

UNMASKING THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER:MANAGING JEALOUSY IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

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In my counseling practice, I work with many people who have chosen to have open relationships--to have more than one intimate sexual relationship. The biggest obstacle to creating successful and satisfying open relationships is jealousy. Despite how enlightened we think we are, most of us experience jealousy if our spouse or lover has a sexual relationship with someone else. A few rare individuals never experience jealousy. They are either more highly evolved than the rest of us mortals, or else they are pathologically out of touch with their feelings. I advise clients to treat jealousy as a given: assume that it will occur, and be prepared with strategies to successfully address it and minimize the damage.

JEALOUSY IS A WHOLE BUNDLE OF EMOTIONS

We tend to think of jealousy as a single emotion, but actually it is a whole bundle of feelings that tend to get lumped together. Jealousy can manifest as anger, fear, hurt, betrayal, anxiety, agitation, sadness, paranoia, depression, loneliness, envy, coveting, feeling powerless, feeling inadequate, feeling excluded. It often helps to identify what is the exact mix of feelings you experience when you feel jealous. What is the primary emotion you feel when you are jealous? Demystifying the exact components of your jealousy can be a giant step towards getting a grip on things and resolving the problem. Is it always the same for you or does the mix change from time to time depending on circumstances? For instance, one woman figured out that her jealousy was about 50% fear, 20% anger, 20% feeling powerless and 10% feeling betrayed. However, when she asked her partner for reassurance and affection, and he provided it, the anger and betrayal disappeared. Then her jealousy was much more manageable, because most of what was left was fear and she could express those feelings more easily to her partner and resolve them.

JEALOUSY IS ABOUT FEAR

It is crucial to understand what jealousy is and what it is about. Jealousy is about fear--fear of the unknown and of change, fear of losing power or control in a relationship, fear of scarcity and of loss, and fear of abandonment. It is a reflection of our own insecurity about our worthiness, anxiety about being adequate as a lover, and doubts about our desirability. For every jealous feeling there is an emotion behind the jealousy that is much more significant than the jealousy itself. Behind jealousy there is an unmet need or a deep fear that our needs will not be met. Recognizing those fears and unmet needs is the key to unmasking jealousy and taking away its power. Jealousy is just the finger pointing at the fears and needs we are afraid to face. When jealousy kicks in, it is the ancient reptilian part of our brain going into a "fight or flight" response because we feel that our very survival is threatened. When you feel jealous, ask yourself, "What is it that I am really afraid of? What do I need to make this situation safe for me?" "What is the worst thing that could happen and how likely is that to happen?"

UNMASKING JEALOUSY: SOME SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES

Jessica believed in open marriage but she became insanely jealous when her husband John initiated a sexual relationship with Carol. In counseling, it became clear that Jessica had already

felt lonely and neglected for years because John was obsessed with his work and didn't give her enough time and enough sex. Behind her jealousy was a feeling of scarcity and deprivation, and an unmet need for love. As soon as John started spending more quality time with her, their intimacy was greatly enhanced, and her jealousy virtually disappeared.

Kate and Peggy are two bisexual women involved in a long-term relationship. Peggy got very jealous when her lover started a relationship with a man. In counseling, Peggy realized that she felt insecure about Kate's commitment to her. Behind her jealousy was an overwhelming fear of loss and abandonment, and she feared that Kate would leave her for this new man. Kate reassured her that she was fully committed to their relationship, and Peggy was able to move beyond jealousy to full acceptance of her partner's new lover.

Greg had many affairs outside his marriage, but when his wife got involved with a hunky, much younger man that she met at the gym, he became very jealous and threatened divorce. In counseling, he admitted that he was feeling old and unattractive and felt very threatened by his wife's new lover. She reassured Greg that she loved him and that she was still very sexually attracted to him. Behind Greg's jealousy was the fear that his wife would reject him sexually, as well as his own insecurities about aging and loss of sexual prowess.

George and Marsha lived together many years, but were on the verge of breaking up because George got involved with Barbara. After a few counseling sessions, Marsha realized that she only got jealous when George saw Barbara on weekends. Marsha demanded that George reserve weekends for her and see Barbara only on weeknights. The new relationship upset her schedule and shook up her sense of security. As soon as she was guaranteed every weekend with George, her jealousy subsided. After several months, she felt secure enough that she told George he could see Barbara one weekend night each week, and they negotiated a schedule that seemed equitable for everyone.

