

Consensual Non-monogamy Fact Sheet

The purpose of this resource is to provide a comprehensive, sourced introduction to consensual non-monogamy and related topics. This guide is intended for journalists, content creators, advocates, and anyone interested in learning more about non-monogamy! Sources are provided whenever possible. This guide focuses on non-monogamy as an overall topic and does not provide any personal or relationship advice. This resource is organized into the following sections (click to jump):

- [Consensual non-monogamy 101](#)
- [Myths & misconceptions](#)

This document was created by [OPEN \(Organization for Polyamory and Ethical Non-monogamy\)](#) in collaboration with [Chosen Family Law Center](#) & [Polyamory Legal Advocacy Coalition](#). We'd also like to thank the many researchers whose work we cite.

Comments? Contributions? Feedback? Write us at info@open-love.org

Consensual Non-monogamy 101

- **What is consensual non-monogamy?**

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) describes a range of relationship styles and structures that involve multiple intimate, romantic or sexual partners, with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved. CNM is an umbrella term that encompasses practices including polyamory, open relationships, swinging (also known as the “lifestyle”), and more. People use the terms “consensual non-monogamy” (CNM) and “ethical non-monogamy” (ENM) interchangeably, or sometimes just “non-monogamy” (after all, there are already words for **non-consensual** non-monogamy, such as “cheating” and “infidelity”).

- **What does consensual non-monogamy look like in practice?**

Because consensual non-monogamy encompasses a range of relationship styles, it can look like a lot of different things in practice! It might look like a polyamorous triad of three individuals dating one another, but no one else. It might look like a married, heterosexual couple who vacation at a swingers resort where they mingle with other couples in the “lifestyle.” It might look like four or more adults all dating one another and raising kids together. There are even “mono-poly” pairings, where one partner is monogamous and the other partner is polyamorous and consensually has other partners. Despite this variety, many non-monogamous individuals have a common set of experiences and interests that we seek to address throughout this document.

- **How prevalent is consensual non-monogamy?**

Multiple surveys and studies evidence that around **5% of American adults**, or about 10 million people, currently practice consensual non-monogamy.

A series of academic studies ([2014](#), [2017](#)) found that 4-5% of American adults *currently* practice some form of ethical non-monogamy and one in five adults in North America will engage in ethical non-monogamy at some point in their lives .

In a more recent survey, one-third of American adults describe their ideal relationship as *something other than complete monogamy*, and 6% of respondents said that their *current relationship is completely non-monogamous* ([2023](#)).

- **Who practices non-monogamy?**

Non-monogamy is practiced by people from all walks of life. The proportion of people who have engaged in consensual non-monogamy at some point in their life was *not* found to vary significantly across age, education level, income, religion, region, political affiliation, and race. Non-monogamy is more common among people who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. ([2016](#)), and is also more common among Millennials and Gen Z compared to Baby Boomers and Gen X.

- **Why do people choose non-monogamy?**

People prefer non-monogamy for a range of reasons. When researchers asked non-monogamous individuals to list the benefits of their relationship type, the top responses were as follows (in order of frequency mentioned) ([2017](#))([2021](#)):

- Access to a large social network of friends and family
 - Desire for honesty and lack of deception
 - Having more people to meet one's needs, resulting in having more of one's needs met
 - More non-sexual activities and variety in one's life
 - Personal autonomy and freedom
 - More access to emotional support
 - Open and honest communication
- Additionally, some people choose non-monogamy due to their preferences around sex and intimacy. Examples include:
 - A relationship in which one or more partner is bisexual or pansexual and desires sex and intimacy with partner(s) of multiple genders
 - A relationship where only one partner is asexual (does not experience sexual desire or attraction)
 - A relationship in which partners have different sexual needs and desires, such as widely differing "sex drives" or kink preferences
 - **Do non-monogamous individuals face discrimination?**

Almost two-thirds of non-monogamous adults reported experiencing some form of discrimination based on their non-monogamous identity or relationship style/structure ([2020](#)). Examples include family rejection, difficulty accessing supportive mental health care, housing discrimination, and workplace discrimination. Additionally, non-monogamous partnerships are denied access to a range of benefits that married spouses receive related to inheritance, immigration, parental rights, taxation, and more.

"Relationship structure" is **not** a protected category, meaning that it is legal to discriminate against people based on the non-monogamous identity and/or relationship style/structure in housing, employment, and even custody disputes.

Non-monogamous individuals also face social and cultural stigma. In a 2023 survey of American adults, a majority said that polyamory is "morally wrong" ([2023](#)). Compared to monogamous relationships, consensually non-monogamous relationships are *perceived* as being low in relationship quality, less committed, less moral, and harmful to children ([2013](#), [2016](#), [2018](#)), but research and people's lived experiences do not substantiate these stigmas!

The pervasive societal stigma and discrimination consensually non-monogamous individuals face harm their mental health and relationships. For many, the

additional stigma and discrimination experienced by the CNM community are internalized, leading to increased psychological distress (e.g., increased depression and anxiety) and worse relationship outcomes ([2021](#); [2021](#)).

- **Is non-monogamy becoming more popular?**

Yes! The last few years has seen a surge in interest in non-monogamy.

A ten-year study found a “**significant increase**” in search terms related to polyamory and open relationships between 2006-2015 ([source](#)).

Between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of American adults who described their ideal relationship as “completely monogamous” dropped from 61 to 55 percent, with even sharper drops among younger generations. During the same period, the percentage of adults who described their ideal relationship as “completely non-monogamous” rose from seven to eight percent ([2016](#), [2023](#)).

