

Rethinking Relationships: An Open & Polyamorous Lens



Alex Sanderson-Shortt and Niki D

Specialists in Gender, Sexuality and
Relationship Diversity (GSRD) Therapy

Course Creators of Opening Up CPD

Presenting at: Psychologists Protection Society Trust AGM

Dún Laoghaire, Dublin

23rd May 2026

Glossary:

Polyamory Definitions

Polyamory (consensual multiple relationships with different degrees of sexual/romantic exclusivity)

Kitchen table polyamory (family style connections in a polyamorous set-up whether romantically/sexually connected or not)

Parallel polyamory (someone who has more than one relationship with little or no connection between metamours)

Polycule (network of interconnected people, including metamours, lovers or partners)

Throuple or Traid (three people in a sexual and/or romantic relationship together – exclusive or not)

Hinge (central partner who has relationships with people who don't date each other)

Anchor Partner (the person who emotionally and/or practically supports another)

Metamour (platonic partner/s of your partner)

NRE (new relationship energy - recent exciting sexual and/or romantic energy)

Compersion (taking joy from a partner finding sexual/romantic pleasure in another)

Nesting partner (co-habiting partner who can be sexually/romantically or platonically linked)

Open Relationship Definitions

Open relationship (sexually non-exclusive dyad relationship, which can include or exclude romantic connections with others)

Monogamish (a degree of sexual openness in a typically monogamous dyad – hall pass, sexual scene)

Swingers (couples who engage in sexual play with others, but limit romantic and emotional connection to their partner. Single people can also be swingers)

Soft swinging (a couple who only have sexual involvement with each other in a group sex setting)

Hard swinging (a couple who have sex with others in a group sex setting, together or separately)

Play & play party (term for recreational sex, including private sex parties and swingers club nights)

Veto (a stop or pause to the open relationship if one partner requests this)

Unicorn (a lover in a relationship with an established couple)

Soft limit (a boundary open to renegotiation)

Hard limit (a non-negotiable boundary)

No hosting (sexual hook-ups not entertained in the domestic home)

No feelings rule (sexual hook-ups without emotional involvement)

FWB (friends with sexual benefits)

FREEDOM Model

An O&P Lens to Support Therapeutic Work with Open & Polyamorous Relationships.

Alex and Niki developed this model to support therapists using an O&P Lens © when working with clients in open and polyamorous relationships. The model is structured around seven core ideas. Each one offers a therapeutic stance, informs practice and invites reflexive enquiry. By intentionally attending to the intersections of the personal, professional and political, the Freedom Model supports a holistic and relationally attuned way of working. There is a summary of the full model on the next page.

FREEDOM Model ©



F

FREEDOM

Supporting clients' freedom to design and define their own relationships.

R

RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom requires responsibility to self and others; relational freedom is always contextual and ethical.

E

ELEVATION

Affirming, celebrating and destigmatising O&P relationships.

E

ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS

Multiple relationships mean multiple beginnings, endings and transitions.

D

DYNAMICS

Understanding and navigating complex dynamics within and around O&P networks.

