

# The Practice Of Jealousy Management

Fixing The Refrigerator: How To Deal With Jealousy

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## **Jealousy management for love and profit... or, how to fix a broken refrigerator**

**Note:** This essay is adapted from a two-part entry that originally appeared in my [online journal](#), the first part of which appears [here](#) and the second part of which appears [here](#). Both parts have generated significant commentary, which you can read in my journal. Additional commentary is welcome.

Throughout the course of this essay, I use the metaphor of a broken refrigerator as a shorthand for a broken romantic relationship. The reason for this is a comment left in my online journal by [one of the readers](#), which says:

*“Not to sound flippant, I am reminded of a Letterman joke he told on the Tonight Show (with Carson), about guys that can do anything, and how aggravating they can seem to regular folk: “You’re serious?” the guy says, “You bought one of those? You can save a bunch of money building your own refrigerator.”*

*The joke, of course, is that not everyone can— or even should—build something complex and potentially dangerous. The same can be said for people trying to deal with complex emotional issues. [...]*

*Tell me, Sir, how did you build your refrigerator?”*

This essay is an attempt to answer that question with respect to building a relationship without jealousy.

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**One of the central fixtures** in most polyamorous relationships, especially polyamorous relationships between an existing couple who begin with a monogamous relationship and then expand the relationship to include polyamory, is a set of rules or covenants designed to protect the existing relationship and to make the people in the relationship feel secure—in other words, to deal with issues like jealousy, insecurity, and threat. I'm going to use the metaphor of the refrigerator and bend it to my own ends.

**Let's assume your relationship is a refrigerator.** One day, a problem arises in your relationship—the refrigerator quits working. You walk into your kitchen, there's a puddle on the floor, and all your frozen pizzas and ice cream are a gooey mass in the bottom of the freezer. There are a few things you can do at this point, once you've mopped up the mess and scraped the remains of last night's lunch out of the fridge. One solution is to fix the refrigerator; another is to replace it. A third solution is to leave the refrigerator exactly where it is and change your life around the problem—"From this day forward, I will bring no frozen or refrigerated foods into this house." In the poly community, the last option is the one most people choose.

I'll get back to the fridge in a bit, though. First, let me say something important, which is that sometimes, fears have a purpose. I'm going to spend a good deal of the rest of this entry talking about fear and threat, and it's important to keep in mind that not all fear is irrational. Fear of snakes? Positive and healthy. Fear of spiders, or falling, or drowning? Positive and healthy. A lot of our distant ancestors had to die to bequeath us with these instinctual fears, and they've served us well. There's a difference between a rational fear and an irrational fear, a difference between a fear that genuinely keeps you safe and a fear that makes you contort your life (and the lives of the people around you) for no good reason. The latter kind of fear seeks only to protect itself, not to protect you—and ironically, sometimes it creates the very thing you're afraid of!

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**In a relationship, a fear or an insecurity** is a symptom of a problem. In some cases, the fear is perfectly rational and justified. An abused child lives in fear of his abusive parent for good reason; he has tangible reason to fear. In a healthy relationship, though, these fears are almost always irrational and unfounded.

Jealousy itself is an interesting emotion, because jealousy is a composite emotion that is based on other emotions. It's a second-order emotional response—something happens, that thing causes you to feel threatened or to feel insecure or to feel something negative about yourself, and then that fear or insecurity makes you feel jealous. For that reason, the root of jealousy is often surprisingly difficult to pin down and understand.

Instead, what happens is that people look at the event that is the proximal cause of the jealousy and assume that that event is the source of the problem. “My partner kisses another person, I feel jealous; therefore, it's the kiss that makes me jealous. The way to deal with the jealousy is to tell my partner to stop kissing people.”

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**Many years ago**, I was dating a woman I'd met at college, who I'll call R. During the course of our relationship, R started dating another close friend of mine, T. And for the first time in my life, for the first time in my history (at the time) of a half-dozen successful long-term poly relationships, I was jealous.

