

Extramarital sex always wrong? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Is extramarital sex always wrong?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sex that occurs outside of a relationship or marriage (referred to as extradydactic sex or extramarital sex if the partners are married) isn't inherently "right" or "wrong." In reality, it boils down to each person's beliefs and the dynamics of the relationship. Some couples may find sex outside of a primary relationship to be damaging to the partnership. For others, being non-monogamous might not only be invited but may be beneficial to the relationship. Either way, when it comes to having romantic or sexual relationships with additional people, the answer depends on how each partner feels about sex outside of their relationship or marriage. Ultimately, clear boundaries and communication are key to any romantic relationship.

To begin, it's good to make a couple of distinctions about sex that occurs outside of a primary relationship. There are two types of non-monogamy:

- **Consensual non-monogamy (CNM)** is a practice in which both partners agree to have sexual partners and relationships outside of a primary relationship. Some examples include:
 - Polyamory: an individual chooses to have multiple consenting romantic relationships at once and there is some level of commitment to all partners.
 - Open relationships ^[2]: both partners agree to romantic and sexual relationships with other people while still remaining committed to each other.
 - Swinging: both partners explore sexual relations with others, often by inviting outsiders to participate in their sexual activities together, such as in a ménage à trois ^[3]
- **Infidelity or cheating** occurs when one partner is having sexual partners or relationships without their primary partner knowing or consenting.

The distinction between consensual non-monogamy and infidelity is key: while the dishonesty that comes with infidelity could put a relationship in jeopardy, research shows that some people

who practice CNM experience equal satisfaction and commitment compared to those in monogamous relationships.

Even talking about sex outside of primary relationships is stigmatized in some societies — some people may place monogamy on a pedestal and look at CNM as a flawed arrangement or just “wrong.” It’s key to note that what people believe about non-monogamy may be different than what those who practice CNM might report. Surveys show that many people believe CNM means less sexual satisfaction, a greater risk for sexually transmitted infections, and that having multiple relationships means they are of poor quality. However, people in these relationships — about four to five percent of people — often report high levels of trust, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction. Additionally, those who practice CNM actually report more frequent condom use than those who report cheating on their partner. So, a non-monogamous lifestyle works well for some, provided that all partners are in agreement about the arrangement.

If you're thinking about entering into a CNM arrangement, you may want to ask yourself and your partner a few questions: are partner(s) outside of the primary relationship aware of the non-monogamous arrangement? How might you approach any conflict that arises in these relationships? What’s the time commitment involved in juggling multiple relationships, and is it a feasible lifestyle? What boundaries and expectations do you have for one another? Are you comfortable sharing your CNM lifestyle with your family and friends or would you rather it remain private? You may want to carefully consider both your answers to these inquiries before proceeding.

All this to say, open and honest communication between partners is often the bedrock of healthy relationships. Having a discussion with partner(s) about what all partners are comfortable with when it comes to sex (within and outside of the relationship) will likely open up conversations about each other's wants and desires. Once both partners give the green light to see others, it's good to keep communication lines open to make sure it's working for everyone involved, providing opportunities for addressing concerns and renegotiating boundaries and guidelines as needed — and keep up the potential to make for very happy and satisfied lovebirds.

Alice!

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