



Polyamory Exploration & Relationship Clarity

This exercise helps partners understand their boundaries, needs, and attachment styles while exploring or maintaining consensual non-monogamy. Take your time—these questions are meant to spark honest reflection, not perfection.

1. Hard vs. Soft Boundaries

Hard lines are non-negotiables that protect your emotional safety. Soft lines are limits that may expand or shift with time and trust.¹

→ List your hard and soft boundaries. Talk through what each one protects or allows.

2. Shared and Separate Needs

Picture a Venn diagram of your relationship.

→ Where do your desires, values, or comfort levels overlap?

→ Where do they differ? Naming this helps reduce confusion and clarify expectations.²

3. The "Why" Behind Boundaries

Every boundary is driven by something underneath—a feeling, fear, or longing.

→ Why is each hard or soft line important?

→ What does it help you feel (safe, valued, in control, connected)?³

4. Meaning of Sex and Romance

Sex and romance serve different purposes for different people—stress relief, affirmation, creativity, intimacy, etc.

→ What roles do sex and romance play in your life and relationship?

→ Which of those roles do you want to protect, and which could you open up to others?⁴

5. Imagining Scenarios

Exposure work means mentally walking through possible situations (like your partner on a date) and noticing your reactions.⁵

→ As you imagine that scene, what do you feel—jealousy, calm, curiosity, fear?

→ Where do you feel it in your body?

→ What would help you soothe or share that feeling?

¹ Barker, M., & Langdridge, D. (2010). *Understanding non-monogamies*. Routledge.

² Conley, T. D., et al. (2017). "A critical examination of popular assumptions about the benefits and outcomes of monogamous relationships." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 21(1), 5-27.

³ Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1992). *Boundaries: When to say yes, how to say no to take control of your life*. Zondervan.

⁴ Meston, C. M., & Buss, D. M. (2007). "Why humans have sex." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 36(4), 477-507.

⁵ Foa, E. B., & McLean, C. P. (2016). "The efficacy of exposure therapy for anxiety-related disorders and its underlying mechanisms." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 12, 1-28.

6. Attachment Styles

Attachment theory describes how we seek safety and closeness: secure, anxious, avoidant, or fearful-avoidant.⁶

- How does each of you tend to connect or pull away when stressed?
- How might these styles affect how you open your relationship?

7. Breaking the Activation Cycle

When attachment fear gets triggered ("you'll leave me," "I'm too much"), your body goes into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.⁷

- What helps you regulate and return to calm?
- How can your partner support that without trying to "fix" it?

8. Looking Back at Past Openings

If you've opened your relationship before, the past holds clues.

- What helped things feel safe or exciting?
- What caused pain or distance?
- What do you want to do differently this time? ⁸

9. Double Standards

Power imbalances sometimes sneak in as double standards.

- Have there been rules or privileges that felt unequal?
- What made them feel unfair, and how could they be rebalanced? ⁹

10. Relationship Maintenance

Even in open structures, your primary bond needs consistent care.

- What rituals or habits help you feel connected before and after dating others (date nights, morning check-ins, aftercare conversations)? ¹⁰

⁶ Bowlby, J. (1988). A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory. Routledge; Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). "Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511-524.

⁷ Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton & Company; Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From surviving to thriving*. CreateSpace.

⁸ White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. W. W. Norton & Company.

⁹ Sheff, E. (2014). *The polyamorists next door: Inside multiple-partner relationships and families*. Rowman & Littlefield.

¹⁰ Stafford, L., & Canary, D. J. (1991). "Maintenance strategies and romantic relationship type, gender and relational characteristics." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8(2), 217-242.

11. Information Sharing & Boundaries

Not everyone wants the same amount of detail about other partners.

- How much do you want to know?
- What kinds of information feel supportive vs. intrusive?
- What boundaries keep you from feeling flooded or disconnected? ¹¹

12. Processing Feelings Separately vs. Together

Some emotions belong to your individual work (insecurity, comparison). Others belong to joint repair (betrayal, dishonesty).

- Which feelings do you need to process solo or in therapy?
- Which need open conversation between you? ¹²

13. The HEARTS Model for Connection

This framework by Dr. Martha Kauppi highlights five habits that sustain closeness. Use it as a weekly check-in:¹³

H – Here: Am I fully present when I'm with my partner?

E – Expressed Delight: Do I show that I enjoy them, not just tolerate them?

A – Attunement: Am I tuned in to their emotions and energy?

R – Rituals & Routines: Do we have regular touch points that ground us?

T – Turning Toward after Conflict: Do we repair quickly and gently when things go wrong?

- Reflect on where each of these is strong or needs attention.
- Choose one HEARTS element to practice intentionally this week.

14. Gottman Principles in Open Relationships

Based on the research of Drs. John & Julie Gottman, these principles help couples build trust and manage conflict. You can apply them in any relationship structure.¹⁴

Bids for Connection: Notice small invitations for attention or affection—and respond.

Soft Startups: Bring up hard topics gently, without blame.

Repair Attempts: Use humor, affection, or a pause to de-escalate tension.

Turning Toward: Choose to engage rather than withdraw during stress.

Trust & Commitment: Keep agreements and talk openly about mistakes.

- Which of these come easily to you?
- Which ones could strengthen how you communicate during and after opening your relationship?

¹¹ Matsick, J. L., et al. (2014). "The desire for less frequent sex in non-monogamous relationships." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(7), 962-976.

¹² Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Jason Aronson; Schnarch, D. (1997). *Passionate marriage*. W. W. Norton & Company.

¹³ Kauppi, M. (2020). *Relationship practices based on attachment science and neurobiology*.

¹⁴ Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (2015). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. Harmony Books; Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically based marital therapy*. W. W. Norton & Company.