O

ONGOING COMMUNICATION & CONSENT

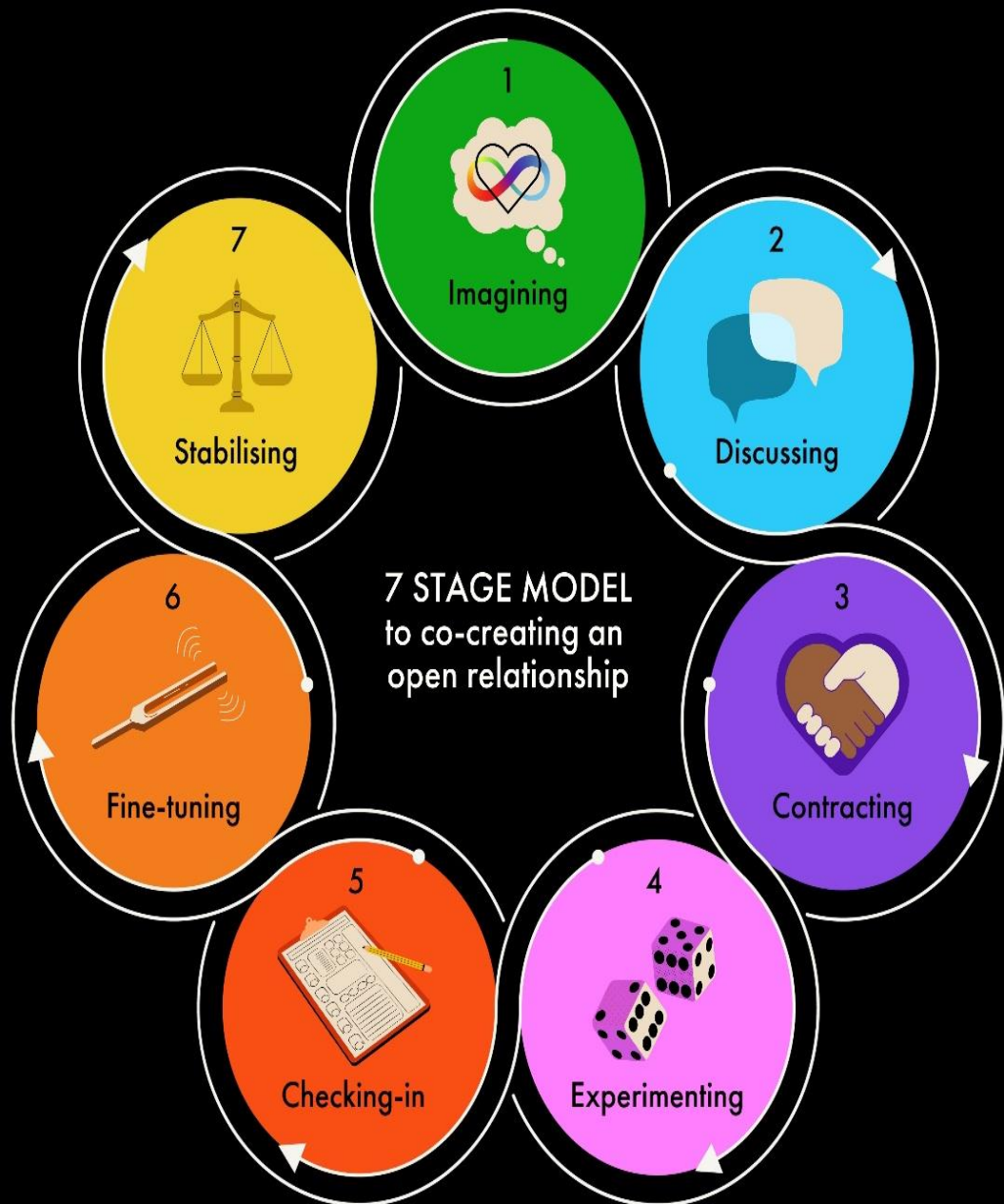
Communication and consent require ongoing attention and relational skill in multi-partner and sexually open relationships.

M

MONONORMATIVITY

Awareness of how mononormative beliefs shape expectations and personal narratives.

7-Stage Model



© Niki D 2021

rainbowrelationships.com

7-Stage Model of Co-Creating an Open Relationship: a therapist's guide

© Niki D

Stage 1 - Imagining

Support clients to explore possibilities beyond conventional relationship scripts. Encourage reflective, non-judgemental curiosity about desires, fears, boundaries and relational values. Clients may benefit from imagining a range of scenarios (emotional, sexual, social and practical) while noticing areas of excitement, resistance, avoidance or anxiety. This stage can reveal relational dynamics, internalised norms and unspoken expectations.

Stage 2 - Discussing

Help partners develop the capacity for ongoing dialogue about polyamory or open relationships without urgency or pressure. Discussing is an intentional communication for clients to understand their partners' wishes and boundary expectations. Explore how conflict, difference, defensiveness, withdrawal or emotional escalation are managed within the relationship. Encourage clients to identify shared values, practise active and embodied listening and maintain connection during difficult conversations unless time-out is required.

