Dear Alice,

Is extramarital sex always wrong?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sex that occurs outside of a relationship or marriage (referred to as extradydactic sex or extramarital sex if you’re married) isn't inherently "right" or "wrong". For some couples, sex outside of a primary relationship can be damaging to the partnership. For others, being non-monogamous might not only be invited, but may be beneficial to the relationship. Either way, when it comes to being non-monogamous, the answer to this question really boils down to how you and your partner feel about sex outside of your relationship or marriage, given your and your partner's personal beliefs and the dynamics of your relationship.

To begin, it's good to make a couple distinctions about sex that occurs outside of a primary relationship. There are really two types of non-monogamy:

- **Consensual non-monogamy** is a practice in which both partners are on-board with having sexual partners and/or relationships outside of a primary relationship. Some examples include:
  - Polyamory [2]: an individual chooses to have multiple consenting romantic relationships at once
  - Open relationships [3]: both partners decide to permit and tolerate romantic and sexual relationships with other people while still remaining committed to each other
  - Swinging [4]: both partners explore sexual relations with others, often by inviting outsiders to participate in their sexual activities together, such as in a ménage à trois [5]
- **Infidelity** [6] or cheating occurs when one partner is having sexual partners or relationships without her/his primary partner knowing or consenting.

The distinction between consensual non-monogamy and infidelity is key: while the dishonesty that comes with infidelity could put a relationship in jeopardy, research shows that consensual non-monogamy (called CNM) might actually be beneficial for some relationships.

Why might some people think sex outside of a primary relationship is wrong? Some societies may stigmatize non-monogamous relationships. Monogamy tends to be placed on a
pedestal, whereas CNM is seen as a flawed romantic arrangement. What people believe about non-monogamy may be different than what those who practice CNM might report. Surveys show that many people believe CNM means less sexual satisfaction, a greater risk for sexually transmitted infections, and that having multiple relationships means they are of poor quality (despite the research that says CNM individuals are quite satisfied). However, those who partake in CNM, about 4 to 5 percent of people, often report high levels of trust, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction. Additionally, those who practice CNM actually report more frequent condom use than those who report cheating on their partner. As you can see, a non-monogamous lifestyle works well for some, provided that all partners are in agreement about the arrangement.

If you are thinking about entering into a CNM arrangement, you might want to ask yourself a few questions: are partner(s) outside of the primary relationship aware of the non-monogamous arrangement? Are certain conflict management styles or ways of approaching relationship turmoil better suited for CNM than others? What might be the time commitment involved in juggling multiple relationships, and is it a feasible lifestyle? What are the boundaries of the relationship(s) and each party’s expectations of one another? Are you comfortable sharing your CNM lifestyle with your family and friends or would you rather it remain private? Consider your answers to these inquiries before proceeding.

All this to say, dear reader, open and honest communication between partners is often the bedrock of healthy relationships. Having a discussion with your partner about what you’re both comfortable with when it comes to sex (in and outside of your relationship) might help you both learn more about each other’s wants and desires. Whatever you decide together will likely be the best one for your relationship. If you and your partner give each other the green light to see others, it’s good to note that CNM relationships certainly aren’t doomed if it’s working for everyone involved? they have the potential to make for very happy and satisfied lovebirds.

Best of luck in charting out your relationship roadmap!

Alice!

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