

Cultivating Compersion: The Magic of Feeling Joy for Others

A polyamorous trait useful for anyone who struggles with jealousy.

Elisabeth A. Sheff

People in polyamorous relationships seek out the kinds of situations that tend to make people jealous. For most people, the thought of watching their beloved flirting, snuggling, smooching, or even (especially?) having a terrific and/or emotionally intimate conversation with someone else evokes many feelings – anguish, rage, terror, and despair. Joy is not usually at the top of that list. Because they court jealousy-provoking situations, polyamorists have developed a range of ways to deal with jealousy and recognize positive reactions to it.

Why Care?

Polyamory is certainly not for everyone – in fact, it is most likely workable or desirable only for a minority of the population. Why should others care about jealousy or become interested in compersion? It is because jealousy is corrosive, it focuses energy outward on negativity with someone else instead of directing attention inward to self-betterment. Anyone who has ever suffered a bout of serious jealousy knows how incredibly distracting, uncomfortable, and even overpowering it can be. You don't have to be in a consensually non-monogamous relationship to confront a serious case of jealousy – it can happen with your friends, siblings, co-workers, team-mates, rivals, or monogamous beloved.

Face Jealousy

Because jealousy can be so overwhelming, it can be tempting to try to stuff it down or make the person who sparked the jealousy do something different to stop “making” you feel jealous. The thing is, stuffing it down does not work – the jealousy is still there, secretly poisoning your mind and interactions. Demanding that the person who sparked the jealousy change something to make you more comfortable also does not work, in part because no one can “make” you feel anything because it is your own internal experience, and in part because stunting interactions instead of courting self-growth leaves a tiny little safe(ish) space to inhabit, but keeps you bound by the fear of jealousy. Instead, try tolerating your own feelings. Bearing the discomfort of jealousy can be incredibly difficult, but if you try, it can get easier with practice. You won't die from experiencing jealousy, even if you feel like you might.

Polyamorists basically stuff their faces into a big hot steaming bowl of jealousy, so they have developed a range of ways to tolerate that excruciating emotion. For individuals who want to learn to tolerate and even grow through their jealousy, Kitty Chambliss's excellent book *The Jealousy Survival Guide* offers many exercises and ways to breathe through the intense jealousy until it passes. People in relationships who are dealing with jealousy together could benefit from Kathy Labriola's wonderful guide, *The Jealousy Workbook*. While both of those books are designed for a polyamorous audience, they could be useful for anyone who is struggling with jealousy or trying to cultivate compersion.

What can you do?

In addition to facing jealousy, there are some ways to turn lovers' romantic successes – and others' successes of any variety – into joy for you and success for them. The techniques below can help to mitigate some of the most negative impacts of jealousy and make it easier to deal with, even if it does not go completely away.

Negotiate the Practical

One way to deal with jealousy is to negotiate the situations that provoke it. The problem is, it can be incredibly challenging to decipher what is a practical need and what is jealousy controlling the interaction. “I feel uncomfortable when you two are all over each other in front of me, so please hold off on making out until you have time alone” is a reasonable request – doable without impinging on anyone severely. “I feel uncomfortable when you hang out with those oxygen breathers, so please only date aquatic folks who can get oxygen through their gills” is obviously ridiculous, but people sometimes negotiate ridiculous restrictions to manage jealousy.

Distinguishing between a reasonable practical accommodation and a manipulation to control others in order to contain jealousy can be incredibly difficult and requires people to be honest with themselves and each other. One easy clue to tell the difference between the two is if it directly affects you, then it is reasonable to ask your beloved to work with you on finding a way that all of you can be comfortable. If it does not affect you beyond sparking your insecurity, the way to deal with it is to face the insecurity instead of making others change what they are doing.

Cultivate Gratitude

Focusing on what others have and you don't will ultimately produce only unhappiness because it is definitionally a focus on lack. Turning instead to thoughts of good things in your own life can help you to realize the many awesome things you have going for you, even if you are currently taking them for granted. Can you read? Great! Then you are better off than the 775 million people in the world who are unable to read. Do you have a safe place to sleep at night? Lucky you! You are better off than the millions of people who are homeless, refugees, runaways, or are experiencing abuse in their homes. Do you have access to clean water? Sufficient food? Reliable electricity? Can you see? Smell? Hear? Walk? Poop regularly? Some people can't, and it turns out to be a significant drag for some of them. Are you in constant pain? Running for your life? Under aerial bombardment? Then you are much better off than others who are in that situation, and cultivating gratitude for everyday amenities can make an enormous difference in how lucky you feel.

Take a New Perspective

It is easy to be proud of children when they do something well or feel great when something good happens to them. Taking that perspective and applying it to everyone else – not that you created them, so you get to take credit for their accomplishments, but that you really want the best for them – allows you to enjoy their success without it causing you pain. It does not have to be a zero-sum game, that if someone else wins it means that you lose. There can be

enough of some things – especially non-material things – for everyone. Rather than focusing on what they have and you don't, consider being happy for their successes instead. If it helps to imagine them as your child or a child of your heart, try that!

Focus on Self-Development

Jealousy is essentially other-focused, captivated by what others have and you lack. By focusing instead on positive self-growth, you can redirect your energy from the negative stewing of jealousy to doing more positive things in your life. Learn a musical instrument, study a new language, or take up dancing. Do something engaging to create some new neural pathways that take you out of jealousy mind and catapult you into curiosity and fun.

If you have nothing to be proud of, then do something! Volunteer, donate money often, do something kind every day. Spend all of the energy you used to waste on feeling jealous of what other people had or did on making yourself the kind of person you can be proud of.

Polyamorous folks often use these tools to tone down their jealousy, and cultivating compersion can make everyone more satisfied, no matter how many partners they have.