

The Seven Deadly Sins of Polyamory

by Master Roy

©2007

Ok, granted, "seven deadly sins" is a bit melodramatic. These "sins" are the seven passions that if not checked can seriously injure, if not destroy, an otherwise healthy poly relationship. I will examine these emotional land mines and offer some practical principals I have learned that may help to circumvent these temptations. These principals are pulled from my first hand experience, culled from other resources, and from discussions with other poly folk over the years.

One quick note on definitions. For my purposes, polyamory is defined as (1) multiple partners (2) in consensual, (3) non-monogamous (4) relationships. I will often refer to the poly relationship as a "family". In my experience, many poly relationships are very much family units. In addition, my experience has been limited to leather poly families. Naturally, my thoughts will reflect this bias. Due to space limitations, I cannot begin to examine all possible permutations of poly arrangements. Nevertheless, these general principles should hold true for most scenarios.

I must also give one quick disclaimer for my selection of this topic. Naturally the biblical reference of the "Capital Vices" or "Cardinal Sins" is intentional. However, what is not intended is any offense or insult to anyone's belief system, religious choice (or lack thereof), or any other offense to anyone's sensibilities for the use of a religious allusion. All is meant in good fun and to promote discussion (much like a mnemonic device) of an important topic.

At the outset it should be noted that poly folk are no more susceptible to committing these "sins" than anyone else in any other type of relationship. However, as poly relationships are different from other relationships, members of the poly group are prone to their own set of temptations and tribulations. A relationship with just one other person is hard enough to manage. Juggling the dynamics of multiple partners with their myriad intricacies can test the true hero in us all. In my view, poly relationships are not for the faint of heart or the lazy. Issues of jealousy, anger, bruised feelings, loss of privacy, commingling of assets, and possible emotional abuse are just a few of the concerns that can become multiplied in poly relationships.

Just as the problems inherent in juggling multiple relationship dynamics can be intensely troublesome, the rewards of a successful, healthy, "working" poly dynamic can be that much more satisfying, rewarding, and intensely fulfilling. A healthy poly relationship can result in an awareness of companionship, family, compassion, inclusiveness, security, sexual gratification, and even love.

First Sin: Lust. Wait a minute. Isn't a poly relationship all about lust? Anyone who has been in a relationship for any length of time knows that lust is a false-god and is fleeting. Okay, maybe I am bit jaded. The true measure of love (however you may wish to define it) is being able to not throttle your partner(s) a few weeks after the "honeymoon" is over and you find his/her body hair on YOUR toothbrush. Again. Believe me, lust is fleeting. Unchecked covetousness can damage years of work spent in building your family. You may have had a great time with that new person at the play parties. Everyone seems to along so well when together. But can everyone truly work together as a family dynamic? If the enthusiasm for adding a new person to the family is not shared by all, jealousy, soon followed by resentment, will follow. Insecurity and a perceived threat with one's place in the family can lead to disaster and heartache. It may be hot at the time, but when the passion cools and reality rules the day, do you really think this new person is a good fit for the family? Assessing and repairing the damage caused by momentary lust can be overwhelming. Without honest feedback (mutual communication) from the others in the poly dynamic, trouble is sure to follow. Don't let short-lived passions overcome your common sense and all the work you have done to form your relationships.

Second Sin: Gluttony. Slow down. Building a poly family is not a contest to see who can form the biggest, baddest polyhedron in the community! Don't be a pig. Leave some for the next guy. Just as adding someone to the relationship based upon how "hot" they appear to be or how good they would look in the family holiday photo invites disaster, adding folks to the mix for the mere sake of adding someone is sure to injure an otherwise perfectly good dynamic. Folks need time to work together, to bond, to see if they are indeed "family worthy". Even worse, forcing someone through guilt or other emotional blackmail to agree to adding another to the family that they are not comfortable with (a unilateral re-negotiation) is relationship abuse. Instituting trial or probationary periods for potential new family members can reveal underlying issues -- not only with the candidate but with existing poly members. Don't short-circuit this process. Not everyone you have a relationship with needs or should be in your poly relationship.

