

# MONOGAMISH}

To an increasing number of couples, being committed doesn't mean being sexually faithful. *Women's Health* delves into a provocative new movement: negotiated fidelity.

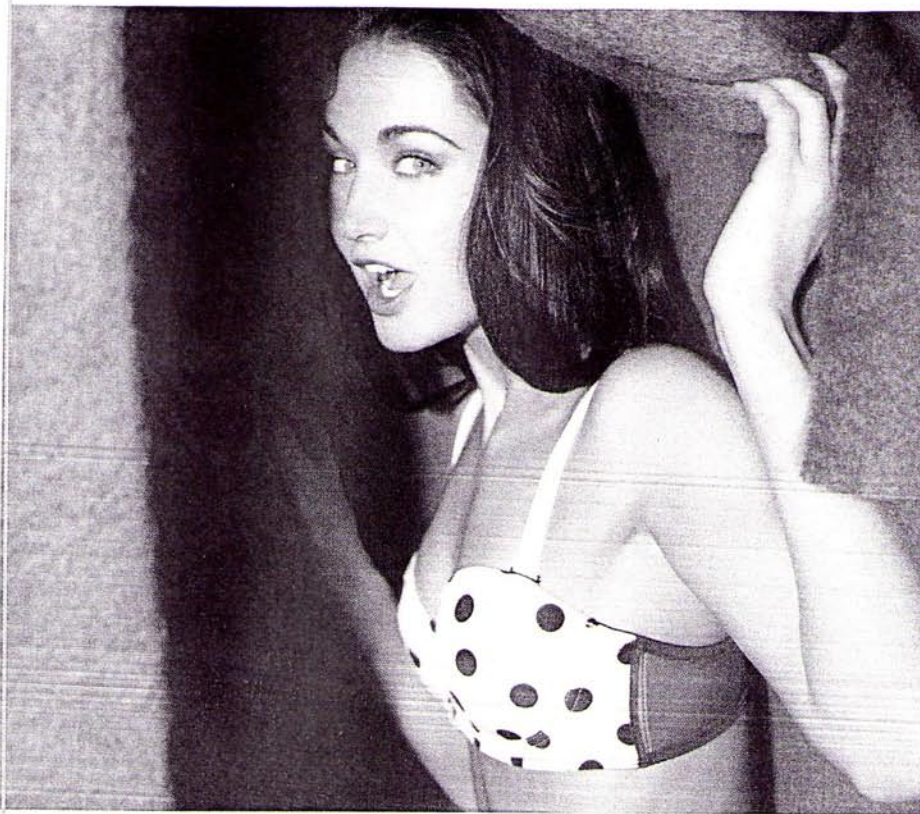
*By Tracy Clark-Flory*

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Elizabeth\* was basking in postcoital bliss when her husband, Chris, turned to her and asked,

## “WOULD YOU EVER WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE ELSE?”



They had been married for six months, together for nine years before that, and monogamous the whole time. True, they had toyed with the idea of a threesome, usually during dirty talk, but this was different. “I was appalled,” says Elizabeth, a 30-year-old TV producer living in Los Angeles. She assumed this suggestion opened the floodgates to any number of horrible things that could doom our marriage.” Faced with Elizabeth’s tears, Chris, 33, tried to explain that it was only an uncensored inquiry. Still, she couldn’t let it go—and not necessarily out of anger. Underneath my disgust, I was actually intrigued by the possibility,” she admits. Over the next few months, she started to become more aware of other men. “I had been with Chris for so long that I didn’t really notice when guys would flirt with me,” she says. “Once I

started flirting back, it gave me the confidence to consider the what-ifs.” She slowly came to terms with the fact that, yes, like Chris, she also wanted to twist the sheets with other people.

Chris and Elizabeth seem like the poster couple for a happy marriage. Elizabeth’s Facebook page is plastered with photos of their romantic adventures—hiking in Peru, snowboarding in Utah, surfing in Costa Rica—and each shot shows them in a smiling embrace that can’t be faked. “Everyone says to us, ‘Oh, you guys are such a perfect 1950s couple,’ and it’s like ‘Um... no, we aren’t!’” Not anymore.

### BROKERING A BEDROOM DEAL

Elizabeth and Chris are among a growing number of couples who are reconsidering the terms of their commitment. They’re not swingers, per se:

Their arrangement is more accurately described as negotiated monogamy, or “monogamish,” as popular sex columnist Dan Savage has dubbed it. Instead of assuming complete sexual fidelity ‘til death or divorce papers do us part, these couples open up monogamy for discussion.

The idea is for both partners to come clean about what they feel emotionally capable of handling, often through ongoing conversation. Some couples agree to allow only one-night stands, while others give permission for continuous hookups. Some settle on a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy; others share every detail, even using it as foreplay. There are those who allow flings on business trips or vacations, or give each other one-time passes. And some say yes only to online flirtation.

Elizabeth and Chris have agreed to be honest about

temptation and sometimes act on it, and always report back. So far, Chris has made out with another woman while on a business trip, and Elizabeth maintained a fling of several months. “The rule so far has been to step out only with someone who completely knocks your socks off—the kind you’d cheat with if you weren’t having such an honest relationship,” she says.