Bob and Peter are two gay men in a committed relationship. Bob wanted sex much more often, so Peter told him to go to the baths and have casual sexual relationships with other men. However, he became angry and withdrawn when Bob actually went out, and was even less inclined to want sex. In counseling he revealed that he was worried that Bob might have unsafe sex with other men and be exposed to HIV/AIDS. They agreed to both be re-tested for HIV, and negotiated a clear agreement that they would have only 100% safer sex outside of their relationship. After that, Peter's jealousy subsided so much that he began asking Bob to tell him all about his sexual adventures. This sharing sexually aroused him and as a result they began having sex much more frequently.

Sara, a bisexual woman, was involved with Dave, a straight man. Dave got involved with Helen. Helen was very jealous of Sara, and demanded that Dave leave Sara. Sara understood Helen's feelings, so she encouraged Dave to spend more time with Helen to help her feel more secure. Sara also called Helen to reassure her that she welcomed her and wanted to cooperate to make this work out for all three of them. After a few months Helen gradually became less jealous and stopped making such extreme demands for Dave's time and attention.

Beth and Mark had agreed to an open relationship, but Beth was very jealous when Mark told her that he wanted to start a relationship with Janet. Beth asked Mark and Janet to give her a month to get used to the idea before becoming sexually involved, and they agreed to wait. As Beth got to know Janet she decided that Mark had excellent taste in women, and she gave them

the green light to have a sexual relationship. The first few nights Mark spent with Janet were very hard for Beth; she couldn't sleep and was very frightened about the future, but she waited it out and her jealousy faded. Because she felt she had some control over the situation and had a voice in how it unfolded, her jealousy was minimized.

JEALOUSY IS INEVITABLY GENERATED BY OUR CORE BELIEFS

Our society is addicted to three core beliefs about relationships that are almost guaranteed to create jealousy even in the most well-adjusted people. Most of us have absorbed these beliefs without even realizing it. Identifying and dismantling these beliefs in our "heart of hearts" is the single most effective way to short-circuit jealousy. Ask yourself how much of you believes each of these three statements. Is it 90% of yourself that believes them? 50%? Notice which belief is most entrenched in your subconscious mind and which one you've made the most progress on:

Core Belief #1

If my partner really loved me, (s)he wouldn't have any desire for a sexual relationship with anyone else.

This belief sees any interest your partner has in anyone else as a direct reflection of how much (s)he loves you. It's a quantitative view of love which equates the amount of love with the ability to be interested in having another partner. When you break it down, this is as absurd as saying that a couple that gives birth to a second child must not love their first child or they couldn't possibly have any interest in having a second one.

Core Belief #2

If my partner were happy with me, and if I were a good partner/spouse/lover/etc., my partner would be so satisfied that (s)he wouldn't want to get involved with anyone else.

This belief is even more insidious. With the first belief you can at least blame it on your partner for not loving you enough. This belief says that if your partner is interested in someone else, it's your fault for not being the perfect lover or spouse and your relationship must be a failure. If you truly believe that your lover could only be interested in another partner because you're inadequate, you can see how that will generate jealousy big time!

Core Belief #3

It's just not possible to love more than one person at the same time.

This belief is built on the "scarcity economy of love", the belief that love is a finite resource, there is only so much to go around, and there is never enough. Therefore, if my partner gives any of her or his love to anyone else, that necessarily means that there's less for me. Because most people already feel there are some areas in their relationship where they are not getting enough of something (time, love, affection, sex, support, commitment) they are fearful that they will receive even less if their partner gets involved with additional partners.

Because each of these beliefs is connected to a very primal fear, they take time and effort to overcome. The first belief expresses a deep fear that you are not loved and will be abandoned.

The second taps into our insecurities and the fear that we are not adequate or deserving of love, and the third is a fear of deprivation and being starved for love and attention. So have compassion for yourself and your partner(s) as you work with these beliefs and gradually replace them with beliefs that support your desire to embrace open relationships. Try on these new beliefs instead and see how they feel to you..

New Core Belief #1

My partner loves me so much that (s)he trusts our relationship to expand and be enriched by experiencing even more love from others.

New Core Belief #2

My relationship is so solid and trusting that we can experience other relationships freely. My partner is so satisfied with me and our relationship that having other partners will not threaten the bond we enjoy.

New Core Belief #3

There is an abundance of love in the world and there is plenty for everyone. Loving more than one person is a choice that can exponentially expand my potential for giving and receiving love.

