

Relationship Repair

Co-Creating Trust



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I've been asked many times, *is it really possible to go from infidelity to healthy, happy polyamory?* The answer is a resounding yes. As a relationship therapist who specializes in working with non-monogamous partnerships, I can say that I've seen it happen many times, and I've trained other therapists to work with relationships in this situation.

That doesn't mean it's an easy process, or that success is guaranteed. Moving from infidelity to polyamory will require repairing the damage that's been done by deception. It will also require addressing the underlying factors that led to the infidelity in the first place, and building relationship skills that can support honesty in the relationship.



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Making A Good Repair

Making a good repair is an essential relationship skill. Learning how to repair thoughtfully and intentionally will serve you well many times over the course of any long-term relationship.

A good repair goes far beyond “I’m sorry.” This document will guide you through the process of making a good repair, starting with careful preparation. I focus on preparation first, because making a good repair takes forethought about hard stuff.

I direct this handout primarily to the person who is initiating a repair for something they did that was hurtful to their partner, but the steps for getting ready are just as applicable to the other partner, and the entire process is a team endeavor. A repair takes grit, grace, and stamina for everyone concerned. Don’t rush it, and take breaks if you need to.



Action steps for *getting ready to repair*:

- Get grounded. How will **you** benefit from a good repair? It will take some time and energy, so get clear on why you think it is important and what you will get out of it. “Happy spouse, happy house” isn’t really sufficient motivation for this kind of deep process. Really ask yourself why **YOU** will benefit from understanding what happened for you, what happened for your partner, and what other options or choices might be preferable in the future if a similar situation comes up.
- Trust yourself. You’re strong enough to admit your mistakes and live through it. It isn’t possible to have a well-functioning relationship (let alone more than one!) without getting good at repair.
- Forgive yourself, but don’t let yourself off the hook. Everyone makes mistakes. And all actions have consequences. You are a fabulous human being—and even more so when you take responsibility for your actions, make a good repair, and build a safe and trusting connection that gets stronger throughout time.
- Accountability is everything. Think carefully about what you did, and really let it in. Find the line between accountability and shame. You don’t want to fall into shame, but you won’t have an effective or meaningful repair if you don’t let yourself get in touch with exactly what happened and what your responsibility was. If you lied, how did you decide not to tell the truth? If you broke an agreement, how did you decide not to renegotiate first? Let yourself get a little more comfortable experiencing the discomfort of being accountable for what you did, the choices you made, and how they affected your partner and your relationship. If you aren’t ready to be accountable, you aren’t ready for a repair. If you are having difficulty with this step, get help from a coach, therapist, or friend to help you get there.



- Prepare for some discomfort. Part of making a repair is hearing how your actions hurt your partner, and that isn't easy. It is not reasonable to expect trust to grow if you don't have the grit to really hear your partner's point of view. Some people prepare for discomfort by bracing themselves, but I think it is more effective to get in touch with your highest and best intention, your very best self, and do whatever it takes to stay in touch with that part of you.
- While you are in touch with your best self, it should be easy to find generosity in your heart. You love your partner, and they got hurt because of some choices you made. Let yourself feel genuinely curious about what happened for your partner. What did they experience? What was the hardest part about it? What do they think you could have done differently that would have made a difference to them? It isn't possible to make a repair without asking for and really hearing this kind of input from your partner, so get yourself organized internally to welcome this feedback. If you try to make a pseudo-repair from a resentful or cranky place, it won't work.
- A repair is an opportunity for a lot of growth. As you move through this process, notice what you are learning about yourself, and about others. The more you learn from mistakes the less likely you are to repeat them.
- Get comfortable with the discomfort. The best repair takes some time and focus, and that focus should initially be on the injured party or the most distressed person. Prepare to focus on your partner without explaining your perspective for quite some time. Prepare yourself to listen and get curious without getting defensive.



Action steps for *making the repair*:

- Get curious about what your partner's experience was. What hurt? What was hard? How did your partner perceive events? What interpretation did they put on those events? Make sure you stay with this process until you are very clear and able to say back what went wrong from your partner's perspective. How would they prefer for you to have handled the situation and why? You need to know it all, and ending this process too soon won't benefit you, difficult as it may be. Stay with it and show genuine curiosity until you have a feeling of, "Oh! I get it!" Then make sure you can say it back and your partner agrees that you got it.



- Express empathy. Once you understand what happened from your partner's point of view, you can express empathy. That means indicating that you understand how they felt and it makes sense to you. When that goes well, it sounds like this: "I now understand that when I did (x), this is what happened for you (description of your partner's internal experience). I see how you felt (x), and it makes total sense to me that you would feel that way, given the combination of what I did and what it meant to you."