In many instances, it’s the dread of cheating (researchers at the University of Texas at Austin estimate that it happens within 40 to 76 percent of marriages) that drives couples to negotiate their sexual parameters. Some experts, like psychologist Christopher Ryan, Ph.D., coauthor of *Sex at Dawn*, go as far as to argue that monogamy fundamentally goes against the programming in our DNA—that our ancestral tribes shared not only food and shelter but also sex partners.

Beyond biology, a set of 21st-century social factors has created a hospitable environment for negotiated monogamy to flourish—factors such as “economy, technology, and demography,” says historian Pamela Haag, who researched these arrangements for her book *Marriage Confidential*. Women have greater financial freedom, the Internet connects like-minded souls, and we’re living longer than ever, which makes lifelong monogamy a much bigger (and harder-to-keep) promise.

Even if flexible monogamy doesn’t become the dominant trend anytime soon, Haag feels it could be in the future. “After all, premarital sex and interracial marriage were widely scorned just 70 years ago,” she says. It’s difficult to know just how common these arrangements are now, since



each one is unique and these couples are often closeted. (Only Elizabeth and Chris's closest relatives and friends know about their decision.) Haag crunched the numbers in an online survey of 1,879 respondents and found that 41 percent of her mixed-gender panel "thought nonmonogamy might work if the couple agreed to it beforehand." This means, she says, "if you're at a cocktail party with 20 married couples, chances are at least one or two of them has agreed to be nonmonogamous."

## PLAYING WITH FIRE

So a growing group of people believe this can work in theory...but what about in practice? Elizabeth and Chris were thoroughly prepared—or so they thought. For several months, they talked openly about it, read books on negotiated monogamy, and perused online forums. Elizabeth was the first to try it, but she jumped headfirst into a sexual relationship with a lothario who broke her heart. After it ended, she says, "I would randomly break down and cry. I didn't want to have sex with my husband."

Another married woman who was experimenting with negotiated monogamy—Ainsley, a 36-year-old graduate student from Wisconsin—ended up in a similar situation after her first foray. She says, "I felt guilty for the sadness I brought into our home."

Amazingly, both husbands helped tend their wives' wounds, and both couples say the ordeal drew them closer. "I've never felt more loved or more confident that I had married the perfect person. Chris wasn't insecure—he was there holding my hand," says Elizabeth. Her takeaway: Be more selective about partners.

Overall, jealousy hasn't been an issue for Chris. In fact, his wife's dalliances turned him on. Elizabeth, on the other hand, says she "definitely felt a pang of jealousy" when Chris told her

about his business trip make-out session. "But it wasn't as bad as I expected it would be," she concedes. "I think if I knew her, or he told me he'd slept with her, I would've taken it much worse. I won't know for sure until we actually experience it, but I anticipate it being difficult."

An additional possible speed bump: Just because a couple has agreed to be monogamish doesn't mean staying within the lines of the negotiated boundaries is easy. Beth, a 27-year-old editor in New York City, pushed to open things up a year after she got married, and her husband agreed. Off-limits: one of Beth's ex-boyfriends, in particular.

Predictably enough, she slept with him. Her husband was furious. "There's even more of an opportunity to cheat when the rules are so complicated," says Beth. After working through the betrayal, they're still "technically" monogamish, she says, but life has proven to be too hectic for exploits. "I'm a busy-ogamist," she jokes.

## MAKING IT WORK

Maintaining negotiated monogamy is difficult, says

clinical sexologist Ian Kerner, Ph.D., author of *Sex Recharge*. There are usually consequences, he says, like enduring resentment or even falling in love with someone else. But Kerner has seen the concept succeed. These couples, he says, "have a fairly elastic sense of sexuality in their relationship," along with a sexual thrill-seeking side. When it fails, he adds, "it tends to be when one person is the driver and the other feels pressured to agree." If the decision is made out of anger or resentment—*shocker*—it tends not to work, either.

For couples who are curious, Kerner suggests "reinventing sex in the context of a monogamous relationship first"—via exploring fantasies, new positions, toys—before looking elsewhere. Many times, sexual variety isn't really what couples are after; most often, there are more fundamental issues in the relationship that haven't been dealt with yet, such as a lack of emotional intimacy. Some people find that just talking about the possibility of sex with other partners ignites a spark.

If a couple decides to jump in, transparency and

communication are key, says psychotherapist Tammy Nelson, Ph.D., author of *Getting the Sex You Want*. "Each partner should disclose their feelings and fears, both when they're asked and when they aren't," she says. "The whole relationship must be based on rolling with the changes and waves of emotion."

And from the trenches, Elizabeth's advice is simple: "Don't rush it." She was so quick to engage in the first opportunity that she ignored some red flags about the guy.

For certain people, the payoff can be worth the risks. "Being realistic about expectations can make some couples more stable and happy in the long run," says Nelson. It's common, she adds, for those who happily stick to negotiated monogamy to report that it has led them to greater intimacy.

Elizabeth may feel differently after she and Chris have tested the waters more, but for now, she agrees: "Our relationship has never been better than on the other side of this choice. I don't have to wonder, *What if?* I know how amazing our love is. And it's empowering to feel so in control of my sexuality." ■

## Would You Ever...?

We polled readers of *Women's Health* and *Men's Health* to find out what they'd allow their partners to experience in a nonmonogamous union.

