

So You Want to Help the World Accept Polyamory?

The primary roadblock to the acceptance of polyamory (or any non-monogamy) is mainstream misconceptions about us. One of the most important things you can do is simply talk to people about your life. Doing outreach feels incredibly rewarding – every time you walk out of a room having done some education, you have helped people.

Coming Out and Talking to Friends

Coming out has been the prime mover of mainstream acceptance of queer people. Coming out humanizes a sexual minority and is the best way to dispel the host of bad mainstream stereotypes. Coming out and talking to friends makes your non-monogamous practice real and positive in a way that nothing else can.

At the same time, only come out if you will not be materially damaged in some way by doing so, and if it has not yet become exhausting. Financial fears are why most poly people are still not out to their coworkers. Many people lose the support of their relatives, their jobs, or their housing situation after coming out, or are punished in divorce or custody court. There is no shame in keeping yourself safe.

When talking to people, stay cool! They will pick up on your emotions – if you are scared and freaked out, they will become scared and freaked out too. The best vibe you can give off is a calm “poly is this somewhat alternative thing I do which has brought me happiness”. Some people favor bringing up things naturally as they come up in conversation in order to help this nonchalant approach.

Be prepared for defensiveness. Most people have never really thought about their monogamy critically, and the possibility that there are other options will be instantly threatening to them. So when they immediately warn you off their spouse, or shut down, or say something vicious, let it go. And of course, do not play on these insecurities by bashing monogamy. Monogamy might be terrible for you, but it is probably a good practice for them.

Overall, give these discussions some time. Informative or coming out talks seem to go best when there are plenty of breaks so people can assimilate the new information, breaks that can stretch out to months. Be patient – often people will react badly at first and will have come around by the next time you talk to them.

Keep your boundaries! You do not need to discuss your bedroom habits or STD status with your friends, family, or co-workers. Figure out your topic limits in advance and stick to them during discussions. Also, do not tolerate hatred or abusive language.

Indeed, most people close to you will not want to hear details of any sort immediately. You may be eager to talk about everything, but hold off on even the mildly advanced poly stuff (like lingo) until they have established a base comfort level. Keep it as simple as possible at first.

Students, Classes, and Workshops

College students are a great population to talk to about non-monogamy, either during a class or at a special workshop sponsored by a sexuality center or similar at the university. Students are generally curious, respectful, and eager to learn, though at the same time they are often befuddled by polyamory. Not only is every student you talk to going to carry that knowledge through the rest of their lives, it is also possible to change a college's overall attitude towards polyamory by talking for just one class per term.

At the same time, it can be very difficult to find receptive venues at colleges. Often sexuality or counseling classes are interested in having sexual minority speakers. Offering to do a class for free helps. While it is probably possible to cold-email professors and get lucky occasionally, your best bet is to get in contact with professors via personal contacts or students in their classes. If you have any teaching or presenting credentials or experience, do not be shy about saying so. Sexuality, gender, and counseling on-campus centers are also a great way to get started – often they are delighted to have presenters on non-monogamy.

Colleges are not the only place to teach classes, of course. Local sex-positive sex toy stores, LGBT centers, BDSM venues, and the like are often eager to have presenters speak on non-monogamy skills. These are generally beginner workshops, and the attendees are usually entirely new to non-monogamy. They are looking for skills and a general validation that what they want is possible. Speaking at these venues is a great way to help out new folks, and eventually makes a small amount of money.

If the audience is in a class, they are probably completely cold to the concept of non-monogamy. Keep it simple and focus on giving out basic definitions and debunking myths. There is no need to hide the issues attendant in non-monogamy (such as jealousy or scheduling), and they should be mentioned. At the same time, students who are feeling defensive will focus on the negative, so difficulties should probably take up less than half the presentation time. It is not a good idea to blatantly recruit or try to teach poly skills to a captive class audience.

If you are teaching a workshop where people do not have any motivation to come to it other than interest, then that is a different matter. Whether at a college or when doing a non-monogamy skills workshop at a local center, the people walking in the door will already have an investment in non-monogamy, and it makes sense to take an advocate role when speaking to them. You will be there to both share your skills and provide them with working examples of non-monogamy in action – you!

When doing any class, it is important to remember that the people in the audience will certainly have much less experience than you. While it is important to cultivate good presenting skills, at the same time you should remember that anything you say will probably be news to them. Living non-monogamously we learn a lot of stuff that we then take for granted – try to reset your perspective to that of the monogamous world and verbalize things that are second nature to you.

As living examples in all these cases, it is important to think about diversity when presenting in order to accurately represent non-monogamous communities. Try to avoid putting only one man with multiple women on stage – people will then assume your polyamory is pretty much traditional polygamy. If possible, showcase queer folks or a woman with multiple male partners. If you can, get people of color or people with disabilities to present. Try to represent more than one type of non-monogamy. This can all be difficult as the base strategy is usually to present with one's partners, but if you add another non-monogamous grouping to your presenter group, that gives you a lot of flexibility.

Blogging, Podcasting, and Other Internet Publishing

If you want to reach a large number of people while still retaining control over your own voice, internet publishing of various forms is the way to go. Blogging, podcasting, video blogging, and the like can be very time-consuming but it is generally worth it due to their wide reach. It is common for even medium-level blogs to get hundreds of hits per day, and an established podcast will see individual episodes downloaded a number of times in the tens of thousands.

That said it is important to come up with a compelling vision before you even get started. Some internet mediums have very little non-monogamous content, such as podcasting – you can count the number of polyamory-focused podcasts on one hand. But in other forms of internet media with a lower entrance cost you will see a lot of competition, for example blogging or Tumblr. Think about what might differentiate content you produce. What are you especially good at? What interesting situations or information do you have experience in? Also, if you do not have a lot of writing or speaking experience there is no shame in lessons, though the nice thing about internet work is that you can just start and learn as you go.