- Be accountable. Own what you did, rather than defending your choices: “Yes, I did lie about that, and it makes sense that you were hurt by it, since our relationship is based on transparency and you’ve told me how important honesty is to you.” Don’t collapse into shame; just own what you did.
- Apologize. Explain to your partner why you are sorry. Continue to focus on your partner, and resist the impulse to explain your perspective. It will be much better if you save your point of view for later.
- Figure out what you would like to have done differently, or would want to do differently in the future. This is important, and if you’re having trouble with it, consult a coach, a therapist, or a friend. Take into consideration what your partner would have wanted you to do differently. Some common options might be to disclose the secret yourself rather than having your partner discover it, or renegotiating the agreement instead of breaking it. Really give this some thought. What have you learned from this experience, and how would you put that learning into practice in the future?



- Explain what you plan to do differently in the future. This should go beyond, “It was a mistake, and it won’t happen again.” Your new understanding of the situation will inform your future choices. However, think this through carefully because you *must not* agree to something you can’t or don’t want to follow through on. This is a tempting time to make promises, but be very careful; the very last thing you and your partner need right now is another broken agreement. Here are some ideas to consider:

1. Would you want to think about things differently, take responsibility, renegotiate, check in more, and/or communicate more fully?
2. If a similar situation did happen, how would you like to handle it next time?
3. If substances were involved, are you ready to decide not to use substances under some circumstances? Are you truly aligned with a new course of action, and do you know what it is about the situation that makes you want to use substances? Can you handle those challenges differently?
4. Are there emotions you would like to deal with differently, to prevent a similar situation from coming up again? Sometimes emotions like boredom, anxiety, anger, dissatisfaction, fear of conflict, or depression can be involved in choices we later regret.

- Acknowledge that your partner might have some doubts about your ability to follow through effectively with your plan. This is particularly important if there have been major or recurring breaches of trust in the past. For instance, you might acknowledge that years have gone by with many lies, and that it would be a lot to expect a partner to suddenly trust that things will change just because of one heartfelt conversation. As painful as that is to say, this level of repair is respectful of the reality of particularly difficult situations. It is extremely challenging to stick with someone while they do battle with their inner conflict-avoidant demons or tendency toward abundant untruths. Acknowledging that you are asking something big from your partner in the way of newfound trust is a very respectful thing to do. (Thank you to Pete Pearson from the Couples Institute for this concept.)

Dishonesty 101



Polyamory is a relationship style that prioritizes honesty, open negotiations about transparency (i.e., while you may not tell your partner everything, you will decide together what information to share and what to keep private), and the ability to make and keep an agreement. These are all relationship skills that you can develop by learning and practicing them. For now, I'll be focusing on the skills that support honesty. Understanding how lies happen and what purpose they serve is a very helpful step in developing these skills.

There are multiple kinds of lies, and they are not all created equal. Here, I'm going to share a taxonomy of lies that was developed by Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson of The Couple's Institute. You can learn more about it in their book *Tell Me No Lies*.



Some lies are kindhearted attempts to soothe, encourage, or lift someone's spirits. For instance, imagine you saw your partner give a speech; they were clearly nervous and flubbed a few lines, but to raise their spirits, you tell them "You did an *amazing* job with that presentation." Another common example is "Yes, I love those pants on

you!" We call these **loving lies**, and they are very common in relationships. They're not malicious, and they rarely do damage.

I wouldn't necessarily tell partners to stop telling loving lies, but because people have different opinions about whether loving lies are an act of kindness or a form of deception, your relationship might benefit from taking the time to get on the same page about the topic.

Another very common form of dishonesty is the **conflict-avoidant lie**. Every small child learns how to craft or spin a story to avoid getting in trouble, and then hones that skill over many years. Nobody is immune to the conflict-avoidant lie. Can you think of a few times you told a fib just to avoid trouble?

As common as the conflict-avoidant lie is, it has the potential to do real damage in your relationships. Not only does it leave your partner acting on false information, it also denies them the opportunity to truly know you, and it denies you the opportunity to be truly known. The counter-intuitive truth is that while it may lead to conflict in the moment, being honest about difficult topics actually builds trust in the long term, because it lets your partner see that they can rely on you to be truthful even when it's uncomfortable.