Stage 3 - Contracting

Assist clients in developing relationship agreements that clarify expectations, boundaries, responsibilities and relational ethics. Agreements may be flexible, evolving and negotiated rather than rigid or controlling. Explore hard and soft boundaries, safer-sex practices, veto power, disclosure preferences, time management and emotional expectations. Emphasise that agreements cannot eliminate uncertainty, only support navigation through uncertain times.

Stage 4 - Experimenting

Clients begin translating their discussions into lived experience. Encourage gradual, reflective experimentation, whilst keeping in mind the shared good intent to test a new relationship dynamic, with awareness of emotional capacity and relational stability. Support clients to distinguish between productive discomfort associated with growth and experiences that create relational harm, attachment injury, or emotional overwhelm. Refer to Niki D's 3 D's (discomfort, disruption and damage). Notice when underlying relational patterns are revealed when the relationship structure changes.

Stage 5 - Checking-In

Encourage regular relationship check-ins as an ongoing practice rather than crisis management. Help clients identify and articulate emotional responses such as jealousy, insecurity, excitement, grief or fear, while also exploring the meaning beneath these emotions. Planned and spontaneous check-in's can support emotional regulation, relational repair, boundary renegotiation and increased self-awareness. Support the client to find and adapt check-in models that work for them.

Stage 6 - Fine-Tuning

As clients gain experience, support them in revisiting agreements, expectations and relational patterns. This stage often surfaces deeper issues, including relational wounds, communication difficulties, power imbalances, guilt, possessiveness, or unmet needs. Encourage clients to approach these challenges with curiosity and emotional responsibility rather than self-criticism, blame or avoidance. Emphasise that equity in non-monogamous relationships may not always look symmetrical.

Stage 7 - Stabilising

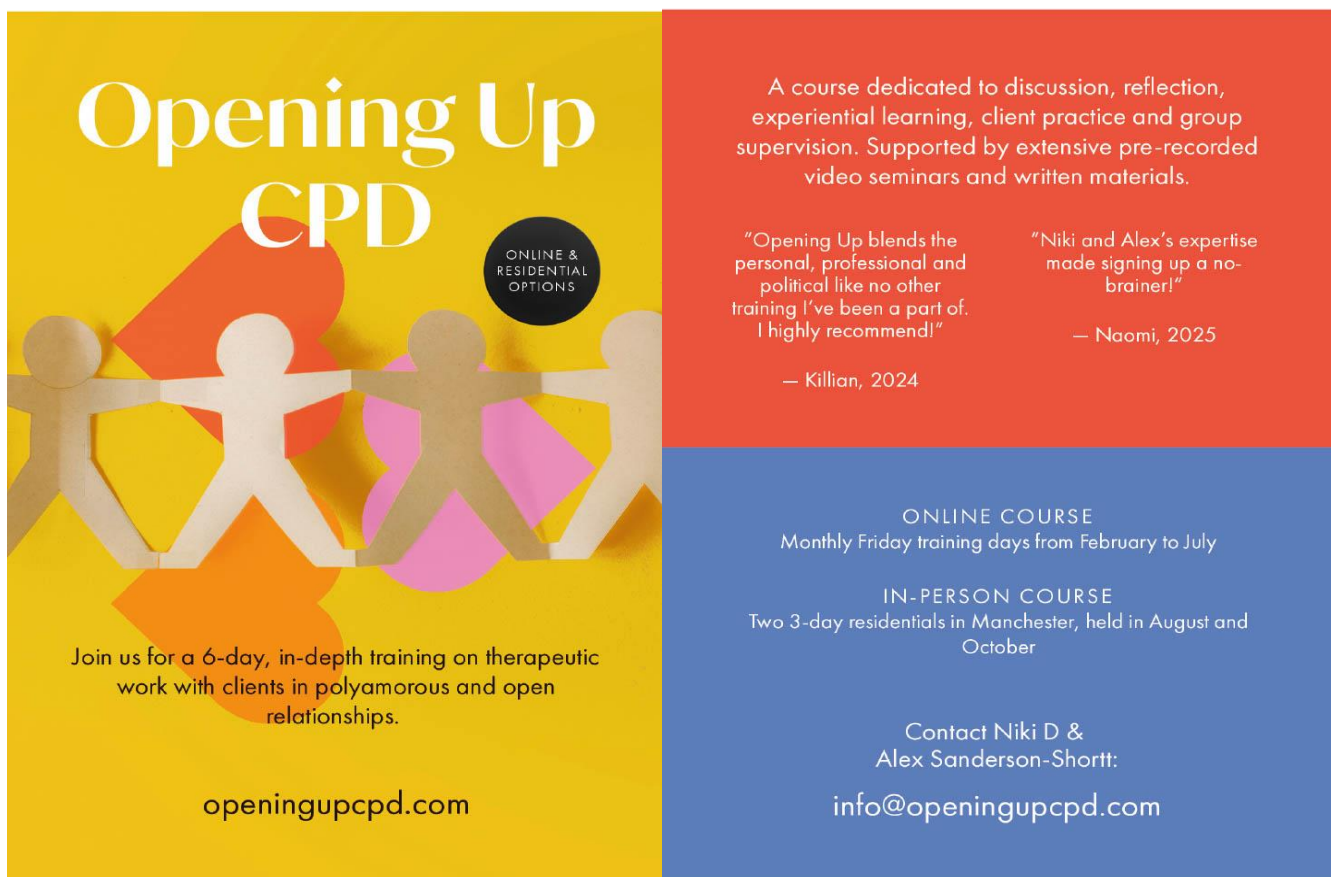
Some relationships develop greater stability, trust, and confidence over time. Encourage clients to recognise growth, resilience and integrity while remaining realistic about the ongoing nature of relational change. Stabilising may also involve returning to monogamy or restructuring relationships in ways that align more with clients' needs, wishes and capacities. Support clients to grieve losses, honour limits and maintain supportive community connections where possible.

