

Frank (a white man of 42) comes to see you to talk about some problems that he is having in his relationship. He says he wants a place where he can just talk it all through to try to make some sense of it. Frank has been with his partner Sid for 10 years. They have always had an open relationship and have both had casual sex with other men during their time together. They never negotiated this explicitly and it tends to be something that Sid keeps very separate (when he is away at conferences, for example) whereas Frank brings people back to the flat which they share and often encourages Sid to join them for a threesome.

The other men generally aren't interested in anything more than a one-night stand. Recently though, Frank met someone at a nightclub who he got on really well with, Paul. Sid was away, so Frank and Paul ended up spending the weekend having sex and hanging out. Frank realised that he enjoyed this a lot more than the casual sex encounters which he has had, and wants to start seeing Paul as another partner. However, Sid is deeply uncomfortable with this. He says that he wants them only to have other sexual relationships from now on and to limit it to one-off encounters.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Frank?
- What assumptions might you have about Frank's relationship on the basis of this information?
- How would you proceed?

You agree to help Frank to continue exploring this situation in order to clarify his own thoughts. In subsequent sessions he reveals that he is torn because he doesn't feel that he can stay with Sid under Sid's conditions but he would hate to lose that relationship which is so good for him, and in which he has invested so much, both emotionally and financially. Paul is much more open to Frank's preferred way of doing things having had friends in similar set-ups when he lived in California.

Frank expresses the view that Sid's way of structuring their relationship is far more normal than what he, himself, is proposing. You use this opportunity to talk about the variety of forms of non-monogamy that exist, acknowledging that while Sid's version may be more common in the particular gay community they are part of, other people do manage their

relationships in a way which is closer to Frank's preference. You present the emotional and sexual continua, exploring the different places in which people place themselves at different times.

After six sessions Frank feels clearer about what he wants and the legitimacy of this. However he is also respectful of the fact that Sid may not share these values. He invites Sid to attend relationship therapy with him to work this out and you give him a referral to a gay-affirmative practitioner.

Loz, Lee and Jen are looking for support because Loz has recently been made redundant and this is putting a strain on life in the home that the three of them share. Jen speaks of her frustration at the fact that Loz does very little around the house even though he has all this free time now. Lee says that he is happy to talk about these things but he wants to know that the professional isn't going to discriminate against them on the basis of their gender, sexuality or relationship style. He saw a practitioner some years ago who insisted on referring to him as female even though he is a trans man, and has heard negative things from other polyamorous people who have gone to professionals.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Loz, Lee and Jen?
- How would you respond to Lee's views about your position on these issues?
- What assumptions might you have about the relationship on the basis of this information?
- How would you proceed?

In terms of responding to Lee you should be honest about your experience in working with LGBTQ, and openly non-monogamous, people (whatever this is). If necessary, you could offer to refer them to a colleague who is more experienced in these areas (see Further Reading), but it would also be worth acknowledging that there are relatively few such experts and they may have long waiting lists. It may well be appropriate to read up (perhaps being guided by clients to relevant websites), and talking with colleagues with expertise on open non-monogamous relationships, if you and the clients decide to meet again.

See Chapters 2 and 5 for advice about working around gender labels. It is worth using similar ask etiquette to that suggested around gender and sexuality in relation to relationship structures. For example, exploring how they define their relationship, what their agreements are, and how this fits within the wider communities they are part of, and their cultural backgrounds and how these relate to where they are now.