Wondering how to stop telling conflict-avoidant lies? Here's what I'd recommend:

1. Take a good look at how you handle conflict. When you and your partner disagree, do you feel comfortable speaking up? If not, why not? What are you afraid will happen? Be honest with yourself, and identify if you have a tendency to avoid conflict by telling lies, hiding the truth, or avoiding tough conversations.
2. Initiate a conversation with your partner about managing disagreements between you. Do you both agree it would be good to be able to disagree without creating a lot of drama or tension? Do you need some help with this? If so, agree to find a coach or therapist to help you.
3. Start growing your muscle for truth-telling. Some people think if they are going to be honest, they will have to give up a lot of things they don't want to give up. In truth, all you have to give up is lying. Instead of lying, tell your partner what you think, feel, believe, or prefer. Let the disagreement happen, and prove to yourself and each other that having a difference of opinion won't kill you.
4. For some, disagreeing and staying connected is hard, but you should know it is definitely possible. If you and your partner are unable to do it despite your best efforts, get some help from a therapist or coach. This is a learnable skill. It will make you happier and your relationship stronger.

Some infidelity falls under the category of conflict avoidant lies. If you have infidelity in your past, do you think avoiding conflict was a significant factor? What agreements were broken, and what would it have taken to discuss your desire to be with a new partner rather than just acting on it and/or lying about it?

A third kind of lie is a **passive-aggressive lie**. This goes a little further than the conflict avoidant lie, although it very likely includes conflict-avoidance. The kind of internal logic that tends to contribute to infidelity can often fall under the heading of passive-aggressive lies. For example, the thinking might go something like this: “I want what I want, and I won’t get it if I talk about it. Or the opportunity will pass, and I want it now. So I’ll just do it, because what you don’t know won’t hurt you, and you’ll never find out.”

This kind of lie features a lot of magical thinking, and a decidedly me-focused perspective. This logic lacks awareness of the other people who might be hurt by or affected by the choices being made. When this is the kind of thinking underneath the lie, it will probably require a significant personal growth project to get clear on what you would want to do differently in a similar circumstance. How would it benefit you to really shift how much you consider your partner’s feelings and preferences when making choices? Are you aware of how it affects *you* when you break agreements or tell lies?



A fourth kind of lie is a **felony lie**.

Felony lies are really big, do a lot of damage, and are very hard to come back from. Examples include multiple infidelities over many years, seriously damaging lies involving a lot of money, denying big lies again and again, or defensive tactics that cause real harm, like gaslighting. These are tough to come back from for many reasons. If you truly want to make a good repair, and create a relationship based on transparency,



strong agreements and trust, you have a journey ahead of you. And it is absolutely possible! I would recommend engaging a skilled therapist or coach to help with the process.

The fact is, whatever your relationship history, strengthening your honesty skills will be necessary to support a successful polyamorous relationship. Polyamory often requires handling differences of opinion in emotionally-charged territory and negotiating between the desires of multiple people. It can be very tempting to tell a lie to smooth things over. That's why I recommend building your comfort with transparency ASAP, even with the small stuff—so that you can start creating the foundation of trust that will allow your relationship to flourish long-term.

When you are able to acknowledge and get curious about your differences, and learn to



leverage your strengths and work together with the challenges you face, you co-create a relationship where you can both be honest, increase your connection through even very tough conversations, and re-negotiate agreements that aren't working anymore rather than breaking them.

Inviting Honesty



I see relationships as a system in which each person plays a part. We create the dynamics of our relationship together, controlling only our own actions, but influencing one another with our choices. Coming to understand your part in the dynamic is an act of empowerment, because, while

you can't control your partner's actions, being intentional about your own has the potential to shift the whole system. It's worth understanding how your part in the system can influence your partner's choice to be honest or dishonest. Partners can make choices that invite truth-telling, and they can make choices that discourage truth-telling.

Just as many of us have learned to lie from childhood on, many of us have learned to discourage truth-telling in our interactions. But when it comes to dishonesty, if we blow up, shut down, or avoid when we hear bad news, we may be inadvertently encouraging the behavior that is causing us pain. The truth is, when we respond badly to something we're not comfortable hearing, we make it harder for people to come to us with uncomfortable truths in the future. In this way, honesty is kind of a team sport.



How do you build the skill of encouraging honesty? Here's what I'd recommend:

1. Identify your goals. How will it benefit you to hear more honest truth from your partner? At the very least, you will then know them better, and be better able to figure out if you like them. Are there other benefits? You are learning to get some control over your emotional reactions, so your partner can more easily talk honestly to you; it will help if you keep your reasons for doing so right at the front of your mind, because it won't always feel comfortable. Know why you're doing it.
2. Take a good look at how you respond when someone tells you something you don't want to hear. Do you cry, yell, run away, shut down, leave the house in a huff, change the subject? Have you ever heard yourself say "don't ever talk to me about that again!?" If any of this describes you on a bad day, you could get better at inviting your partner to be honest with you.
3. Trust yourself. You can handle some hard stuff. You'll be ok. Learn to trust that you will live through getting bad news or learning something uncomfortable about your partner. Also, you don't need to respond to everything right away; it's ok to take some time to process so that you can decide how to handle a situation in the way that aligns with your values and the kind of partner you want to be. You've got this. I believe in you.

