I want a relationship with a man AND a woman

Dear Alice,

I'm a bisexual female and I've been dating a girl on and off for the past couple years. "On and off" due to distance, but the point is that as much as I love her, I still feel like there is a male void in my life. I'm not sure if it's because I get a lot of attention from guys and very little from girls, but lately I've been thinking that I would feel most comfortable in a committed relationship with a man and a woman. Do you think there's any hope in finding others who would be able to maintain this kind of relationship in a healthy manner? I have a lot of difficulty finding the right chemistry with people to begin with...

Answer

Dear Reader,

Coming to terms with the specificities of your needs and wants, as you're doing now, can be a difficult, but worthwhile undertaking. What you're describing — wanting a committed partnership with both the woman in your life and a man — is often coined polyamory, meaning plural loves. Polyamory doesn't refer to marrying more than one person (which, in fact, isn't legal in the United States), but rather involves choosing to have multiple romantic or sexual relationships with multiple consenting people. This means that all relationship partners are fully clued in to and amenable to their partners’ polyamorous intentions. Polyamorous folks may not outright reject monogamy as a workable option for some people, but may emphasize that it isn't the most natural choice for everyone. The polyamorous philosophy suggests that many people are capable of loving more than one person, and that through communication and negotiation, they may figure out the intimacy and commitment level that they’d like with each partner.

Historically, the predominant culture in the United States has enforced a norm of monogamous heterosexuality, as seen in the debates over gay marriage and whether to include topics about non-heterosexual relationships in sex education. This stigma certainly persists; people in consensually non-monogamous relationships experience discrimination and microaggressions around their dating practices, and it's common for polyamorous people to "stay in the closet" or refrain from disclosing their relationship status in order to escape this discrimination. It's also been found that individuals suffer from psychological distress as a result of the hostility and perceived hostility that they experience in response to their lifestyle. Despite the continuing
challenges, research shows that the climate is shifting; in the past decade, Americans have shown increasing interest in polyamory and other consensual non-monogamous configurations. Surveys found that about one in five people had engaged in a consensual, non-monogamous relationship at some point.

There are a range of reasons why couples may opt for non-monogamous arrangements, and you and your partner(s) can discover your ethical and philosophical values together. However, here are some of the other underlying principles that guide polyamory for many people:

- Human nature doesn't dictate monogamy.
- It's key that non-monogamy, when chosen, is practiced responsibly, ethically, and intentionally.
- Intimacy and sex between multiple simultaneous partners in polyamorous relationships isn't inherently wrong, bad, or unhealthy.
- Sex is a positive part of life if engaged in with honesty, responsibility, and trust.
- Love is an infinite rather than finite commodity and can be offered to partners without conditional constraints to love only that one person.
- Even while having more than one partner, grappling with jealousy isn't predestined. Polyamorous persons try to find joy in knowing their partners may be desired by other people, and if jealousies do arise, work to address feelings in a constructive way.
- Relationships require long-term emotional investment.

As you mentioned, finding true connection with one person, let alone more than one, may seem daunting. As you first begin to explore polyamory, having open, honest dialogue with your current partner about taking this step is key. Monogamous relationships may have certain scripts and expectations that come along with them, but polyamory is relatively uncharted territory — your idea of a polyamorous relationship might be completely different from someone else's! You may consider asking yourself, what, in particular, is drawing you towards a polyamorous relationship structure (sexual satisfaction, need for emotional connection, other concerns) and then ask the same of your partner(s). Being clear about what you need and desire could help you determine whether polyamory is a suitable option for you, and if it is, could help guide your discussions with others. How do you see your current partner fitting into this newfound polyamorous paradigm? In the case that you and your partner are on the same page around opening up the relationship, there are some other questions to consider. Would you like to maintain a primary partnership with each other, and engage in casual dating outside of it? Are you comfortable with dating someone together or would you prefer dating separately? What boundaries do you each have? What triggers jealousy for you and for your partner, and how could you address jealousy together when it arises? What safer sex strategies might you agree upon, if you choose to have sexual relationships outside of your current partnership? Are you both comfortable being open regarding living a polyamorous lifestyle, or do you want to keep it private? Would you ever want to cohabitate or coparent with more than two people? Establishing some ground rules beforehand could help avoid unintended hurt or betrayal as you explore polyamory.

Finding a community of like-minded lovers may help flush out these budding ideas and explore your interests. You could try looking for local polyamorous meetups in your city to meet other potential partners and open-minded friends. Dating apps and websites could also be a way to build community — there are a number of dating websites specifically designed for polyamorous
relationships, but you could also use general dating apps, including an honest section in your profile that states what you’re seeking for in a relationship.

Staying in close touch with your true desires may lead to more avenues of romantic possibility, now and in the future. With an open attitude and a respect for honesty and communication, the more may very well make the merrier.

Alice!
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