

Caring for ourselves and our relationships

By Meg Barker

First published on http://www.polyamory.org.uk/selfcare_mbarker.html

When people who have previously been single or in a monogamous relationship become poly they often find that most of their time and energy is taken up by their relationships, which can leave them very little for themselves. For example, one newly poly person can't remember the last night he spent at his own house, another spends her one hour alone trying to work out how she can schedule all her partners into the next month.

Of course this is not specific to poly, there are multiple demands on our time from all kinds of relationships, as well as different jobs and social groups. However, multiple love or sexual relationships can bring particularly emotionally loaded challenges, particularly when you are new to it and working from an old set of relationship rules which may not apply very well. Difficulties and conflicts that do arise might well be due to a combination of the pressure of adjusting to a new way of doing things, precisely at a moment where there is so little time to look after yourself, due to your new commitments to multiple people. However, people who have been poly for some time can equally struggle to make time for themselves because it is something that is generally quite undervalued.

The idea of self-care, or 'treating yourself as another primary relationship', as some poly people have described it, is a useful one. It fits well with some key political and philosophical ideas around polyamory because it emphasises non-possessiveness and openness, not only to multiple relationships, but also to multiplicity in ourselves and to the fact that we, and our relationships, change over time.

What is self-care?

On a very basic level, self-care involves making sure that our fundamental needs are met. Are we looking after our body and ensuring that we are not under too much stress? This would include getting enough sleep, eating enough, getting some exercise, and keeping an eye on how stressful our job and the rest of our lives are.

We all know that if we run ourselves ragged and go from crisis to crisis we're not in a very good place to manage yet another challenge (such as meeting a partner's new partner, or reassuring someone who is feeling insecure). Particularly when we are tired and stretched we may try to take short cuts with our partners: becoming frustrated with them for struggling, and demanding that they do things they are uncomfortable with, rather than patiently listening to where they are at.

However, there is another basic need which I would put alongside sleep, food and ensuring that we're not under excessive stress: solitude. If we go through life with no time alone whatsoever it is difficult for us to build a good relationship with ourselves or to know ourselves very well.

There are two key elements to solitude; being kind to ourselves, and self-reflection. The first is about putting us in a relaxed, calm place by doing things that are nurturing and soothing. The second is about reflecting on our lives and how we are engaging with ourselves and other people. Let's take a deeper look at why self-care might be useful for our relationships and then we'll come back to some specific practices we might build into our lives.

Why is self-care important for our relationships?

Building a good relationship with ourselves

In a hectic life it is very easy to get out of touch with what we really enjoy because we are so busy answering all the demands on our time. If this goes on for too long it can lead to us becoming stressed or depressed. Relationships that were pleasurable at first can just feel like a duty because we're not in tune with what we want within them or able to communicate that with the other person or people involved.

The first step in addressing this is to make some regular time to get back in touch with ourselves. Often when people are in a bad way this is the foundation that needs putting back in place before anything further can happen. Try making a list of all the activities that you really find pleasurable, focusing particularly on those that are simplest and cheapest. Try making ten minutes a day at first to do an activity from your list. Don't worry if it doesn't feel that good to be in with, the thing is that you are proving to yourself that you are someone worth treating kindly. Over time you can expand the amount of time you spend this way.

Knowing ourselves and our limitations

In poly, as in all relationships, knowing ourselves means that we have a clearer idea what we are able to offer to others, and what our limits are. If we don't take some time to think about it, it may be tempting to embark on a shiny new relationship when, in fact, we know that we really don't have time to see another person as regularly as they would wish. Or it might be that the energy that we're considering giving to this new relationship actually needs to go into an existing relationship which is in a bad way and needs all we have to navigate a way to a better place or a good ending.

If we build in regular time for self-reflection then we come to know ourselves better: how we work, what stresses us out, what we need when we are struggling, etc. Self-reflection time might involve writing in a journal about what is bothering us and different ways we might react and respond to it. Some people find it useful to write this as a conversation between the part of themselves which is struggling and a 'wiser' part of themselves, or friend. Alternatively, some people find it useful to meditate, to go for a thinking walk, or to make 'thinking time' with a friend who isn't involved in the situation, where each person gets some time to talk exclusively about themselves for a set time.