Co-Creating A Trusting Relationship

So far, we've discussed how to move away from dishonesty, and how partners can choose to invite honesty with their behavior. But how do these relationship-skill-building projects come together to create an honest relationship?

Here are some discussion points to get you started creating a relationship based on trust. As you discuss these items, ask one another questions until you can accurately say back what your partner is expressing, but using your own words:

- How important is honesty to you, and why?
- How comfortable are you telling untruths? What types of things have you lied about (for instance, in previous relationships or in your childhood)? What types of things have motivated you to lie?
- Give your partner examples of the kinds of things that feel important to you to know, and the kinds of things that don't feel important to you to know. Maybe there are even some things you don't *want* to know. Discuss this with enough examples that you both feel

confident that you understand one another's preferences, which might be very different from one another. Do not assume your partner wants to know (and not know) the same types of things you do. Ask. Tell. Be specific.



- What do you do to actively create an environment of trust and honesty in your relationship? What does your partner do?
- What do you do to create a soft landing-place for your partner to make difficult, honest, and vulnerable disclosures? Check with them to see if your efforts are helpful to them, or to find out what strategies might work better for them.
- When you have a choice to make that you know will affect your partner, and you suspect you and your partner will disagree about what you should choose, what feelings do you experience, and what is your thought process? Discuss how you want to show compassion for one another in situations like this.
- When you make a mistake that affects your partner, or when your partner feels hurt by something you have done, what emotions do you experience? How do you handle those emotions? How would you like to handle them? Discuss how you each would like to show compassion for one another in situations like this.



What You Need for Successful Polyamory

To function well, polyamory requires some serious relationship skills. That includes strong differentiation of self, which I define as:

- The ability to look inside yourself and identify what you want, feel, believe, and prefer;
- The ability to honestly express that to someone else;
- The ability to stay open, calm, curious, and connected while someone else expresses what they want, feel, believe, and prefer to you, even if it's challenging to hear.

You might be noticing some overlap with my discussion of conflict-avoidant lies and inviting honesty. If you did, you've got a good eye; they're absolutely related. Differentiation of self is the skill set that supports honesty within a long-term relationship.



If you're thinking "wow, I struggle with some of those skills," you should know that you're far from alone. Building differentiation is a lifelong process; I've taught thousands of therapists about differentiation, and I'm still working on it myself! But differentiation is well worth the effort. It's the essential bedrock that supports a relationship in which partners can feel simultaneously secure and free.

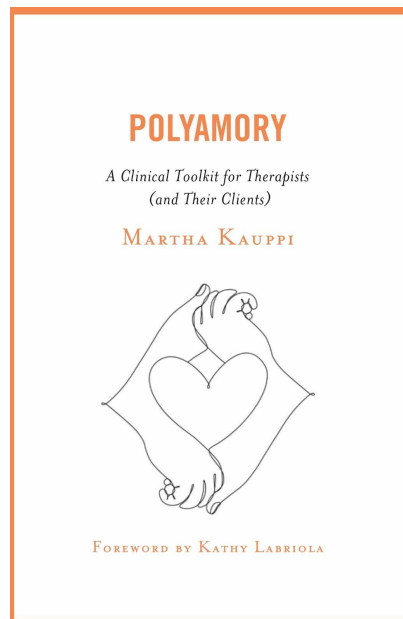
As a final note, I've also observed that polyamory flourishes best when both partners have what I refer to as "good manners." People who take the time to appreciate the little things about their partner, who are generous with their time, energy, and affection, who pay attention to what makes their partner feel special, who don't get overly swept up in new relationships to the point that they neglect more established ones, who are truly present in shared moments together, who are scrupulous about keeping their appointments, who take care not to make comparisons or pit partners against each other—these people are much more likely to make polyamory work easily. If you can go the extra mile to make your partner feel loved, cared for, and respected, do it. It's worth the effort.



Now that you've learned several steps for co-creating trust, how are you feeling? Ready? Excited? Overwhelmed? I hope you feel empowered to keep agreements and build trust with your partner.

I truly believe that most people can navigate their relationship challenges with some good information, strong support, and effective relational strategies. When the going gets tough, getting good help can make a huge difference. If you feel like you need some extra support to navigate this project, a polyamory-friendly coach or therapist can be an amazing investment.

And if you aren't ready for therapy, or can't find the right fit, try [my book](#). It's a deep-dive into how polyamory works in real life, and it's not just for therapists; I also wrote it for people just like you. Many partners and community groups are reading it together as a self-help manual, working through the 25 worksheets, and setting themselves up for very successful relationship experiments. If that sounds like your cup of tea, you can find it by searching for *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and Their Clients)*. Finally, I wish you the best in all your future relationship endeavors!



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