

Martha Kauppi Interview

Okay. Welcome everybody to Sex and Love with me, your host, Dr. Emily Jamea, I am joined today by Martha Kauppi. Did I say your last name correctly? Kauppi. Kauppi, who is a therapist, author, speaker, and educator specializing in complex relational sex therapy, sex issues, and alternative family structures.

She trains therapists all over the world and is the author of the groundbreaking new book "Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists and their Clients." You can follow her across the various social media platforms on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. And I will link all of her contact information and social media handles in the notes description for the show.

So thank you so much for joining me today, Martha. Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to talk to you.

Yeah. So Martha is based in Wisconsin. I'm here in Houston.

We were just discussing how different our weather is right now in the fall, because in Houston we go from summer to winter and it sounds like you are getting into your fall season there in Wisconsin. So I'm glad you get to enjoy that. Yeah.

I love those middle seasons. They're so beautiful. I know.

I know. So Martha, before we dive in, um, I'd like to hear just a little bit about your background and how you got into the field. The field of sex therapy? Yeah.

Let's start there. Okay. Uh, well, this is a third career for me.

So I've been around the block a couple of times. My first career, I was a midwife and, uh, as a midwife, one of the things I did was mentor young midwives and train midwives. So I discovered in that career, not only, I mean, it's a miraculous career to have, and it's kind of a miracle a minute and really, um, an amazing, hard act to follow, but also I really discovered a lot of passion for teaching.

Um, I developed a 600 hour curriculum to train midwives and it was based on role play. It was super creative and really, really fun. Uh, and it was quite a pivot point for me career wise, as I look back now, because now, of course, most of what I do is train therapists to work with sex issues.

Right. You've come full circle. I have.

Yes. And then my second career, I was a glass blower. Oh, wow.

I wasn't expecting you to say that. Um, and you know, I just had been on call as a home birth midwife for 14 years and 350 births, and I was just exhausted. And so I sort of

returned to my first love, which is art and decided now would be a good time to learn to blow glass.

And so for 10 years, I worked as a multimedia artist and I had glass art and galleries across the country. It was very fun and exciting. And then, um, I thought, gee, you know, I would like to do something more depthful again.

And um, so at that point I decided I wanted to be a therapist and I went back to school and got a master's in marriage and family therapy. And then I tied all of that together into the career that I have now. Amazing.

That is such a unique path. I think that, you know, in a way, when I think of the work that we do as therapists and in all of the careers you just described, there is such artistry and all of it because you can have all the training in the book, but every case, every birth, as I'm sure you remember has so many little nuances and you have to think on your feet and be creative. And to me, at least that's one of the things that makes this work so exciting is that there's that creative element.

I always feel like I'm on my toes a little bit. So, um, I think that I can see a common thread, I guess, is what I'm trying to say in all of those career choices. Yeah, that's lovely to hear.

I agree. They're all really creative. They're all think on your feet kind of things.

Being a glass artist is different from being other kinds of art artists because glass is super fussy and you really have to work within its rules. So it's very much a "think on your feet", problem-solving kind of a thing. Oh, I can, I can definitely imagine that.

I went to one demonstration when I was in Seattle and we were at the Chihuly, did I say that right? Chihuly Museum. Chihuly. And, um, yeah, I mean, it was fascinating watching what goes into creating some of these glass works because it is very, I mean, you can't really have like a plan and stick to it as, you know, as I learned through that demonstration.

So do you still dabble in that at all? I don't. I had a hot shop in my basement for more than 10 years and I don't anymore. But I do still do art of various kinds, mostly fiber at this point.

I make most of my own clothes and I paint, I do encaustic. So every now and then I have just an art frenzy and to give myself a break from all the teaching and all the clients. But mostly my creative pursuit right now is figuring out how to develop curriculum so that therapists everywhere can work with sex issues really, really well.

Awesome. Well, we're like not even five minutes in and you're extremely interesting. So thank you so much for sharing all of that.

So you've been working in the field of sex therapy now for how long? Oh, that's a good question. Not as long as you might think because it's a third career for me, but with sort of a higher level of experience than you might think because of that previous career as a midwife, which is essentially a family systems counselor. So yes, I think I don't actually remember what year I graduated, but less than 10 years, close to 10 years as a therapist.

As you say, I'm sure you brought in a wealth of knowledge already from your experience as a midwife. I didn't have a midwife when I had my babies, but I did have a doula. And as much as I thought I knew about what was coming up and all the changes that were going to happen in my relationship, I think the most valuable part of our experience working with her was some of the work we did just as a couple in preparation for, you know, how my partner could be emotionally supportive and what expectations we had for our relationship after the baby came.

And I mean, she really was a marriage therapist, I think for us at the end of the day, we didn't realize that was what we were signing up for, but, you know, we look back and he's like, "Do you still have that handout that Amanda gave us?" And, you know, she had some really great tools. And I know that midwives do a lot of that as well. So, yeah, I can see you were a marriage therapist a long time ago.

Yes, for sure. Except crossed with a lifeguard at the same time. Right.

