



Chapter Six:

Break-ups where polyamory plays some part, but is not the primary cause

In about half of all poly break-ups, polyamory was either part of the cause or the main cause. There is an unfortunate tendency to blame the non-monogamous nature of polyamory whenever a poly relationship ends. Polyamory can be a convenient scapegoat, even when some other incompatibility or problem was actually much more influential in ending the relationship.

Let's play "High Stakes Poly Dominoes!"

Dr. Julie Fennell is a sociologist, writer, and polyamorist (check out her great website, www.slutphd.com). She defines high stakes poly dominoes as: "Any dynamic in which the demise of one relationship leads (or is likely to lead) to the demise of other relationships. The epic sweep of poly dominoes across both serious and casual relationships can sometimes be breathtakingly awful." She explains, "It's the opposite of "polytastic" arrangements, in which multiple relationships support, strengthen, and help sustain one another."

Dr. Slut has observed that the one situation most likely to cause this cavalcade of disaster is a primary triad where each person in the triad is romantically involved with the other two. Either one duo in the triad falls apart, taking the other two relationships and the whole triad down with it, or one duo is much stronger than the other two relationships, and that couple splits off and abandons the third partner completely.

Another common scenario is one person who has two partners who really dislike each other, and one or both of them inadvertently (or deliberately) sabotages the other relationship, creating so much conflict that eventually both relationships will collapse.

A third scenario is an unstable primary relationship. While even an okay primary relationship can usually survive the end of other secondary relationships, it is often much harder for secondary relationships to survive the demise of one partner's primary relationship. Dr. Slut explains that this is "because the emotional, financial, personal, etc. upheaval of a primary relationship's dissolution often makes a person incapable of being in a healthy relationship with anyone. So much of the secondary relationship becomes about comforting the partner who has lost their primary that there is little time/energy left to focus on the relationship itself."

Another common problem is what she calls "polyunsaturation. This is the opposite of "polysaturation," which she defines as someone has as many relationships as they can reliably sustain. "Polyunsaturation" happens when a person is experiencing scarcity because they don't have ENOUGH partners. In the context of poly dominoes, polyunsaturation usually results from both people in a relationship having relatively recently broken up with someone. Suddenly alone together without outside relationships, they start to demand more from that one relationship than it can provide, causing its demise.

When polyamory is compounded by other factors

Sometimes other problems will aggravate tensions and dissatisfactions related to polyamory, and that can make it difficult to tease apart the real reasons someone decides to leave a relationship. Often, someone is already unhappy about their partner having other lovers, and an additional problem pushes the "cost-benefit ratio" into the negative column. One common scenario is a relationship where one person already feels they are not getting enough romantic attention because of their partner's other relationship(s), and then another problem creates even more of a scarcity.

For instance, Frances was already frustrated that her husband Joe was spending a few nights a week with his other partner Omar, and she felt neglected and lonely. Then the software company he worked for was behind schedule for releasing a new product and suddenly he was working 60 hours a week. Joe refused to stop seeing his boyfriend during the company's two months of "crunch time." After another month of Joe working seven days a week, Frances finally moved out because she felt ignored and alone.

When pre-existing conditions are compounded by polyamory

Conversely, sometimes one partner already feels dissatisfied and mistreated for other reasons, such as sexual incompatibilities or money problems, or simply growing apart, but for the most part, they have been willing to cope with these problems for years. However, when their spouse decides to take a lover, that creates a crisis and the relationship implodes.

The most common example is a relationship where one person has started to lose interest, or feels disappointed or dissatisfied with their partner, and suggests "opening up the relationship" in the hopes that this will improve things. Unfortunately, sometimes this is code for "I have fallen out of love with you, but I am hoping that having an additional relationship will make this relationship more tolerable," or "I'm bored with you, but I am not ready to break up with you until I have a replacement lined up." Unfortunately, they often don't even realize that this is their agenda until much later. In most cases, they simply don't realize-until they start an outside relationship-that the existing relationship is fundamentally unsatisfying in some important way.