What might we learn from such self-reflection? Well we should become aware of baggage that we are carrying from the past and the buttons we have from that which our partners might inadvertently press. Then we can communicate with our partners about them, and also recognise in ourselves when we are over-reacting because of them. We might also learn what is best for us, and realise more easily when we just need a quiet night in, rather than the social extravaganza we had arranged. Or we may learn when we need to take time out because a conversation is getting heated, and realise that this is okay because it is better for both ourselves and our partners.

Self-reflection can also help us to define, and communicate, our boundaries. It is easy to feel like we should be there for everyone in our lives all the time, or that we should never cancel a date, or that we should always be up for being social or sexual. If you live like

this you are probably also familiar with the intense pressure it puts you under. It just isn't possible to sustain and leads to resentment or exhaustion and withdrawal.

People often think that self-care means being selfish or self-absorbed and avoid it for this reason. Actually looking after ourselves in such ways, and being clear what our boundaries are (what we can and can't offer at a particular time), means that we are more likely to remain engaged with people in our lives, and to have a lot to offer them when needed because we've been able to keep a little energy back just in case. You could even say that it is more 'selfish' to avoid self-care. Poly authors such as Dossie Easton and Trisan Taormino strongly emphasise self-awareness and 'ownership' of feelings, and the importance of being clear and open with ourselves if we are to be honest and ethical with others.

Self-care and non-fixing

The Buddhist author Stephen Batchelor has pointed out that people are drawn to fixing themselves, and other people, rather like a potter fixes their pot in a kiln. Instead of allowing ourselves to remain fluid and flexible like the pot on the wheel, we try to define and limit ourselves by fixing ourselves in one definite shape. Unfortunately that often means that we feel brittle and rigid.

The existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a lot about such fixing, suggesting that people were always trying to fix other people or themselves.

When we try to fix other people we might find ourselves trying to get a partner to change their habits to make them more like we want them to be. We might criticise their bad jokes or eating habits, we might encourage them to pursue ambitions that we think would be best for them, or wish that they could be more spontaneous.

When we try to fix ourselves we might try to always appear in ways we know our partner/s find desirable, or we might try to read their minds and never to do anything that may upset them. We try to discover the side of ourselves they like most and to be that all the time. This is a very tempting thing to do because most of us are worried that there is part of us that is fundamentally not okay. If we can make ourselves into the perfect person for our partner/s perhaps it will prove to us that we really are completely okay, desirable and loveable.

Perhaps when we look at it so openly we can see that such attempts to fix others and ourselves are doomed to failure. This is what Sartre meant when he said 'hell is other people'.

When we try to fix someone else, we will probably be unhappy if they do submit to our whims because they will no longer be the free and ever-evolving person that we fell for in the first place. Also we may be faced with the pain they go through in trying to restrict themselves in this way, and our role in that.

When we are drawn to fixing ourselves for others, we also resist it because, of course, we can never just be one thing. While we think we are being kind and selfless by trying to please our partner/s, actually we are probably storing up all kinds of resentment. Also we risk feeling terrible when we fail to fix ourselves in this way and find ourselves being the 'not okay' version of ourselves as our partner/s look on.

How much of the pain, conflict and struggling in our relationships has come from attempting to fix or be fixed? As another great thinker, Esmeralda Weatherwax put it, 'sin, young man, is when you treat people as things, including yourself, that's what sin is'. That 'including yourself' part is vital. If we can realise that we, ourselves, are not fixed, or things, then we can see that the same is true for the other people in our lives too.

Through the self-awareness that comes with reflective self-care we may well come to realise that we are not fixed. We observe ourselves in different situations and realise that we have many sides to ourselves: That we are capable of being both quiet and outgoing, serious and light, daring and cautious. Poly can be excellent for this because different intimate relationships offer the possibility to see different versions of ourselves mirrored in different partners' eyes: We may realise that we are playful and silly with our fuckbuddy, passionate and politically engaged with our secondary, and relaxed and homely with the partner/s we live with. This way perhaps we can come to terms with the sides of ourselves that we are least happy with, instead of trying to deny them or eradicate them.

Through self awareness we may see how who we are changes over time. Journal writing (whether online or in a notebook) brings us up against the unfolding story of our life. Meditating reveals that the thing that bothered us so much that we couldn't relax yesterday has been replaced by something else today. Again we can see that we are in constant process if we reflect back on how we were in our relationships over the past year, or five, or ten.