- **Is non-monogamy a new phenomenon?**

Monogamy as the default mode of relationships is often seen as a universal and timeless practice, but in fact, it is a relatively modern construction. Throughout history, non-monogamy has been practiced in many different cultures and contexts; for example, many indigenous cultures in the Americas, Africa, and Asia traditionally practiced various forms of non-monogamy. It was only with the rise of Christianity and the subsequent influence of Victorian morality that monogamy became the dominant form of relationship in Western society, with legal and cultural norms enforcing its primacy.

- **Is non-monogamy a sexual orientation? Is it a choice, or an immutable identity?**

It’s complicated. While there is an argument to be made for viewing certain non-monogamous identities as a sexual orientation in a legal context ([2010](#)), non-monogamy is not generally considered a sexual orientation as traditionally defined ([2016](#)). While some people identify as “queer” based on their non-monogamous identity, non-monogamy is not considered part of the traditional LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

Some non-monogamous people feel that non-monogamy is an important, intrinsic part of their identity; others feel it is a lifestyle choice or personal practice. Whether or not non-monogamy is an innate and immutability characteristic, this

is not a prerequisite for protection from discrimination. For example, religion and marital status are protected classes and are not strictly immutable.

As Yale Law Professor Jessica Clarke writes: “Many courts now ask, ‘not whether a characteristic is strictly unchangeable, but whether the characteristic is a core trait or condition that one cannot or should not be required to abandon’ (2015). Or, as another judge put it, “‘immutability’ may describe those traits that are so central to a person’s identity that it would be abhorrent for government to penalize a person for refusing to change them, regardless of how easy that change might be physically.” (2021). This principle clearly applies to the CNM community as the available research demonstrates that many perceive CNM as a central aspect of their identity.

- **Where does polygamy fit into all this?**

Polygamy means marriage among multiple spouses. Polygamy is illegal in all US states and territories and in most countries around the world. In the US, three cities allow for plural domestic partnerships (Somerville, Cambridge, and Arlington in the state of Massachusetts). Notably, polygamy and polyamory are often conflated but they are distinct concepts. Polygamy has a historical connection to religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, and traditional heterosexual marriage, while polyamory originated from queer and feminist ideologies and is not necessarily linked to marriage.

Myths & Misconceptions

- **Myth: Consensual non-monogamy is just about sex.**

Non-monogamous relationships encompass many forms of connections, including romantic, emotional, physical, and beyond. While sex and intimacy are often (though not always!) a feature of romantic relationships, it is not usually the main motivator for non-monogamy. When researchers asked people in non-monogamous relationships about the benefits of their relationship style, “sexual variety” ranked all the way down at #8, below “honesty,” “personal autonomy,” and “wider range of friends and family” (2017).

- **Myth: Non-monogamous people are promiscuous and can’t commit to one person.**

Fact: Non-monogamous people are capable of committing to one or more partners, just like monogamous people. Relationship health, including the ability to commit is not determined by the relationship structure. People engaged in non-monogamy and monogamy report equal levels of relationship satisfaction, trust, commitment, and psychological health ([2017](#); [2015](#)). Non-monogamous relationships require just as much communication, trust, and commitment as monogamous relationships, if not more. Being non-monogamous does not mean that one is always seeking new partners or that they are unable to sustain long-term relationships.

- **Myth: “Non-monogamy” is just an excuse for cheating.**

It’s only “consensual non-monogamy” if it’s consensual! This means that all parties to the relationship or dynamic give their fully-informed consent, free from pressure, manipulation, or intimidation. This applies to all relationship styles under the umbrella of consensual non-monogamy, from polyamory to the swinger lifestyle.

This is not to say that it is not possible to cheat *within* a consensually non-monogamous relationship by violating the mutual agreements of that relationship.

- **Myth: Non-monogamy is something that privileged people do.**

Reality: Non-monogamy is practiced by people from all walks of life. Regardless of age, education level, income, religion, region, political affiliation, or race, the percentage of people who have participated in consensual non-monogamy at some point in their life has not shown significant variability ([2017](#)).

That said, because non-monogamous individuals face stigma and discrimination, it may be that people with privileged identities can be open about their non-monogamous identity leading to more visibility. For example, it’s easier to be publicly polyamorous if you own your own company, compared to if you’re an at-will employee worried about losing their job.

- **Myth: Non-monogamous people are trying to abolish monogamy or push their values on the rest of us.**

Non-monogamous people are not out to “abolish” monogamy. We don’t believe that non-monogamy is better than monogamy, or that everyone should be non-monogamous. Rather, we do challenge the assumption that

monogamous relationships are the ideal, and that monogamous romantic relationships should take priority over other forms of relationships. While everyone has the right to choose monogamy, they should also have the right to choose non-monogamy!

- **Myth: Non-monogamy means anything goes!**

Many non-monogamous relationships often involve more communication, negotiation, and explicit boundaries than traditional monogamous relationships. Consent, honesty, and communication are key tenets of non-monogamous relationships. Just like in any relationship, there are rules and boundaries that partners agree on together. Non-monogamy does not mean that partners are free to do whatever they want without regard for their partner's feelings or safety.

- **Myth: Parents practicing non-monogamy is harmful to kids.**

The myth that a parent or parents' non-monogamy harms kids is not supported by research. In fact, studies have shown that children raised in consensually non-monogamous families fare no better or worse than children in monogamous families. Children in non-monogamous families can have secure attachments to multiple caregivers, just as children in monogamous families can have secure attachments to two parents, or more than two parents in a blended family (i.e. families with parents and stepparents). Furthermore, children raised in non-monogamous families can benefit from having a broader support network of caregivers and a more diverse range of role models. It's important to recognize that the stability and quality of care, not the number of adult caregivers or family structure, is what matters most for a child's well-being.