The fact that these new beliefs sound so strange and almost laughable to us at first shows just how deeply the old paradigm beliefs about love and relationships are ingrained in our consciousness. It also underscores the importance of dissolving these old beliefs if we ever hope to enjoy multiple relationships free of jealousy.

ADDING A NEW RELATIONSHIP IS LIKE HAVING A NEW BABY

Jealousy is almost always most intense right when one partner starts a new relationship, and usually subsides over time. A new romance shakes up everything in your life, including your existing relationship. I use the analogy that adding a new relationship is very similar to having a baby: while it can bring great joy and excitement to your lives, you are adding a new person to your family, and this creates a whole new dynamic in your relationship. Just like a new baby, a new relationship will change your schedule, your lifestyle, and take a lot of your time and energy, as well as adding a major source of stress to your life. And, like a new baby, it is an unknown quantity, and it is impossible to predict how it will change your life experience and what kind of intense feelings it will trigger. As with a new baby, flexibility and willingness to open yourself up to a completely new experience are crucial in adjusting to a new relationship.

At the beginning of a new relationship, fear of loss and abandonment are at their peak. Fear of the unknown and fear of change can be extremely uncomfortable as well, because, as one woman put it, "There's just no telling where this thing will go from here." As the drama of a new romance gradually settles into a more manageable relationship with clear parameters, most people relax and realize that this is not going to be fatal to the initial relationship. If you are the partner initiating a new relationship, you can significantly reduce your partner's initial jealousy through clear communication and reassurance that you are fully committed to staying with him or her.

POWER IMBALANCES CAN AGGRAVATE JEALOUSY

A new relationship can dramatically alter power dynamics in a relationship. Particularly in a triad or triangle situation, where one person has two lovers and the other two only have one, an unfortunate dynamic of competition and a struggle for control can arise. This can be minimized by encouraging all parties to communicate their needs openly and by negotiating reasonable agreements that are fair to everyone. The person with two lovers should bend over backwards to avoid a power struggle and make sure both of his or her partners get enough time, attention, affection, commitment, and sex. If someone in this position abuses power, they should be called on it immediately. Both lovers should become allies to demand a change in their partner's behavior, rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated against each other. Unless everyone cooperates and is careful of each other's feelings and needs, it is easy for one person to feel like the "odd person out." No one should feel powerless in a relationship-- there is enough love for everyone to be satisfied.

THE PHOBIA MODEL OF MANAGING JEALOUSY

Learn to accept jealousy as a normal but exaggerated response to a stressful, emotionally charged change in your life. I often use the phobia model to help clients manage jealous feelings. For instance, if someone is afraid of heights, a therapist would pinpoint exactly what situations frighten that person, and then gradually try to make those situations safe enough to tolerate. By exposing someone with a fear of heights first to a few steps and then to a ladder, and then going up an escalator, and eventually even going to the top of a hill or mountain. By gradually experiencing the situation that triggers the phobia, and by incrementally escalating that exposure, a person can slowly overcome their fears.

To treat jealousy, I ask clients to pinpoint as specifically as possible exactly what is triggering jealousy for them. For instance, Susan identified that what upset her most about her husband Bill's affair was that he spent the night with Rachel, and Susan felt lonely sleeping alone. Bill agreed to come home every night, as long as he could spend a few evenings with Rachel. After a month, Susan realized that she was no longer jealous, and she agreed to let him spend one night a week with Rachel, with the caveat that if she got really jealous she could call and ask him to come home. After a few more months she decided that it was okay for Bill to spend two or three nights a week with Rachel, and she only got jealous when Bill forgot her birthday and made a date with Rachel for that night. Throughout this process, Rachel was willing to be very flexible to accommodate Susan's demands, as she understood that securing Susan's cooperation was essential to making this relationship work for everyone. And for Susan, what worked was an incremental approach of exposing herself to exactly the situations she feared the most, and gradually learning to tolerate and even embrace this new situation.

Jim and Joan are a married couple. Joan became involved with Ruth. Because Joan had never been involved with a woman before, Ruth feared that Joan would drop her and go back to her comfortable married life. Ruth demanded more time and commitment from Joan, but Jim got very jealous when Joan started spending more time with Ruth. Faced with two jealous lovers, Joan came for counseling, and eventually negotiated an agreement with them both: Joan would spend a few nights a week with Ruth, but each night she would call home to check in with Jim, and would go home if he was feeling too lonely and jealous. Jim agreed that if this worked out, after six months Ruth could move in to their home and Joan would divide her time between them. After six months, Jim was not ready to let Ruth move in, and he asked to extend this for

another three months, and by then his jealousy had subsided to the point where he welcomed her into the household. While it's great to negotiate a plan so everyone has the same understanding and expectations, it is crucial to be flexible and willing to wait for all partners to be ready to take the next step. If any partner feels coerced into moving faster than feels comfortable, the old phobic "fight or flight" mentality will kick in, and the relationship will be sabotaged.