Therapist, lifeguard, physician, all of it. Yeah. This is much easier.

And now it's really the lifeguard part is mostly gone. So well, you can predict your hours and that's saying something. That was actually one of the things I really looked at when I thought about being a therapist.

I talked to a bunch of therapists and asked them if I was going to have the same kind of hours and boundary issues that I had with being a midwife. And they were like, no, no, you set your own hours. It's going to be fine.

I was like, OK, then I'm going to do it. Yes. Yes.

And my dad practices as an OBGYN. And I mean, he's in his 60s now and I'm like, you have got to stop the OB soon because you're getting too old for these late night calls. But he loves it.

So anyway, so when you entered the field of sex therapy, did you dive right into the specialty of polyamory and consensual non-monogamy? Tell me a little bit about your evolution in that regard. Yeah, I did and I didn't. It wasn't an area that I needed to specialize in.

Like, I didn't come into it thinking this is what I want to do. I came into it more from the

midwifery perspective. I used to practice gynecology and midwifery and I really know a lot about sexual health and function.

And so I was interested in working in that realm. But then I started hearing things about polyamory, like "it can never work in the long run." "It's not really a viable relationship form." "It's just a way to try to have your cake and eat it too," whatever the hell that means. Or all these things that didn't match up with what I saw in the polyamorous relationships that I knew, for instance, my brother's. So I was like, what's this divide between what I see with my own eyes in many open relationships and what I'm being taught in school and what I'm reading in books? And so my research project for my master's degree was about polyamory.

And I discuss it in my book and the findings from it because I wanted to debunk those myths. I wanted to just clear it up. Is it or isn't it viable? Am I just seeing the outliers? Is my brother's relationship just like an unlooked for miracle? Like the exception to the rule? Yeah.

And all of his friends and all those people. And there's a lot of overlap too in the LGBTQIA community and the polyamory community. And I am a lesbian.

So I just have always known people in open relationships up close. And so I just wanted to sort some of that. And so I did that research study.

And then one thing kind of led to another. And once you're in a community and you become known as being competent in a particular area, especially a marginalized group where it's hard to find a therapist, one thing leads to another very quickly. And then as I was training therapists to work with sex issues, it was coming up.

And I was like, oh my God, nobody's gotten any training in this at all. And so I just need to write a book about it because my perspective is so different because I have seen so many actual open relationships at work, which is a really unique position to be in because these are marginalized relationships, many of which are completely closeted. So having an end to that is not something that most therapists have.

So as a result, what they see is people who are struggling in their relationships, because that's what comes into our offices, of course, if that was my measure of whether monogamy could work, I'd be like, heck no. Right. Like I haven't seen a single workable monogamous relationship in my therapy office ever.

No. Right. Our lenses are so foggy as therapists.

That's like what, you know, people come in and they're like, oh, what you do must be so interesting. You get, you know, to hear all about these kinks and fetishes and how excited they are. And I'm like, not as much as you might think, is that people who are coming in to see me are having a hard time with an aspect of their relationship.

And so the people that are out there having a great time, I don't hear about it as much because they're not coming to therapy, unless maybe they just want to work on a different issue that they need a therapist who's, you know, comfortable working with them, given some of their preferences or their identity or whatever. But we don't see, like you were saying, a lot of couples come in who are in fully functional, non-monogamous relationships because they're doing it right. That's right. And then the problem of course, is that if you're a therapist and you don't really get it, that this is actually a workable relationship shape and how you might actually cultivate that, how are you going to help? It's really hard to come out from that spot with anything but a bias that can do damage. So that's how I came to write a book about it.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the study that you mentioned, because you're right, there isn't a ton of research out there. I mean, there are a few other books here and there, but I know a lot of them are written just based on anecdotal experiences and people who kind of know, what did you find in the literature? And what was your study about? Well, my study was literally debunking myths. So a lot of it was demographic.

How long are your relationships? How many relationships? Why did you choose polyamory? That kind of thing. So that I could, oh, and an intimacy measure too. So is there like when you get another partner, does it destroy the intimacy with the previous partner? Are these relationships that have a decent level of intimacy or are they weak, empty relationships? Like we're all told, it's just sex, it's casual, whatever.

So I was looking at all of that stuff and there was nothing about any of that in the literature at the time. And there is now some, there is some duplication. So that's fabulous to see, because when once we have three or four studies that are getting the same binding, it starts to actually generate a body of knowledge.

But there's not still quite enough research about polyamorous relationships for it to be like a really robust field of study in the literature. What were some of your findings? What trends did you notice? Well, the average length of relationships. So I asked people about the length of their relationships and I made a distinction between primary and secondary.

Or if they don't have a primary-secondary structure, pre-existing and then next. Because not everybody has a primary-secondary relationship structure. So I asked about the length of the pre-existing relationship and then the length of the subsequent relationship.

And the average length of primary or pre-existing relationships was over eight. And the largest category was 12 and over. So that just immediately debunked the idea that this can't work over the long run.

And the outlier in that group was 26, I think, years. So a nice, robust, long relationship.

