

Looking at the many faces of a successful male partnership. #1

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“What do you want your relationship to look like?”

Male couples commonly feel intense pressure to maintain a physical connection which is forever fresh, new and exciting because stereotypes tell us that all men are supposed to be innately virile and passionate. Male couples may imagine that other couples are enjoying all kinds of adventurous play in the bedroom however this is often simply not the case. We also often imagine straight couples are happy and active in their intimate lives. Few men who love men have a healthy understanding of the intimate lives of their parents, who are commonly our main model for a heterosexual couple. In my psychotherapy practice I hear many male couples in long-term relationships complain that they haven't been physically intimate with each other for long periods of time — sometimes years. They tell me that they've agreed to have lovers outside their relationship, or they are only intimate with each other when it involves a third man. These partners question if they are really right for each other when it is a struggle to keep passion alive between just the two of them.

Many factors can affect a male couple's sexual desire and compatibility over the course of a healthy, loving relationship. A few are:

- Decrease in libido due to natural body changes that come with aging.
- Change in biochemical and emotional response to one's partner over the natural course of a relationship.
- Natural desire for new partners and experiences.

Some of the couples I counsel explain that while their emotional commitments to each other are solid, they long to fulfill a sexual need that lies outside the desires or even capabilities of their primary partner. This tension brings the couple to counseling to explore the issues and identify some options to resolve their dilemma. Other couples come to me because the relationship has been harmed by one or both of them "cheating", breaking their agreement to be monogamous, and they seek help understanding why outside sex was desired. Sometimes "cheating" can be about power dynamics or unresolved emotional conflicts between the partners. In many situations, however, it is simply the result of a natural male desire for sexual variety after the initial excitement that characterizes early relationships predictably wanes.

What should these couples do? The model of heterosexual monogamous marriage is sanctioned by society, religion, and the law as the only acceptable type of sexual relationship. As a result most people, gay couples included, have not been exposed to other types of healthy relationships. We are heavily socialized to believe in the ideals of monogamy and marriage. Just remember that the vast majority of gay men come from a home built upon the ideal of monogamous heterosexual marriage. There are, however, many models for a fulfilling and stable romantic partnership.

Many couples experiencing sexual issues choose to re-examine their commitment to monogamy. This process can strengthen and maintain their commitment to one another while exploring ways to fulfill each individual's sexual needs. A couple may decide that monogamy feels best to them and focus on reviving passion between the two of them. Some partners may choose to transition into a "polyamorous" or "open" relationship. The most important thing in this process is to be honest with one another and one's self, and to remember that your relationship is your own and can take whatever form suits both partners best.

What do you want your relationship to look like? What are your needs as individuals? How can both of you get your needs met in a way that respects your love for one another? In my next article I will share tools and ideas for exploring these questions and creating a new model for your relationship that works for you both.