Third Sin: Greed. Greed can take many forms. Acquiring another member of a poly family often entails the commingling of assets (and debts) of another. This should happen slowly and in a methodical manner. Take your time and realize what you are giving up (or acquiring). Unfortunately there are those in our community who, consciously or not, take advantage of others. And there are folks, for a variety of reasons, that allow themselves to be used. Adding folks to a family dynamic simply to accumulate wealth is (or should be) a cardinal sin. Just as not all members of a poly family necessarily live with one another, there is no rule that you have to suddenly sign over the deed to your house to your new Dominant. Or that your Dominant is now responsible for your student loan debt (nice try!). You may be so hungry to be part of a family and in the heat of the honeymoon (see Lust) you commit assets to the relationship that you will later regret. Solving a Rubik's cube blindfolded and drunk is easier

than untangling commingled assets once the relationship goes south. A poly dynamic should reflect a heart/spirit connection of some degree -- not as a means to acquire assets or to off-load responsibilities.

Fourth Sin: Sloth. Relationships take work. Yes, relationships are hard work. They are separate entities that can drain the lifeblood from your soul and leave you a withering, dry husk. I told you that I have issues. Seriously, anything worth having is worth working for. Trite but true. And poly relationships take even more work. Just as a relationship with a single individual takes time and effort, the poly relationship with its many interconnected (sometimes convoluted) nodes require nurturing, feeding, healing, tending. If you want to see the passion and vitality of a relationship (any relationship) die, just become a lazy partner. For example, a method to combat lethargy in a leather poly relationship includes dedication to established protocols and rituals. Keep them alive by ensuring everyone understands the need and purpose of the code of behavior. Discard or revise those that are no longer serving the purpose for which they were instituted. No single action will communicate laziness to another family member more forcefully than lax enforcement of established ritual/protocol. The reward for the hard work in keeping the fire burning in a relationship, avoiding complacency, and learning not to take one another for granted is a vibrant, loving poly family.

Fifth Sin: Wrath. Anger. Outbursts of anger are a red flag that something has gone awry in the relationship dynamic. So are actions such as the withholding of affection, support, or comfort. One expects that in a poly situation with its diverse personalities - especially in the early stages of formation - that there will be some limit testing. How far can you push before someone pushes back? But prolonged or renewed limit testing is an attempt to coerce an action or reaction. If the anger goes unchecked, serious damage to the relationship will result. Typically, this anger is a result of someone who feels (rightly or wrongly) that their wants and/or needs are threatened. Or their quality time with one or more of the family members (usually with the Dominant/Head of the family) will be reduced. Anger is a symptom of jealousy, fear, and confusion. Deal with the symptom immediately. Any change - even good change - results in stress. Deal with the anger by minimizing the stress. Often, all that is needed is honest, open communication.

Sixth Sin: Envy. Jealousy can be the worse sin of all. It can be a symptom of deep underlying resentment, fear of loss, or even over-protectiveness. Or, as in my experience, it can simply be a indicator of misunderstanding of where everyone "fits" in the family. Symptoms of envy can include various behaviors: belittling of another, unprovoked anger, unnecessary competitiveness, withdrawal. In any family scenario there is a need for clearly defined roles and expectations. Everyone should understand their duties and obligations in the dynamic. Rarely will jealousy simply disappear on its own. It is tempting to ignore the emotion rather than to face it. Confronting jealousy and its attendant behavior must be immediate. Do not allow it to germinate and to mature into something worse. Again, clear, honest and timely communication can provide the necessary reassurance another may need. Discover the true source of the issue and

resolve it at the outset of the behavior.

Seventh Sin: Pride. Stubbornness. Polys are a radical change from the societal "norm" by their very definition. Everyone involved in this group dynamic must be willing to accommodate change in lifestyle. Change takes time to process. Everyone needs time for the stress associated with the unique issues presented in a poly arrangement to dissipate. During the formation stage of the dynamic, the members need to bond with the others in the group with whom they interact. Avoid the forming of unwanted, hurtful alliances. Members of the family should not be allowed to bully or intimidate others. Folks have to realize that "face time" with the other members will necessarily be reduced as the family grows. With the growth of the family, consider the issues of privacy and the need for simple "down time". Willingness to embrace change is critical. A clearly communicated process for the redress of grievances (perceived or real) and an ethic that honors that process strengthens the family unit.

There you have it. Seven emotional traps or "sins" that are guaranteed to damage or kill an otherwise healthy polyamorous unit. The bottom line is to use your God-given (I could not resist one more religious reference) common sense in maintaining and nurturing your poly relationship. Treat one another with respect, listen to what others are really saying, and don't forget why we enter into these relationships in the first place: to have some sinfully good fun!