So to clarify, that was the relationship length for the subsequent or secondary relationship was eight to 12 years? Nope.

That's the length for the primary or first relationship. Okay. And I guess what I'm wondering is how long, what was the average that people had been in a relationship before opening up their relationship? I did not ask.

So I can't answer that. Because I was just having cocktails with a friend and we were talking, of course, sex always comes up when you're at cocktails with your girlfriends. And one of them was saying, well, I've been in a relationship for like 12 years now.

And she was just talking about how things are still good, but they're feeling a little monotonous. And so I was wondering if that 12-year mark was something you saw as a time when people begin to explore non-monogamy or not. That's a super interesting question.

Somebody should study it. And I can say what I see in my practice, which is some people know that they're non-monogamous from the get-go. And so they start their relationship as an open relationship.

Some people get interested in it after just a few years because of the communities that they're in. People who are in LGBTQ or kink communities know about polyamory. It's on their radar already.

But if they don't, and then they hear about it and somebody is interested and it resonates with them, then there's like no number of years that goes with that. It's just when did you learn that it was a thing? So they picked up a book or read something or heard a podcast or something like that. And they were like, oh, that's interesting.

I'm going to explore it. And then they bring it up in their relationship. But then I also see a lot of people who are in long-term relationships who then open up, like 25-year long relationships that then open up.

And that's the larger group in my practice, probably between 12 and 30 years. So people have been in a monogamous relationship between 12 and 30 years, and then at some point decide to explore the option of opening up. That's right.

Interesting. And so the original number you cited that about 8 years was how long some people had been in successful non-monogamous relationships. On average.

On average. Interesting. Right.

So there were some short ones and there were some long ones. And then I also asked about the length of the secondary or subsequent relationships. And a lot of those were short.

A lot of them were less than a year, but there were also some long secondary relationships. And the secondary relationships didn't change the level of intimacy in the primary relationships, which was very cool. Yeah.

Yeah. If anything, and I'm sure we'll get there, I can see how it could potentially enhance the intimacy in the primary relationship. Let me ask you, though, to back up just a few steps.

You mentioned that people in the LGBTQ community, they know about polyamory. It's on their radar. Why would you, why do you think that is compared to people who are in heterosexual relationships? Why do you think there's such a difference in awareness, openness, or even comfort with the idea? That's a really interesting question and not one that I've actually thought about very much.

What do I think about that? Well, I think that we're talking about marginalized groups and marginalized groups understand marginalized groups, or you would think they might. Yeah. Speaking only for myself as a lesbian person, there's a way in which being in a same sex, long-term relationship, you kind of have to make up your own relationship rules.

And so there's kind of a like, individual focus. What are your strengths? What are your strengths? We can't just go on gender roles. We're not going to fight about why you don't mow the lawn and why I'm not cooking, right? We're just going to have to take an inventory.

What are you strong at? What do you like? What do you not like so much? How can we divide this up in terms of our strengths? And to me, that's a huge strength of being in a same sex relationship because you're taking an honest look at what's true instead of trying to fit into a mold. And so I think that's where my theory about this is that you're already a relationship pioneer, and you're more likely to be thinking outside of a rule book to start with. If we were inside of a rule book, we'd be in a cis het norm thing.

Right. Right. No, that makes a lot of sense to me too.

And like you said, I know a lot of studies find that people in same sex relationships, people in the kink community tend to have much better communication skills overall than people who are in heterosexual relationships. And so I can imagine there's just kind of innate level of increased level of comfort and talking through some of these difficult issues because it's like, you've already had to talk through difficult issues and navigate some of these, like you were saying, kind of outside the mold relationship structures. And so that makes a lot of sense to me as well.

Well, and when we're talking about kink and polyamory specifically, those are relationship styles that have consent as part of their definition. So people who are in

kinky relationships know how to give and withdraw consent or need to learn very quickly. Yeah.

People who are in polyamorous relationships know how to give and withdraw consent or figure it out pretty quickly. So because it's part of the definition, it's part of what just operating instructions for that kind of relationship. Totally, totally.

So you wrote this book recently released about polyamory, and we're going to talk about that some, but when you and I were emailing ahead of time about what we were going to talk about today, you initially said that you could talk about differentiation and how healthy differentiation can strengthen intimate relationships. So I thought it could be kind of interesting to start with that because I think that's something that applies to all kinds of relationships. So can you begin by just defining what you mean by that? And then talk about how that can be a strength in some intimate relationships? Absolutely.

It's like my favorite topic ever. We'll start with your favorite. Yeah, that's my favorite.

And there's nothing in this book. I mean, here it is right here. There's nothing in this book that doesn't also generalize That's a big book.

Can you hold that up again? Yeah, it's a really big book. Wow. It's a really big book.

If you're listening to this in a podcast format, then go over to my YouTube so you can see, I think we need to like relabel this the polyamory Bible because it's about that size. It is. It's really big.

And that's because like it has 25 worksheets. It's like it's for therapists, but it's also a self-help manual and it's written in a chatty voice. Just like I'm chatting with you.

People are telling me that they get sucked in. They can't put it down. It's like a page turner.