I don't mean “you know, this makes me uncomfortable” jealous. I mean “completely overwhelmed, smashed to pieces beneath a tidal wave of feelings I could not anticipate or predict or control; gut-wrenching, wanting-to-puke” jealous. I mean the kind of jealous that consumes every other feeling and leaves nothing but ashes behind. I'd never felt those things before, and when I was in the middle of those feelings the only thing—the *only* thing—I could think about was making the feelings stop, however I could. Because it happened when she was with T, and didn't happen at other times, I made the logical, reasonable, and totally stupid assumption that the cause of the feelings was her relationship with T. From there, I reached the equally stupid conclusion that the thing that would make the jealousy go away was if she changed something about her behavior or her relationship with T. (I also didn't really recognize the jealousy for what it was, powerful as it was, because I'd never felt it before, which only reinforced the notion that it was “caused by” her relationship with him.)

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I behaved pretty reprehensibly, playing passive-aggressive games and just generally acting like...well, like a lot of people dealing with their first crisis in a poly relationship act. Predictably, it destroyed my relationship with her. She went on to marry T and cut me out of her life completely; the very thing I was afraid of came to pass because of my jealousy. Had I not behaved the way I did, we'd probably still be close, almost 15 years later.

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**In hindsight, now that I have** a lot more experience and a bit more emotional wisdom under my belt, I can see where I went wrong. When a person feels jealous, and attributes the jealousy to the things that trigger the jealousy, he doesn't actually understand the jealousy. It's a bit like a person who has never seen a rabbit except when it's being pursued by a dog believing that the dog is the cause of the rabbit. In reality, jealousy is built of other emotions; jealousy is not "caused" in any direct sense by the action that triggers it, but rather by a different emotional response to the act that triggers it.

In my case, R and I had never really discussed her relationship with T; nor had we talked about, in any capacity at all, what her intentions with T were or what effect, if any, that would have on her intentions with and her relationship with me. Put most simply, I saw her and T together, I had no idea what that meant for her and me, so I became afraid of being replaced. The fear of being replaced, in turn, led to the jealousy.

Now, had I actually taken the time to examine the jealousy and really try to understand it, I probably would've figured that out. And, once I understood that the jealousy was caused by a fear of being replaced...well, a fear of being replaced is a fear that you can work with. A fear of being replaced, all things considered, is really not that difficult to address. All it requires is conversation about intentions, perhaps a bit of reassurance, and time enough to demonstrate that the conversations and reassurance are genuine, and hey, there you go.

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### **Getting back to the refrigerator:**

Fixing the refrigerator means doing exactly that. It means saying, “I know that I am feeling jealous. I know that the jealousy is brought about by some other emotion—some emotion that is triggered by the action that makes me jealous. I need to figure out what that other emotion is, and I need to figure out why that action triggers that emotion.”

Until you do that, you are helpless in the face of the jealousy. If you don’t understand it, there is nothing you can do to address it. Trying to understand it isn’t easy; when you’re ass-deep in alligators, it’s easy to forget that the initial goal was to drain the swamp, and when you’re entirely overwhelmed by gut-wrenching emotions that are tearing you to pieces, it’s easy to forget that these emotions are grounded in some other emotions. In the middle of jealousy, all you want is for the jealousy to stop, and you don’t care how.

**So, you confuse the trigger with the cause.** You believe, erroneously, that the source of the jealousy is the action that triggers it. You see your partner kiss someone, you feel jealous, you want the jealousy to stop, you pass a rule: “No more kissing.”

This is the equivalent of saying “No more frozen food in the house.” The problem is still there. The root has not been touched. The broken refrigerator is still sitting in the corner, dripping water. You haven’t actually dealt with the underlying causes at all; you haven’t addressed the insecurity or fear of loss or fear of being replaced; you’ve just “solved” the problem by shielding yourself from situations that might make you address it. You’ve “solved” the broken refrigerator by passing a rule against bringing refrigerated food into the house.

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**And then you do the same thing to anyone** else who comes in to your relationship. You tell anyone coming into the house, “Look, here’s how it is. You can come over, you can have dinner with us, you can spend time here. but under no circumstances are you to bring any frozen food into these premises.” And if anyone asks why—well, secondary partners don’t get to ask why, do they? Those are the rules, take ‘em or leave ‘em. We Just Don’t Talk About the giant, leaky, broken refrigerator in the corner. We don’t talk about it and we don’t allow anything that might make us confront the fact that the damn fridge is busted. No frozen foods. No kissing, no saying “I love you,” no doing anything that might make us actually have to deal with the refrigerator. Take it or leave it.

