meant to "fix" a marriage, or either partner is emotionally or morally unable to, the potential for a negative outcome increases.

For those who claim success in open marriages, the reported benefits commonly include a deeper emotional connection with their partner, a more enduring trust, and/or a deeper sexual satisfaction for both partners.

Outsiders, or even some who practice egalitarian open relationships, may have difficulty understanding how a monogamous husband, for example, could benefit from letting his wife date, build emotional bonds with, and have sex with other men. Husbands involved report an "near primal" urge to engage in these activities, and often the more skilled the spouses lover is, or the more intense the "New Relationship Energy" is, the more it heightens the husbands experience, even if this temporarily relegates him to a subservient or lower position than the wifes new lover.

Mutual Tenets & Agreements

Some couples involved in open marriages or relationships adopt a set of "rules" or "agreements" to guide their amenable outside activities. These rules are individualistic and often change over time. Such agreements, and more importantly the process of negotiating them, can help people to consider and anticipate what behavior to expect from their partners and what intentions they have for themselves. This is intended to reduce the uncertainty that can breed jealousy, insecurity and resentment, and moreover, to focus the commitments that continue between the couple even while the convention of sexual monogamy is modified. These agreements attempt to allow partners to explore new territory without doing something disastrous to the primary (marital or committed) relationship.

Some example elements which might be included in such relationship agreements are described below; a given agreement might include any or all of these elements (in the forms given or modified, or even reversed), or many

others. There is no one correct set of agreements, as the needs of each individual and each relationship vary considerably, and tend to evolve with time and experience.

Ã¢â¬Â Our marriage and family always comes first, (or) We will not harm the quality of our existing relationship, (or) Our individual freedom to grow and explore must not be unduly constrained.

Ã¢â¬Â We will always inform each other prior to any outside activity, (or) We will attempt to inform the other partner first if possible and as soon as possible afterwards if not, (or) We will inform our partner of our general practices but not about specific people or times or places.

Ã¢â¬Â It is enough to keep the other partner informed of all activity, (or) We will not proceed without explicit prior agreement from the other partner.

Ã¢â¬Â The other partner must meet any new person first, (or) The other partner can eventually meet all people that might be involved, should they want to.

Ã¢â¬Â The other partner has a right of veto any relationship or activity at any time, (or) The other partner may inhibit further development of a relationship but any "rollbacks" of existing relationships need to be individually negotiated.

Ã¢â¬Â We will only be involved with people who fully disclose the relationships and activities to their own spouses or committed partners, (or) We will encourage but not require others with whom we are involved to have open relationships with their other partners, if any.

Ã¢â¬Â We will always use agreed upon safer sex practices until and unless our regular partner agrees to specific exceptions, (or) We will trust each other to be appropriately careful about sexual safety without details.

Ã¢â¬Â We will not cancel plans that we have together to be with someone else, (or) We will not neglect our partner to be with someone else unless the spouse agrees.

Ã¢â¬Â We will continue to meet each others sexual needs as well, (or) Each partner is responsible for their own sexual needs.

Ã¢â¬Â We are allowed to omit specific details except as needed for full disclosure for safer sex decisions.

Ã¢â¬Â We will not disclose these activities to other friends without mutual consent, (or) We are each free to share about these experiences within our own judgment of appropriateness and safety.

Ã¢â¬Â We will not use this against each other in any fights or arguments later down the road.

Ã¢â¬Â We will engage in sexual activities only together with both of us present, (or) We may engage sexually with others alone or together.

Ã¢â¬â We will return home to sleep after each encounter, (or) We will accept overnight visits by prior negotiation.

Ã¢â¬â We will not compare anything that has gone on with the other person to anything that goes on between us. We can pick up pointers of new things to try with each other from the outside source but not in a harmful way.

Ã¢â¬â We will not hide or minimize emotional connections forming with other people, (or) We will not form strong emotional attachments unless and until our existing partner forms their own friendship and connection as well.

Ã¢â¬â We will promptly disclose and discuss any breaches to these agreements in order to remain in integrity with each other and avoid building walls of shame and hiding.

Ã¢â¬â We will honestly discuss any concerns or feelings that arise and which affect our closeness or safety with each other.

Ã¢â¬â We will reconsider any of these agreements if experience shows that they are not serving our ultimate purposes.

CONCLUSION

An open marriage is a marital arrangement where both spouses explicitly understand and agree to allow either one or both partners the right to have sexual relationships outside the marriage without viewing it either as behavior harmful to their relationship or as marital betrayal. As a non-exclusive couple, together they continually review and redefine the boundaries of their unconventional marriage to make revisions that best suit their present individual and collective needs and desires.

What this means is that the individuals involved define the criteria and conventions of their own particular marital relationship. There is no one set of rules or boundaries for an open marriage. Each marriage is unique in defining what is acceptable and successfully works for that couple, at that given time. Also, the rules are subject to change over time as each person and their primary relationship grow and evolve. This change is necessary to adapt to new circumstances that arise.

While open marriage is an alternative marital lifestyle - and except for its sexual

non-exclusivity feature Ã¢â¬â it still incorporates the shared fundamental functions, obligations, and bonding ideals and values of traditional marriage. But as in any relationship, the key to a successful open marriage is honesty, trustworthiness, and open communication between all parties involved.

Because of certain held personal beliefs or convictions, intolerant thinking, emotional insecurities, or lacking the capacity to accept or adapt to new relationship changes by either one or both spouses, open marriage is not suitable or appropriate for some couples. Consequently, such intransigent couples should avoid experimenting with or converting to a liberalized marriage of this kind.