I wrote a page turner textbook. So differentiation is much underappreciated, I think. And it's a really important discussion to have because if you want to have a healthy relationship, if you want to have a healthy sex life, if you want to have an open relationship, you're going to have to at some point figure out these skills.

And so I break them down into three, maybe four, depending on how you define it. So I'll just break them down if that's okay. So the first one is to be able to look inside yourself and take an internal read, figure out just from within yourself, without all the noise from what anybody else might want from you or think or prefer, just within yourself.

What do you think? What do you feel? What do you desire? What do you prefer? What do you believe? Just within yourself, just to figure it out is a step all of its own. The next step is to be able to get grounded enough to say it to somebody else, even if you think it's

going to be hard for them to hear. So that might be, I want to open our relationship, my darling, or it might be I'm interested in exploring some kinky sex, my love, or I don't really prefer when we do this, I would prefer to do that instead.

Any of those things falls into the category, I think of a potentially tough conversation. And you can see how those first two parts really go together. You have to be able to figure out what you actually want and what you actually prefer.

And then you have to say it. Yep. The third one is to get grounded enough to be able to hear somebody else say to you something that is important to them about their experience, their preference, their desire, their feelings, something without completely coming unglued, making it personal or becoming reactive.

Yeah, I think that's such a key step because so many people are like, so ready to put it out there, whatever it is they've been contemplating or thinking about, and they're not at all prepared to hear what their partner's opinion might be about that or what their perspective might be. And I think that's where a lot of conversations go awry because you're like, you've kind of had this one way conversation in your mind, and then you finally open up to your partner, and you're totally unprepared to hear their perspective. And so I'm assuming you have some worksheets in the book on how to prepare.

Yeah. That differentiation and that first step I just want to reiterate to people is so key because I don't think people realize how on autopilot we are, how affected we are by what we think about gender norms or what's taught to us, what's ingrained just in society, what we learned and internalized from our families of origin. And a lot of people haven't spent a ton of time really piecing out what fits for them, what they might need to reject.

And so I can see how that first step may take the longest really for some people. It does. And it's super interesting because we tend to be better in some of these areas than others.

We have all got our unique strengths and challenges. And it can be different in different relationships. So like you can be really pretty strongly differentiated with a close friend, and you can have a real struggle with differentiation with your parents, for instance, right? Or you might have a difficult time being differentiated with your boss, but you might have an easier time, you know, with your partner, or you might be really well differentiated in most areas of your relationship with your partner, but not when it comes to sex.

So I think it's very interesting how the challenges to differentiation just keep coming. It's really a lifelong project. Totally.

And I think people think they're very differentiated. I remember I had one client come in,

I think we had spent one session talking about differentiation and he came back, he said, okay, that's it. I'm differentiated now.

And I was like, oh, honey, it doesn't happen overnight. Because I think we can think we are quote unquote differentiated and then come against a new life experience or situation or relationship hurdle and realize that we need to reevaluate everything. Absolutely.

And, you know, when I'm working as a therapist, and also there are worksheets about this in my book, what I like to do is have people have conversations with their partners. And so have some of those tough conversations before you open your mouth to say what you think, figure out what you think, figure out what you want your partner to understand about your experience, and about your perspective, and then talk about your experience, your perspective, your preference, your feelings, you, you're talking about you, right? And then work really work on that grounding piece, because all of the, you know, the looks that are crossing your partner's face, the eye roll, the, you know, heavy sigh, or the, you know, crossed arms and tapping foot or whatever it is, that stuff will derail you, if you're not really grounded. And just like, it's important to me to share this with you, because I want you to understand this aspect of me, it's important to share this with you, because I want you to understand this aspect of me.

And then when your partner starts talking, again, the grounded part, it's important to me to stay grounded, so I can hear my partner so that I can know them better. It's okay, if we don't agree, I want to understand them. And so you want to come in then with curiosity, and ask a good question.

So how did that get under your skin? Why was that so difficult for you? If I would have done it better, how would I have done it? So that you can understand somebody else's perspective through their eyes, which is why I say this is a three part thing, but sort of four, because get grounded is kind of its own thing. Oh, totally. And I can see how that comes up through all the other steps as well.

It's like staying grounded, practicing that mindfulness, constantly checking with yourself, assessing what your thoughts are, your metacognitions, what your feelings are about your thoughts, all of that. Exactly. Yeah, that's really well put.

That's exactly how it goes. The you do it, the more you need all of it. Definitely.

Definitely. So let's, to clarify for anyone who isn't sure what we're talking about, we are talking about consensual non-monogamy, which means that you have an emotional and/or sexual relationship with another person, aside from, you know, there's more than one person in your life, and that's all out in the open. And I say maybe you have a better definition.

I'm sure you do. But I say that because I'm still surprised, you know, whenever I say anything about consensual non-monogamy or reference it, like on my social media, so many people comment, so you condone cheating. And I'm like, no, no, no, no, no, no.

I never condone cheating. So let's, let me turn it over to you so that you can give your definition of what consensual non-monogamy is. Cause it's really an umbrella term.