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**One common situation that arises** often among polyamorous people is a fear of competition, or a sense that another person who expresses an interest in your lover is threatening to you. Often, this fear is based on the idea that people who are like you are more threatening than people who are not; as a result, many times people in polyamorous relationships will pass rules like “I feel threatened if you have another partner who is the same sex as me. You can sleep with other people who are not of the same sex as I am, but do not become involved with people who are the same sex as I am.”

Sometimes it works the other way: “I don’t mind if you have partners of the same sex, because I know what they can offer you and I know I can compete with them, but I get insecure when you have partners of the opposite sex because they can provide an experience I can’t.” Whatever. The emotional process is pretty much the same.

One consequence of a feeling like this (and believe me, this particular feeling is *very* common—so common it’s a cliché) is a couple who will search for that mythical “Hot Bi Babe” who will sleep with both of them, on the idea that it’ll keep anyone from feeling jealous.

In any event, the general idea is this: A person has an existing, primary relationship. One of them, or perhaps both of them, then begin sexual or romantic relationships with others. One of the people in the primary relationship has a jealousy response, such as “I don’t care when you are with a partner of the same sex, but when you are with a partner of the opposite sex I feel insecure.”

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**Now, put yourself in that position:** you are jealous when your partner has some sort of relationship with some other person under some particular circumstance, such as when your partner has sex with someone of the same sex as you. What do you do? Well, you have a few choices

You can take the “I’m not the boss of my partner, so I will let my partner do his thing; my jealousy is my issue to deal with, and I shouldn’t feel it, so I won’t” approach. That usually involves squashing or suppressing the jealousy, which in turn usually means sitting in a dark room crying and feeling like you’re going to throw up when your partner is out having fun, sometimes combined with moodiness and passive-aggressiveness when your partner returns...y’know, just to spice things up.

Of course, you’re going to feel like crap. Getting back to the refrigerator, this is like continuing to put food into the fridge even though you know it’s broken. Result: wilted lettuce and sour milk. *Bon appétit!*

Or, you can say “I get jealous if my partner does X or Y with a person of Z sex, so we’ll make a rule in our relationship: no X or Y with someone of Z sex.” There you go, you don’t feel jealous any more. Of course, the underlying cause is still there—you haven’t fixed it. What will likely happen then is that six months down the road, you’ll find that action W triggers the same jealousy. Okay, no biggie—we’ll outlaw W too. But wait, action Q and S trigger jealousy too—who knew? Hey, we can handle this; we’ll pass rules against Q and S. Oh, and against T, too, because T is, y’know, kinda like S. And we’ll pass rules against—you know what, this other partner of yours is just making me feel jealous in general. Veto!!!

And then you end up with problems in your own relationship, because, y’know, unintended consequences and all that. One of the unintended consequences of vetoing a person your partner loves is that you hurt your partner; one of the predictable consequences of doing things that hurt your partner is you damage your relationship.

Or, there’s a third solution. You can break up with your partner, because you feel jealous when your partner does X with a person of sex Y, and your partner wants to do X with people of sex Y, and you don’t like controlling your partner and you don’t like feeling jealous, so this isn’t the relationship for you.

Hey, at least it’s an honest response. You’ve thrown the refrigerator away, and replaced it with a new one.

And that’s about where your options end, right?

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**Wrong. There's another option.** You can fix the refrigerator.

In the past, when my partner has done something that's made me feel jealous, I've tried just ignoring it in the hopes that the jealousy will go away, and I've tried telling my partner not to do that thing any more, and neither one has ever really been effective. Nowadays, with a little experience and (I hope) a little more emotional maturity behind me, my response is much different. Were I in your partner's shoes, the conversation would go a bit differently:

I don't have any problem with my partner having a relationship with another man, but I'll continue using that as an example. If I did have a problem with that, the conversation between my partner and I might go something like this:

*"I am uncomfortable with this, and for some reason the idea of you playing alone with a person of the same sex as you are is OK with me but the idea of you playing alone with the person of the same sex as I am is not OK with me.*

*I do not understand these feelings yet, but they seem like they are rooted in some kind of fear (such as the fear that I cannot compete with someone of the same sex as me), or possibly some jealousy. I need to work on this, because I recognize that it is irrational and unjustified. Therefore, it is OK with me if you play with someone of either sex, but I will want to talk to you about it afterward, and analyze my feelings and reactions, and try to understand them so that I can address whatever is causing these reactions. After you are done, I will need some time with you so that we can work together at identifying what is causing this irrational emotional response on my part."*

That's what I mean when I say "fix the refrigerator."