Similarly, think about audience. Who are you reaching? Monogamous folks, polyamorous people, swingers, all of the above? Decide on who you want to talk to and do not be shy about narrowing it down – often niche publishing venues get a bigger and more active audience than generic ones. Think about how you are going to tailor your content to the people you want to reach.

Many forms of internet publishing require some kind of technical know-how. If you are using one of these, do not re-invent the wheel. Instead, see if you can research what others do or even drop a line to some of your favorite sex-positive internet content producers to ask them what they do – you may find that they are surprisingly responsive and helpful. When setting up, be ready for surprise success. For example, if you think you may someday want to post ads it may make sense to spend the time upfront

to set up your own hosted system rather than using free hosting like that found on Wordpress or Tumblr, as they do not allow ads.

Consider what level of interactivity you want, and how much time you may spend dealing with any interaction channels. With good content it is possible to have an entirely interaction-free publishing channel and still have plenty of viewers or readers. Still, some level of interaction helps your audience feel connected and involved, and gives them an obvious way to give you feedback. At the very least it is important to have an email address posted that people may contact you at. Full-on forums or a lively comment section can be incredibly rewarding for you and useful to your audience but at the same time moderating them can easily turn into a part-time job. Do not be shy about moderating the space to fit your desires – unmoderated spaces on the net generally turn into poisonous troll pits fairly quickly.

Do not forget to advertise! Simply posting your podcast or starting your YouTube channel is generally not enough to get people to start noticing it. While it can be smart to pay for advertising in very targeted venues, generally you can acquire an initial audience by using various internet channels. Tweet your content, post it to Facebook groups, and so on. If you can, try to advertise in the media you are using. So if you are starting a podcast, talk about it on other podcasts. Do not get discouraged early on when things do not seem to be picking up – it often takes time. On the other hand, if what you are doing does not seem to be working after a while, do not hesitate to change tactics, radically if necessary.

Engaging With the Media

Being interviewed by the media (mainstream or independent) is the easiest way to reach a large number of people with a low time commitment, but at the same time you lose some amount of control over the content that is produced. On the other hand, every time a show or article about polyamory or some other sort of non-monogamy hits the media, people who have literally never heard of what we do suddenly get a glimpse into our lives. Positive media has a huge impact on public perception and the polyamory movement in particular has done very well in presenting itself in the media, fueling an ongoing explosion in new community members.

You should either be interviewed anonymously or you need to be all the way out of the closet to do this, even for independent media. That edgy independent queer magazine is secretly read by some of your coworkers. The day you decide to be in the local paper will be the day that your metamour's grandfather decides to actually buy the paper. With the level of exposure you may receive (depending on the media venue), you may be stopped on the street or recognized by people a couple years down the road. It is often surprising the connections that are made once one has been featured in media. Be prepared for this.

Also, be prepared for the possibility that it will not go well. No matter what the venue and how positive they seem, sometimes they will turn around and do a hatchet job on you and your chosen non-monogamy. This may have effects not just on the kind of visibility you want to produce but also on your

social connections, family, and so on. Be ready for this, but at the same time remember that the vast majority of all media on polyamory (specifically) turns out positive, so you are taking a good risk.

Along those lines, do not start with national television or something similarly challenging. First, get your feet wet with a local paper, an online media venue, a local television station, or the like. Some media is pretty much guaranteed to be negative – poly activists regularly get requests from places like the Christian Broadcasting Network and the Dr. Phil Show. Chances are these venues are just trying to use you to prove a point that you will not like. Avoid them unless you have a whole lot of experience under your belt and are down for a challenge. You may think you can convince Dr. Phil with your winning charm and radical honesty approach, but you are almost certainly wrong.

Both papers and video media have a tendency to selectively quote to fit whatever message the journalist wants to convey. For this reason, keep what you say positive and (if you can) learn to speak in bite-sized chunks that will sound good on their own. Do not bash monogamy – it almost certainly will be quoted out of context. Check out online resources around dealing with the media as a sexual minority, and try to get media training from folks who have some experience. If a question is offensive or is digging for dirt, simply do not answer it or change the subject. This is not a time to give the full and complete positive and negative view of non-monogamy – only the negative will end up printing or showing. The only exception to this is if you are absolutely convinced that the journalists (and their editors!) are on your side.

Be aware that most forms of media, even independent media, make an effort to present “palatable” people to their audiences, which is to say white, thin, straight, conservative-appearing, and so on. This has real effects: if your poly pod is interviewed and it consists of one white person and two people of color, chances are the white person will get most of the airtime or quotes. This does not lead to a positive or accurate portrayal of our communities. Try to work against these tendencies by gaming them – in this case by having the white person much more quiet and withdrawn than usual, or perhaps not even present. The same thing goes for getting visibility for larger people, disabled people, queer people, and so on. Diverse exposure is crucial if we want to convince media audiences that we are something more than a southern California cult filled with bronzed people with perfect hair.

For all the reasons above, and also because of the fear of the level of exposure it brings, people are often loathe to talk to the media, and the media has a very bad reputation at least in polyamory circles. However, the positives have so far generally outweighed the negatives so far, and polyamory in particular has surprisingly positive media coverage. We do much better than swingers, BDSM folks, bisexuals, and polygamists, all of whom are regularly trashed or misrepresented. Due to a complex set of reasons, the media actually treats us with kid gloves overall. There is a steady stream of very positive coverage, and only the occasional negative bombshell, which is usually quickly forgotten. If you want to get involved in media outreach for polyamory, do not hesitate because of the negative issues described here – you will almost certainly have a series of good experiences and reach a large number of people in a positive manner.