There's a lot of ways of going about it. There are all infinite ways of going about it pretty much, but consent is the main ingredient. So whatever kind of consensual non-monogamy you're looking at, the word "consensual" in the name implies and requires that there's been some conversation and at least willingness to explore from everybody involved.

So if somebody is in the hell no camp, it's not consensual and you can't make somebody go from hell no to absolutely yes, through any like super easy process. So a lot of what I write about in my book is material that really has not been tackled in any other book about polyamory that has to do with how do you resolve an impasse like that? What do you do when you want one thing and your partner wants another thing? And gee, consensual non-monogamy is not the only impasse that long-term partners come up against, right? We should have a baby. We shouldn't have a baby.

No, but we should have a baby. No, but we shouldn't have a baby. We should adopt kittens.

No, we shouldn't adopt kittens. We should have our elderly parents move in with us so that they can die here at home with us. Hell no.

We shouldn't, right? So this being in a partnership is signing on for having some significant differences between you and your partner. And this one is no different. It's big.

It's big. Like the parents in their old age one, it's got lots of emotions attached to it. It has big consequences that are going to affect everybody involved, but it's not like in a class of its own in terms of the complexity of the issue.

Yeah. Yeah. And it's something, I mean, I, you know, I do some premarital counseling, you know, in my work as a therapist as well, and it's a topic of conversation I have worked into premarital questionnaires, because I think this day and age, you know, we are living longer.

We expect more of our relationships than ever before. And people cannot be so naive to, you know, say that this will never be a consideration for them. Um, so just as it's important to talk about whether or not you want kids, it's important...

I think as much as possible for the topic of non-monogamy to at least come up so that

let's say down the line, it comes up at some point, maybe it's not the first time it's entered into the conversation, because I think people's feelings about it can evolve with time. For sure. Anytime we're exposed to something for the first time, we're likely to be suspicious of it, I think.

Yeah. But another, I love that you bring it up in premarital counseling because one thing that's really different between most open relationships and most monogamous relationships is how much the partners have talked with one another about agreements like fidelity. What does fidelity mean to you? Yeah.

Yeah. I really think every couple should have some kind of a ghost of an idea of what fidelity means to them and also what fidelity means to their partner or partners. It seems to me like, um, kind of a non-negotiable, like, wouldn't you want to know that? That's sort of right up there with, are you more of a saver or a spender? Right.

It's really important and it's going to kick you in the butt if you don't know the answer, right? Definitely. Because to one person, you have to actually have, you know, genital fluid exchange sex in order for it to be in fidelity. For someone else, all you have to do is fantasize for a split second about an ex or a movie star and you have cheated.

So like there's this vast array of options and it just seems like they're not easy conversations for a lot of people, but they're pretty important conversations. Otherwise you're living by two completely separate sets of rules without checking the playbook with one another and gee, what could go wrong? Yeah, exactly. And I, I come up against that all the time.

Couples come in and they have never talked about it and there is such a feeling of betrayal when one person finds out that their partner masturbates a little bit more than they assumed that they did. I mean, it can be something as, you know, simple as that. And they've never had these conversations about what fidelity means in their relationships.

So yes, I think, you know, at a very basic level, all couples need to talk about that, whether or not they can ever see themselves exploring the option of non-monogamy. It's an important conversation to have. Yeah, I agree.

You mentioned, of course, there are infinite ways of going about this, um, in terms of the various relationship structures that people might have. Can you say that there is one that seems to work better than others for most people? Like if a couple were, you know, just beginning to explore this as an idea, what, what steps would you consider that they take or, or rather what kind of relationship would you encourage them to explore first? I wouldn't, um, again, I have a worksheet about this, of course, but, um, what I would suggest is that they talk to each other about, and do some real deep thinking for themselves about what they want in a relationship. Like what are the important aspects

of an intimate relationship to you? Safety, security, dependability, reliability.

We see each other really frequently. We have a bunch of sexual adventures. That's really, um, a new thing all the time.

Like, what is it? What is it that makes a really fabulously workable relationship for you and for you, right? And have that conversation separate from the conversation of what relationship shape is interesting to you. And then that's my question. What are, what's your fantasy? What's your, what do you imagine living into? And then if, if, um, a couple decides that they want to start exploring opening up, I would always frame it as an experiment.

So what would be a small step in that direction that you could run as a first experiment? Well, maybe I go have flirty coffee with a person within the next cubicle. Um, and if they both agree that that's a great first experiment, run that first experiment debrief, see how it went and figure out what you think. Just like love, I think it's good to grow into it organically rather than to try to stuff yourself into a mold or a definition. Yeah. And I have to say, as I was preparing for today's interview and reading through some of your material, I love the language that you use for all of this and how just reframing this as an experiment as something that's sort of a trial and error, I think can make it feel a lot safer for people.

Absolutely. Nobody wants to be trapped and, um, yeah. And nobody wants to be treated like crap either.