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**The nice thing about doing this** is that you can, if you have isolated the emotional response beneath the jealousy and identified positive ways to deal with it directly, end up in a position where you don't feel jealous anymore. Even when your partner does the things that used to trigger the jealousy. You just don't feel jealous any more. You do not need to pass rules banning certain behavior and you do not need to veto someone, because you don't feel jealous anymore.

The downside, though, is that your irrational fear will fight to protect itself; it won't go down easy. The thought process goes like this:



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*“If my partner does these things with someone of the same sex as me, then I might lose my partner, because someone else might give him the same things I give him. If I lose my fear of losing my partner, I will no longer have a reason to ask my partner not to do these things. If I don’t have a reason to ask my partner not to do these things, then my partner will do them, because I know he wants to do them. If my partner does these things, I will lose my partner, because then someone else will give him the same things I give him. So I better not get over my fear, because if I get over my fear, then I won’t have a reason to ask him not to do these things, and that means he’ll do these things, and that means...I’ll lose him!”*

And ’round and ’round it goes. You don’t want to lose the fear, because you’re afraid something bad will happen, and you can’t give up the fear of something bad happening because if you do...you’re afraid something bad will happen.

**Fixing the refrigerator requires a leap of faith.** It requires believing, even if your fear is telling you otherwise, that your partner is with you because your partner *wants to be with you*. If you start with the assumption that your partner wants to be with you, then anything becomes possible—including defeating your jealousy without passing rules. But you have to start there. You got to take it on faith, even when your fear is telling you otherwise—and believe me, it will.

**It also requires communication.** I’m not trying to suggest that if you are secure and confident in your relationship, and you don’t try to pass rules banning the triggers for feelings like jealousy, that means you’ll automatically know what you want. Far from it. In any relationship, communication is absolutely vital. Maintaining a healthy relationship means talking to your partner about how you feel and where you’re at, even when you’re feeling negative or destructive things.

But I have found that that works best when the communication is a *dialog*, not a *decree*. Rather than saying “I feel jealous when you do thus-and-such; I hereby forbid you to do thus-and-such,” you say “I feel jealous when you do thus-and-such. Here’s why I feel jealous; these are the things I’m afraid might happen. How can we all work together to address these things?”

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**Now, if you're on your hands and knees** behind the refrigerator with a flashlight in your mouth, you probably don't want your partner trying to pile more food into the fridge while you're working on it, right? So it seems reasonable to say, "Honey, don't put any more food in there until I fix the problem, 'kay?" And this is exactly what many people will tell you they're doing when they say, "My partner does something with someone else, and it makes me feel jealous, so I told him not to do that thing any more—but only until I get to the bottom of it and deal with the jealousy."

All well and good, but you have to be really careful with this approach. If you're not, then what happens is that days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, you're still uncomfortable with your partner doing whatever it is, months turn into years, and what's actually happened is that you've said you're going to fix the refrigerator but it's still sitting in the corner dripping water all over everything and, effectively, you're just not buying any refrigerated foods anymore.

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**When dealing with a jealousy or insecurity issue**, it's important to differentiate between not wanting to do something because it's uncomfortable, and not wanting to do something because it's actually harmful. Some things are a no-brainer.

People often accuse me of being against rules of any sort in a relationship. Actually, this isn't the case at all; I have rules in all my relationships, and certain standards of behavior that are essential and non-negotiable for anyone who wants to be partnered with me. I do not intend to come across as saying that there should be no rules in a relationship. Quite the contrary; some rules are reasonable and prudent, and some fears are rational and justified.

A trivial example is sexual health. STDs are real. they exist, and they can kill you. Anyone in a sexual relationship of any sort, especially multiple sexual relationships, is well-advised to keep that in mind, and design a minimum standard of behavior for himself and his partners to deal with that risk. In fact, you'd have to be a fool or a madman not to think about STDs when you create your relationship arrangements, and fear of STDs is not only rational, it's downright prudent. Creating rules to protect yourself from this risk is a damn good idea.