Therapeutic Considerations

- Attend to attachment dynamics, emotional regulation and consent throughout all stages.
- Recognise that this cycle is not intended to be used in a formulaic way but to help guide therapists and clients to identify when stages are missed, avoided or fixated on.
- Support clients in identifying embedded socio-cultural assumptions about monogamy, sexuality, gender, and intimacy.
- Encourage flexibility: clients may move back and forth between stages repeatedly.
- Maintain awareness of minority stress, stigma and community influences impacting consensual polyamory and open relationships.

Suggested Reading for Therapists

- Opening Up — Tristan Taormino
- Polysecure and Polywise — Jessica Fern
- Rewriting the Rules — Meg-John Barker
- A Therapist's Guide to Consensual Nonmonogamy — Rhea Orion
- Expansive Love – Tuck Malloy
- Love's not Color Blind – Kevin Patterson

The advertisement is a vertical rectangle divided into three main color sections: yellow on the left, red on the top right, and blue on the bottom right. The yellow section contains the title 'Opening Up CPD' in large white font, a circular badge for 'ONLINE & RESIDENTIAL OPTIONS', a row of five paper figures holding hands, and a paragraph about a 6-day training. The red section contains a description of the course and two testimonials. The blue section contains details about online and in-person course formats and contact information.

**Opening Up
CPD**

ONLINE & RESIDENTIAL
OPTIONS

Join us for a 6-day, in-depth training on therapeutic work with clients in polyamorous and open relationships.

openingupcpd.com

A course dedicated to discussion, reflection, experiential learning, client practice and group supervision. Supported by extensive pre-recorded video seminars and written materials.

"Opening Up blends the personal, professional and political like no other training I've been a part of. I highly recommend!"
— Killian, 2024

"Niki and Alex's expertise made signing up a no-brainer!"
— Naomi, 2025

ONLINE COURSE
Monthly Friday training days from February to July

IN-PERSON COURSE
Two 3-day residentials in Manchester, held in August and October

Contact Niki D & Alex Sanderson-Shortt:
info@openingupcpd.com

www.openingupcpd.com