So if you think that you're marching into, or your partner is like marching you into a trap where you're going to be treated like crap, who's going to sign on for that and what therapist is going to endorse that? Nobody. So clearly we have to figure out a way to think about these things in ways that don't trap anybody and that give everybody a voice about what's important to them and what they want without making undue assumptions about what polyamory or any other form of consensual non-monogamy is supposed to look like, has to look like, or, you know, we have to get much more individual and personal about what I want in my relationship and what you want in your relationship and why it's important to you and how we're going to preserve that with relationship shape, monogamy, non-monogamy, swinging, polyamory, consensually open monogamish, whatever it is, how are we going to preserve the things that are most important to you and that are most important to me? Yeah. I like that.

How, what advice would you give to people on how to assess whether or not their relationship is in the, for lack of a better word, right place to open things up? Because I have a lot of couples come in whose relationships are really suffering and they're considering non-monogamy as a solution to their relationship problems, which I always kind of advise against. How can people make that assessment? What do you think needs to happen at a minimum within a relationship before couples can even consider whether

or not this could be healthy for them? This is one of those interesting points where I tend to say things that aren't the usual. Okay.

That's more interesting though. It probably means it's something we need to talk a lot about. There's a fair amount of controversial stuff in my book because just of the way that I see the world and relationships.

So I think that of course there are some skills that would be really great to have in place before you embark on a challenge, like an intimate relationship or an open relationship. I think a certain level of differentiation is super handy. Boy, that's really, really helpful.

And once you're in therapy with any kind of relationship, for sure, there are going to be things relating to safety and security and attachment, which is the groundedness piece, and differentiation, which we already went into. That's going to be part of the thing. But do you have to have it first is where I trip because no, you don't have to have it first.

We learn through the school of hard knocks and it's through our own motivation for something. It's through desire that we grow. And if we had, for instance, to use a different example, a really common example, think about differentiation and its importance to consent in a sexual situation.

Really important to be able to figure out what you think, feel, prefer, desire, believe, want. Really important to be able to say it to a partner. Really important to be able to change your mind, even if your partner is not going to be happy.

Really important to be able to tune into your partner and what's going on for them, even when you're feeling really self-absorbed. That's a differentiation project of the highest order. And if you get it wrong, the consequences are quite high.

We have non-consensual sex, right? Not good. How many of us, however, have a high level of differentiation before we have our first sexual relationship? Nobody, right? Pretty much nobody. So you can do whatever you want with your relationship and with your life and whatever you choose to do, whatever direction you choose to go, you're going to run into some bumps.

And that's where a good coach or a therapist or a really good self-help book will help. And you just sort of work your way to the level of support that helps you to succeed at making what you want to have for yourself and your life come true. Yeah.

I think that's a really helpful way of thinking about this because you're right. At the end of the day, there are so many nuances to every single relationship. They're like little fingerprints.

And so what may make one relationship be in a good place to then explore non-monogamy may be very different from what puts another relationship in a good spot to

jump off from. Yes. And that said, there are some pitfalls for sure.

If you're having trouble making and keeping agreements, you're going to have a very, very difficult time in any intimate relationship. See, that's the other thing. It's not special for polyamory.

So any intimate relationship is going to really suffer if you're having trouble making and keeping agreements. And if you're having trouble making and keeping agreements, I think there's a complicated bunch of stuff that's going on around that way beyond what you mostly hear about building trust and following through on agreements. I think the process of making agreements in a strong way is often overlooked.

And instead, we spend a lot of time talking about how to repair after an agreement has been broken without ever really looking at the dynamics that went into making a shaky agreement in the first place. And plenty of people agree to stuff that they don't even believe in. They already know they're not going to do it.

So why? What's going on there? We're going to have to talk about that sort of people-pleasing or conflict-avoiding dynamic in order to get anywhere with agreement-making. And I think we're also going to have to talk about lie-inviting behavior, which is where somebody loses their mind every time you bring up a certain topic. And then again, what could go wrong? Sooner or later, somebody is going to get tired of that and go underground and just keep the secret because it's a heck of a lot easier.

So there are a whole bunch of relational dynamics that underpin making strong agreements. It's not a simple thing, but people who are in intimate relationships get better and better at it over time, or the consequences are pretty high. You lose relationships.

And that's just as true for monogamy as polyamory, but it sure as heck is true for polyamory. Totally. Totally.

So how can someone start the conversation? Because a lot of times there's one person in the relationship who starts to think about whether or not this is something that might work for them. What is your advice on how to best bring this up in a non-threatening way? Yes. Well, first, I think it's important to look inside and figure out what you think and feel.

What do you prefer? What are you dreaming about? How is this touching you? How is this exciting you? And that's what you want to talk about. You do not want to be talking about your partner. So if the first word out of your mouth is "you" and you're pointing a finger at the same time, you're on the wrong track. Yes. Go get the book, take an internal look and then express to your partner something about what you've been daydreaming about. I've been doing some research and I read this book and I'm super

curious about this.

And I wonder if you'd be willing to have a conversation with me. I swear I'm not looking to talk you into anything. I'm just interested in having a conversation about an interesting topic with you.