Things aren't as clear-cut when you're dealing with emotional risk, however, Fears and insecurities are very, very clever at protecting and justifying themselves, and separating something that is actually harmful from something that's merely uncomfortable isn't

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always easy. It requires work. It requires examining, with an unflinching eye, what it is you're afraid of and what it is you think will happen if your partner continues doing the thing that makes you jealous. And above all, it requires that you ask yourself, on a regular basis, what is the point of all this?

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**Many people in the poly community seem to be inherent pessimists**, and to have a worst-case scenario of relationship.

What I mean by that is that many people start their polyamorous relationships from the perspective that polyamory itself is inherently destructive, you can't reasonably expect your poly relationships to be healthy and positive, and if you don't ride herd on them all the time and manage your relationships and your partner's behavior strictly, all that will happen is you'll lose everything.

You see this in the language that people use to describe their relationships. "Well, we do primary/secondary in order to *protect* the primary relationship." Protect the primary relationship? Protect it from what? The basic premise is that if you DON'T do primary/secondary, then you'll automatically find yourself in a situation that destroys the primary relationship; after all, if that were not the case, why would you need these structures to "protect" the existing relationship in the first place? If you believe that you need these rules in order to make sure your needs are met, then what is it that makes you think that another person's needs must automatically come at the expense of your own?

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**When you start from the default assumption** that other relationships are a threat, and you need to manage and control that threat, then of course it makes sense to assume that part of managing that threat means passing rules that place strict controls on your other relationships. But if you start from the default assumption that polyamory is implicitly threatening to your existing relationship, then what the hell are you doing poly for?

But wait, it gets worse! You see, people's behaviors don't spring from a vacuum. People act the way they do for a reason. If your partner's behavior, left unchecked, is disrespectful to you and recklessly disregards your needs, then you don't really solve the problem by placing controls on his behavior. The problem runs deeper than that.

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And on the contrary, if your partner loves and respects you and wants to do right by your relationship, then you don't need to place controls on his behavior; his behavior will reflect the fact that he wants to do right by you, and does so because he chooses to, not because you make him. As Shelly wrote elsewhere, behavior is an emergent phenomenon. You don't actually control your partner's heart by controlling his behavior. If your partner's heart is not really with your relationship, making rules won't protect your relationship; if your partner's heart is with your relationship, making rules to protect the relationship is unnecessary.

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**Let's get back to not putting vegetables** into the fridge while it's being fixed. Yes, this is a very, very good idea. It is not always true that a person who says "not now" actually means "not ever." There are many people who say "not now" because they are, in fact, working on the problem, and sometimes working on the problem takes time. Here's the thing, though. Working on the problem means *working on the problem*. It means taking affirmative action toward addressing the underlying jealousy. It means making progress.

What can sometimes happen is that a person can sincerely believe that he wants to address the underlying insecurities or fears behind his jealousy, and he can genuinely imagine a time when he does not have those fears and his partner can do whatever it is that triggers the jealousy. But you aren't going to get from here to there without discomfort. If you wait for a time when you no longer feel uncomfortable, then you'll be waiting forever, and that time will never come, because the very act of working on the fears and insecurities means being uncomfortable. You cannot challenge a fear without exposing yourself to it. You cannot fix the refrigerator until you actually get on your hands and knees and crawl around behind it and start tinkering with the guts of the thing with a flashlight in your mouth, and that's uncomfortable. If you say "Don't do this until I feel comfortable with it" and then you don't challenge your discomfort, you are saying "Don't do this" and sneaking the rule in the back door. If your relationship is broken and three weeks later you're still saying "No, honey, don't bring any frozen foods home yet, it's still not working," what kind of progress are you making?

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**Things can get a little trickier still** (this business of romantic relationship is messy, isn't it?) when your partner has done something, intentionally or unintentionally, to damage your trust or to mistreat you in some way. When this happens, it takes time to rebuild trust and to repair the damage, and it's reasonable to expect not to keep doing things which are threatening until you get enough time and distance to separate the damage from mere discomfort.

Of course, I say "mere discomfort" even though I know full well that that "mere discomfort" can be an overwhelming tidal wave of jealousy that so completely washes over you that it leaves you shaking and twisted up in agony and unable to do or say or think about anything save for making the feeling go away. Hey, I never said it was easy—only that it's possible, and necessary.