VISUALIZE YOUR JEALOUSY TRIGGERS

Using visualization and guided imagery often helps get down to the "nitty gritty" of what is causing jealousy. Close your eyes and visualize your partner initiating a new relationship with someone else, either someone they are currently interested in or involved with or with an imaginary "hypothetical lover". Watch the entire scenario unfold as if you were watching a video of the entire process.

Begin with when they first meet, the initial spark of interest, going on a date, having dinner or going out, going home with the new person, getting undressed, having sex, sleeping together, waking up in the morning, your lover coming back to you and telling you about the relationship, how your lover treats you, what it's like being with your partner again, etc.

As if you had a remote control, press the pause button for a few moments at any point along the way where you feel discomfort or jealousy. Try to identify exactly what mix of emotions you are actually feeling at different points as the scenario unfolds.

Most people are surprised to find that visualizing their partner having another relationship like this is generally painless except at certain key moments and those "triggers" are different for each person. For instance, one woman discovered that going through the entire sequence was actually pleasurable and sexually arousing except that she freaked out at visualizing her husband getting into "their" bed with another woman. She then made an agreement with him that he would only sleep with other women outside their home, either at the woman's house or at a hotel, and this made her feel safe. Another man found he was comfortable visualizing his partner having intercourse with another man, but became enraged when he visualized her giving head to the man. He considered fellatio as an extremely intimate experience and asked her not to do that with any other man and she agreed to that condition.

Another woman found the entire visualization extremely comfortable, much to her surprise, until she got to the part where after having sex, her husband talked to the new woman about his feelings and emotions. She realized that she didn't mind her partner having sex with another woman, but felt extremely threatened by him having an intimate conversation with her!

When you discover exactly what triggers your jealousy, it puts things in perspective. Realizing that you are only jealous of a small piece of the overall picture makes it much more manageable. After identifying your jealousy triggers, you have two basic choices. You can "engineer the problem away" by making agreements with your partner to avoid that particular behavior or situation, as shown in several previous examples. Or you can use the "phobia model", taking the risk of gradually exposing yourself to situations which trigger your jealousy in the hopes that you will learn to tolerate and eventually feel comfortable with it.

It is important to keep in mind that there is no simple and easy solution to jealousy. It usually requires trial and error to discover what works for your individual situation. And jealousy can bring up many powerful feelings and unpredictable emotions. So be gentle with yourself and your partners, and don't expect instant changes. Try to be understanding of each person's needs and feelings. Make every effort to create a "win-win" situation for everyone by giving each person as much voice as possible in decisions and rule-making. And be willing to compromise to make sure everyone's needs are met.

THE COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF JEALOUSY

Being involved in non-monogamous relationships requires being willing to stretch ourselves and to tolerate a certain amount of discomfort, risk-taking, and uncertainty, especially at the beginning. While jealousy can be literally paralyzing at the outset, usually the balance of pain to pleasure will gradually shift until the enhanced satisfaction and joy will far outweigh the anxieties and insecurities. If you find that you and your partner(s) are unable to resolve jealous feelings on your own, get some outside help. Having a long talk with supportive friends can give you a fresh perspective and some honest feedback. Joining a support group can also be helpful, as other people who have been in similar situations may have good ideas for creative problem solving. Individual or couples counseling can also create a safe environment for each person to express painful feelings and identify possible solutions.

Despite their best efforts, some people find that the fear and pain evoked by a non-monogamous relationship are too overwhelming. They may decide that it's just not worth the trouble, and may opt to return to a monogamous lifestyle. The first six months of exploring this new lifestyle are usually the hardest, so if you survive that, most of the hard work is behind you, and you can relax and enjoy the wonderful relationships you have successfully created.

Kathy Labriola provides low-fee counseling for individuals, couples, and groups. She has extensive experience assisting people with the challenges of non-traditional relationships, health problems and disabilities, HIV/AIDS, sexual orientation crises, political activism, and class struggle. She also facilitates discussion and support groups on open relationships, health and disabilities, and political activism and burnout.