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Polyamory is the new 'swing'

Thursday, June 05, 2008

BY VICKI HYMAN
Star-Ledger Staff

With all due respect to the, er, motion of the ocean, it's the quantity of the waves that count for some sexual adventurers.

Too vague? Okay, you come up with a peppy opener about swinging that's suitable for a family newspaper. But why are we bothering to beat around the bush? CBS sure isn't: "Swingtown," an hour-long relationship drama about mate-swapping in the 1970s, premieres tonight at 10, shedding a lava lamp on the sexual revolution in the suburbs.

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That a broadcast network, and the oldest-skewing one at that, is airing a show about swingers (even though it's safely distanced by the cast's porn-star mustaches and thirst for Harvey Wallbangers) speaks volumes about how laissez faire we've become of alternative sexual lifestyles.

There's no hard evidence that casual swinging is on the upswing, or that more people looking for mates in the plural, a practice known as polyamory, or "many loves" (sort of like polygamy, minus the religious underpinnings and exploitation commonly associated with it, not to mention the bad clothes).

But some sexuality experts say that major societal, medical and technological changes over the last century have contributed to decline in expectations of lifelong monogamy: extended life expectancy, available, effective and cheap birth control, early puberty, increased opportunities for women in the workplace, advances in fertility treatments, and, last but not least, the internet.

"I think it's leading toward quiet variations in lifestyles," said Robert T. Francoeur, a professor emeritus of biology at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and the author and editor of many books on human sexuality, including the International Encyclopedia of Sexuality.

"I don't think we realize to what extent sexual relationships, intimacy and concepts of marriage are going to change. I don't think we realize how much things have already changed."

Swinging entered the public consciousness in the late 1960s on the heels of the free love movement. You might have heard tales of "key parties," where the sexually liberated paired off with friends and neighbors for the night. (The 1969 hit film "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice" took a humorous look at the confusion of affluent suburbanites when faced with the temptations of the sexual revolution.)

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The provenance of polyamory, in which a person forges emotional and sexual connections with two or more people, is less clear, although the term is thought to have been coined nearly 20 years ago.

"I believe every generation thinks that they invented this and gives it a different name," says Tom, 39, an IT professional from Bloomfield who didn't want to use his last name because his family doesn't know he is polyamorous. "In the '70s, there were swingers. It's the 80s, it's open relationships, and in the '90s, it's polyamory."

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Today, anyone with rudimentary googling skills can find, within minutes, TriState Poly, a support and discussion group for the polyamorous in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut; a North Jersey swingers club that hosts monthly meet-and-greets at hotel bars (\$5 cover charge or two free passes with paid rooms); the Garden State's own "Swinging Granny"; and the personal website of a Somerset County couple that goes into great detail about their likes and dislikes and includes an impressive glossary of swinging terminology.

There's a polyamory match-matching site, a list of therapists who specialize in counseling the polyamorous, and let us not forget to mention SwingFest 2008 at the Westin Diplomat in Hollywood, Fla., which will feature an adult expo, shuttle service to a nude beach, and the Fore Play golf tournament.

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Swinging on the links aside, polyamory is not a lifestyle one can slip into easily. Think one relationship is hard? Try balancing the emotional and physical needs of three or four people. (Not to mention the division of labor: "It's just like every other relationship, there's just three or four people in it," Tom said. "You argue over whose turn it is to wash the dishes like everyone else.")

Prominent polyamorist Deborah Taj Anapol is a psychologist and relationship coach in San Francisco and the author of "The New Love Without Limits," and the co-founder of "Loving More Magazine."

"A lot of people are just not equipped to have more than one relationship at a time," said Anapol, who was born in Camden.

If you're interested, the first step is to have an open and honest discussion with your current partner about the possibility. If you can't get that far, she advised, stay monogamous.

"Polyamory to me is really a spiritual path," she said. "It's a tremendous growth opportunity. It will show you very very quickly any area where you're insecure. Any old wounds that you have will come to the surface, any weak spots in your relationship will come forward. Basically polyamory will show more quickly than just about anything else all the unfinished business you have in your life."

Vicki Hyman can be reached at vhyman@starledger.com

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