I'm curious to hear what your take is. And I love that you refer to it in your writing as this is a collaborative exploration, not a decision-making conversation, right? Exactly. Yeah, that's right.

That's right. So the goal in these conversations, and there probably will be many of them, is to understand yourself better, understand your partner better, take both of your understandings to a way deeper level than you've been able to get to before by not pushing for a decision. And instead really talking about what's coming up for you and why is this scary? Or what is it about this that lights you up? Or how did this get under your skin? Or how much of this has to do with that thing that happened three years ago? And really looking at some of that stuff is going to be very important and should come way before any decision.

And then when you get to a decision-making process, it should be an incremental experimental kind of collaboration. Yeah. And you warn about getting into persuasion mode.

Tell people what you mean by that and what is important to remember about it. Yeah. How can you avoid it? How can you avoid it? Have you ever been in a conversation with a friend or partner or somebody and you think that the idea is to get to know each other better, but it starts to feel like a debate team? Totally.

The ulterior motive comes out pretty quickly. It does, right? You start to get that weird pressured feeling and you start feeling like there's a right and a wrong answer to this question. Yeah.

So that's what we're trying to avoid, is that sense that there's a right or a wrong answer, or that there are going to be consequences if you get this wrong, or if you disagree, there's going to be trouble. None of that supports getting to know each other better. So I think the first thing is just to acknowledge clearly and explicitly at the beginning, this is not about a decision-making process.

This is really about an exploration. Let's look at this thing from every angle that we can come up with. We can brainstorm how we would learn about it.

It's interesting to me. And if your partner says, yeah, but it's not that interesting to me, you could say, well, maybe there's something else that you'd like to explore as well that may be not that interesting to me. And then we could both stretch and grow together in learning about what lights each other up.

What advice do you give to people who find themselves in that gridlock situation where let's say they've read your book, they feel super prepared, they're avoiding persuasion mode, they're coming at this very collaboratively, but their partner is still just like, hell no. What do they do? Well, that's a super interesting project. And it's, again, I'll point to the elderly parents moving in with you question.

Okay. Similar. Let's use that.

It's very similar. So I would say, first of all, I'd want to make sure that these people are going pretty deep in their conversations and they have a clear idea of what the meanings are underneath all of this for each of them. So what is it that scares you so much? What is it that excites you so much? What are you hoping to have in your relationship? And then I use that technique that we talked about a few minutes ago of separating out what you want from your relationship from the shape of the relationship.

Because, you know, at least here in our Western culture, we have a very monogamous culture. We think we have a very monogamous culture. Fair.

That's a fair point. We imagine that we have a monogamous culture. We have a lot of infidelity, but we pretend we have a monogamous culture.

And so, you know, while we're steeped in that is the norm, that's normal. And if you don't do that, that's not normal. We also have a really lot of misconceptions about non-monogamies.

So we think, for instance, all those things that my study debunked, it can't possibly last. Another relationship will destroy the intimacy between the two of us. And we'll, or you only want that because you're looking for a way to break up.

Or this is just a coercive way to take advantage of me so that I do all the childcare and you go out and have all the fun and I never get what I want out of our relationship and whatever. So starting to decouple those assumptions from what's possible is really, really important. We have nothing but misconceptions about non-monogamies, which is why I sprinkle through all these stories about real relationships that really work and the hurdles that people have faced and how they've kind of come through them and dealt with their jealousy or whatever, it's possible.

The key though, is you have to want it. So if somebody wants to run an experiment and stretch in a direction that's very uncomfortable for them, I can back that play. And I can help them run the experiment.

I can help them get a lot of bang for their buck in terms of learning how to regulate their emotions, manage things, generate happiness in a whole bunch of other ways. And this could be the partner who's stretching to open or the partner who's stretching to monogamy. Either one, they're both a stretch for someone.

And I don't have an opinion about what the outcome should be, but in this example, a couple, this dyad is going to have to come up with what's going to work for them or that it's important enough to them to split up. And so I like to help people go slow, run small experiments and start debunking their own myths. Start realizing, oh, actually, gosh, my partner is much more dependable and reliable in this open structure than they ever were before in our monogamous relationship.

Oh, gee, I wonder if it's because they're happier and they feel freer. So then we start learning for ourselves and our own successes give us motivation to continue. On the other hand, if there's a string of failures, that is also going to be somewhat demotivating.

And I very often say, and it's not reasonable to expect your partner to get on board with this if you cannot make and keep an agreement. If you can't keep it, don't make it because the consequences are going to be enormous, especially in a situation with an impasse. I can't wave a magic wand and make it work, if you're going to keep secrets and lie and then not follow through on your agreements, no can do.

And I think so many people kind of quote unquote, make an agreement and then kind of do things that are, you know, maybe in gray areas, a little bit outside of that agreement. And that's where a lot of couples trip up because then something comes to light and they feel betrayed.

And it's just, I think people don't realize how important it is to get like explicitly detailed in all of these agreements. Well, that's an interesting point too, because I, more agreements does not necessarily make this work better. Okay.