As we come to see that we are multiple and in process, we will realise that the same is true for the other people in our lives. This involves:

- Recognising that we, and others, are more than just one thing,
- Recognising that we, and others, are in process rather than static.

To me this way of seeing ourselves, and others, fits well with polyamory given its emphasis on non-possession. Many poly people are striving (although inevitably not always managing) to embrace the freedom of all the people in their lives rather than attempting to possess them. Perhaps the best way to enable an ongoing commitment to this is to start with ourselves. If we can accept that we are free and changing, and stop trying to fix certain parts of ourselves, whilst eradicating others, then we can treat others the same.

Applying these ideas to polyamory itself

Lately I have come to realise that these ideas of non-fixing apply to our ways of doing relationships as well as to our relationships themselves. In our culture it can be easy to identify as monogamous, with very rigid rules about what behaviours are allowable or not. Many people coming to polyamory are reacting against this, but often we then find ourselves identifying in a very fixed way with polyamory. For example we might feel defensive around monogamous people, or take on board a single, rather fixed way, of being polyamorous (e.g. having to have a primary and a secondary, or to live in a triad, or to insist that we don't get jealous).

If we can see ourselves and those around us in a less fixed way, then we can also hold our way of relating more lightly. We might feel less need to define ourselves rigidly within monogamy, or against monogamy. Instead we can ebb and flow through the relationships that we form and develop, remaining flexible enough to embrace changes in our way of doing things.

The implications of this for the poly movement may be towards emphasising a diversity of ways of relating. Rather than forcing an agreement on what one thing, such as 'polyamory', means to everyone, we can be open to different understandings. We might feel less need to prove that it is as good as, or even superior to, monogamy. Perhaps this is why neither Tristan Taormino or Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy use 'polyamory' as the title of their books.

We live at a time when most people are re-negotiating their relationships. We have moved away from traditions of marriage and nuclear families. People are living longer, there is more gender equality and recognition of same-sex relationships, as well as acceptance of divorce and break-up, and a diversity of family forms. In 'monogamous' relationships, people are re-examining and redefining what is meant by 'commitment' and 'fidelity' in similar ways to the ways people are in poly communities. Perhaps the way forward is to ask that multiple relationships of various different kinds (partners, lovers, friends, family) be acknowledged equally and given equal rights and responsibilities.

Perhaps the starting point for any of this is self-care.

What kinds of things can I do?

Here are some example self-care practices that you might consider. Different things work better for different people so it is about building a regular practice out of a combination of these that works for you right now and committing to it. It seems important to include a balance of kindness and self-reflection, because kindness without reflection won't help us to consider ethical responses to our situation, whereas reflection without kindness, won't build compassion for ourselves and others. A regular practice might be putting aside half an hour a day and/or a more significant chunk of time once a week, but it is bound to look different for each person:

Kind self-care could include things like:

- Taking a hot bath or shower
- Listening to, or playing, your favourite music
- Having an evening in alone with a glass of wine and a favourite movie
- Arranging a 'date' with yourself (a gallery, a movie, a country walk, etc.)
- Going for a run, swim or cycle-ride
- Buying yourself a small treat like an individual flower or a few posh chocolates
- Having your favourite hot drink in a nice café one morning a week
- Watching the sun rise or set
- Feeding the birds in the park

Reflective self-care could include things like:

- Writing or drawing in a private journal
- Making 'thinking time' dates with a friend
- Going on a reflective walk
- Doing sitting meditation or yoga where you focus on being in the moment
- Going away for a day or a weekend by yourself every now and then (e.g. camping or self-catering, or on some kind of retreat)

Useful books on this subject

Two great books on poly relationships, which cover similar ideas in more depth, are [Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's *The Ethical Slut*](#) (2009) and [Tristan Taormino's *Opening Up*](#) (2008).

A very useful book that covers these ideas in relationships more generally is [John Welwood's *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*](#) (2006). This covers particularly the idea that we fear that we are lacking in some way and wish for partners who will make us feel that we are not. Also useful more generally is [Marshall B. Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*](#) (2003).

To find out more about meditation practices, try [Martine Batchelor's *Let Go*](#) (2007). My ideas about writing practices come from [Natalie Goldberg's books like *Writing Down the Bones*](#) (1986) and the [Elizabeth Gilbert novel *Eat, Pray, Love*](#) (2006). Thinking friendships are described by [Nancy Kline in *Time to Think*](#) (1999).