So tell me about that because that's not what I learned or have learned or have been taught rather. I think sticking with one agreement is better than having a rule book. I think that, you know, when people want to make a whole bunch of rules and agreements, this is what I think is going on.

I think very often they're trying to legislate their way out of uncomfortable feelings. And instead I would say, you're going to have some uncomfortable feelings. Let's just talk about them when they come up.

I like that. I'm going to use that with my clients from now on. And if you're going to make an agreement, please don't make an agreement that you can't really commit to because a broken agreement is going to shoot you on the foot like nothing else.

So if you can only make one agreement, just let's make sure you can really make it. And then together you can experiment and grow and tiptoe your way in and see what actually comes to be, what feels like it works, what feels like it doesn't work. And then it's not really so much a matter of like legislation.

It's not a rule book. It's more like, I just know this about my partner. My partner wouldn't

feel comfortable if I did this or that.

So I'm going to not do that. So there is such a thing as over-communicating as you're navigating, not- Or over legislating, over legislating. Yeah.

Again, you're great at your language, your choice of words for this, because there is a difference. And I know exactly what you mean. And I've had couples where they think they're doing all the right things in terms of coming up with every possible scenario and imagining how they might react to that.

But at the end of the day, you're right. I think they're legislating their way out of uncomfortable feelings rather than learning skills to manage those feelings. And yeah, and it's problematic because you can think that you're not going to experience any jealousy because you've never experienced it before in your life in any circumstance, and you can be brought to your knees and the opposite can also be true.

You can be sure that you're going to be absolutely undone and then no big deal. I don't feel threatened by that person. So you're not going to know until you do it.

That's why I think, you know, an experiment here and an experiment there and a revision, you know, revisiting, how did it go? How did you feel? What was that like? Worth repeating? Yes, no. Right. Then to me, that's more valuable than a rule book.

Also rule books are confusing and loophole-y. And you know, we don't need our partners to be looking for loopholes and slipping through them because it does not build trust. And so you also don't need your partner to be like, dang, I forgot rule number 168B.3. Like that kind of stuff, nobody can remember it.

And it's not reasonable to, you can't call that a broken agreement. Yeah, that's no, I get what you mean. That's not really reasonable to expect partners to remember every single little tiny rule that you put in this alleged rule books.

But to remember something like, oh yeah, if I'm going to be late home, my partner is going to lose their mind and feel really worried if I haven't called first. So I'm just going to do that. Yeah.

Like I can agree to that. Right. So pick one and agree to it.

Let me ask you one last question because we're about out of time and my editor's going to kill me because we usually cut these episodes down to like between 30 and 40 minutes. And we've been talking for almost an hour now. And I can't imagine anything that's going to get cut out of this, except that maybe I'm going to have to have you on again for a part two.

But that is what, what advice, what's the best piece of advice you can give to people on

managing feelings of jealousy and possessiveness? Yes. Um, get some help that is not about making your partner do something different. So you want some help to figure out what is the connection between your thoughts and your feelings, because you're going to have thoughts and you're going to have feelings, but if you let them play together, you are going to end up with a spiral.

And you can do just the quickest Google on my work and come up with a whole bunch of stuff about managing jealousy. I've got blogs on YouTube about it. I've got a Psychology Today blog series about it.

Um, and, uh, I got a whole chapter in my book, more than one chapter in my book about it, but it's complicated. Um, managing emotions is a really, really complicated project. And it's probably the single most valuable thing that I have ever done for my mental health.

And I highly recommend it, but it's not a short-term project and it does involve, you know, experiencing emotions and then kind of being with it. And if you protect yourself from any negative emotion, you miss the most amazing growth opportunity that really makes you a resilient human. And you don't need your partner to open your relationship for you to have some emotion-producing experiences in life.

Life will just bring it. Oh, yeah. Right.

There's plenty. We'll learn the skills. Exactly.

Like I don't get my way many times a day. I don't know about you. So if I lose my mind every time, it just isn't in accordance with the Martha happiness project.

So I think it's important. And I think it ties back to what we were talking about, the very beginning, like beginning, starting with that self-assessment of what your own values are, because I think so much of what people feel jealous about is what society has told them. They should feel jealous about rather than what they might have felt jealous about or possessive about had they not been exposed to so many strong societal expectations.

And so I think that's something that everyone needs to spend some time reflecting on. Yes, I completely agree. Yeah.

Any closing thoughts before we wrap up? No, this has been so much fun. We've covered like, I know, I know. So tell people where they can find you and where the best place is to get your book, because I'm going to go order a copy today.

Oh, awesome. Well, you can get it on Amazon. Of course, you can also get it from independent booksellers.

There's a page about it on my web site that has UK booksellers and an independent

bookseller that's local here to me. And my website is InstituteForRelationalIntimacy.com. Awesome. Well, you are fascinating and thank you so much for writing this book.

I mean, again, it's not just for clinicians, it's for the general public as well, and it's obviously packed with a lot of great information. So definitely check it out. Thank you, Martha.

Thanks so much. What a pleasure to talk to you. Yeah.

And I hope to have you back sometime in the future. I would love to. All right.

Thanks. Bye-bye. Bye.