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SAVAGE LOVE

COMMIT TO SOMETHING
BY DAN SAVAGE

My boyfriend of eight months, K, and I are polyamorous. We started the relationship on that foot, and for a while I was the partner he spent the most time with. There have been ups and downs, but overall our relationship is solid and loving. However, recently we both started dating the same woman, L, and they have been spending more time together than with me due to my work schedule. They both reassure me that they love me and care for me deeply, but I am an anxiously-attached person and sometimes I have panic attacks when they spend more time with others/themselves and fear that they're going to leave me. I'm working on becoming more secure via books on cognitive behavioral therapy, and I'm looking into in-person therapy. This is my first serious relationship, but not his (I'm 22, he's 35). And while K has been super patient with me, my worry and grasping is a point of friction in the relationship. K has told me he doesn't want to be solely responsible for my sexual satisfaction and my need for constant reassurances that he cares. The anxiety has been flaring up most strongly concerning sex — we're all switches, and K and L are both professional Dominants. I feel neglected if K doesn't penetrate me but he penetrates L, or if L gets to penetrate K via a strap-on and I don't. He's very good about voicing what he desires, while I'm learning to speak up despite feeling like I'm just being needy and grasping again. I love both my partners, but I've been feeling sexually neglected — and with a HIGH sex drive, it's been quite painful. This is my first "trio rodeo" and I really want to make it work — I've seen a future with K for a while (the I-want-your-children kind), and L is joining those future visions. How can I find a way to create more opportunities for sexy-time and not ruin it with anxiety attacks?

BDSM Enthusiastic Lover On Voyage4 Emotional Durability

I'm always suspicious when two (or more) people claim to be deeply in love after dating for a short period of time, BELOVED, and eight months qualifies as a short period of time. Premature declarations of love — to say nothing of premature commitments — up the emotional stakes, which can place a strain on a newish relationship (or a trio of them) that it may not be strong enough to bear. Not yet.

You'll feel a lot less anxious about this relationship, BELOVED, if you make a conscious effort to lower the stakes. In other words: Dial it way back, girl.

You've been dating K for a little more than half a year, and you've been dating L for whatever "recently" adds up to in a world where eight months equals LTR. It'll reduce your anxiety levels and soothe your insecurities if you tell yourself you aren't committed to K and L as life partners. Not yet. This is the *beginning* of both these relationships. All you're committed to right now is continuing to get to know K and L. You're committed to dating them, you're committed to exploring where this might go, you're committed to enjoying your time with them, however long it lasts.

But you are not committed to *them*. Either of them. Not yet.

Committing yourself to therapy is a good idea, BELOVED. Everyone should commit to working on their emotional and mental health. You and your therapist can start by reevaluating whether a poly relationship is right for you in practice. In theory, you understand poly and you may want a poly relationship. (Particularly if it's the only way you can have K.) But as someone with anxiety issues and hang-ups about all sex acts being divided up equally, poly may not be right for you, or it may not be right for you right now. After a little therapy (or maybe a lot), who knows? (Also: Trying to portion out sex between three people like you would ice cream for three small kids — making sure each kid gets the exact same number and size of scoops — is unrealistic. Sometimes you'll get more; sometimes you'll get less. Eyeing those scoops too closely is only going to generate conflict.)

You've been at this rodeo for only eight months, BELOVED, and if these problems are already coming up, it might not be your attachment style or your anxiety. It's possible this rodeo isn't for you.

This is about your Campsite Rule. I think you should amend it. In 1984, when I was 20 years old, I met an LGBT rights activist who was 53. He was working with the group I contacted after I'd called the local youth crisis hotline here in Baton Rouge and got called a faggot. (I hadn't realized they created youth crises rather than fixing them — my bad.) We had a summer fling (initiated by me), and then I went off to study in Europe. Because of him, I knew the difference between making love and getting your rocks off, and I moved through the world with the self-confidence he told me I deserved to have. I ended up working in national politics for 30 years, and I did all of it as an out gay man. I moved back home a few years ago and tried to find him with no luck. Finally, about a month ago, I did. He's in his mid-80s now and under hospice care, but he does remember me. I got to tell him everything I'd done with what he taught me. I only got about a third of the way down the list before his eyes filled with tears — and pride. To call that a special moment would be an understatement. So here's my suggested amendment: If you benefited from the Campsite Rule — if someone left you in better shape than they found you — look that person up and tell them what they meant to you. And if he's alone and in hospice care, spend some time being there for him and holding his hand.

Can't Think Of Funny Acronym

Your old summer fling left you in better shape than he found you — the heart of my Campsite Rule — and the lessons he imparted had a hugely positive impact on your life. But instead of amending my Campsite Rule, CTOFA, which covers the conduct of older and/or more experienced people dating and/or fucking younger and/or less experienced people, I'm going to amend my Tea and Sympathy Rule.

"When the younger person in an older/younger affair speaks of it in future years, they have a duty to be kind," goes the Tea and Sympathy Rule, which covers the conduct of the younger/less experienced partner. "If you were left in better shape than you were found, strive to do no harm in return. And don't speak of your affair — not even kindly — if doing so will wreak havoc on the life of a former lover who honored the Campsite Rule." And today, by decree, I'm adding CTOFA's amendment to the T&S Rule: "And if you benefited from the Campsite Rule — if years ago a lover left you in better shape than they found you — look that person up and tell them what they meant to you."

Advice professionals often urge us to confront exes who did us wrong — many find closure in those confrontations — but we rarely talk about reaching out to people who did us right (in every sense of the term). My first truly serious boyfriend, who I met at college, was a wonderful and very sexy guy who helped me grow in so many ways. He definitely left me in far better shape than he found me — like CTOFA, I was able to express my gratitude to him before he died and I'm so glad I did. (RIP, Tommy Ladd.)

If you were lucky enough to have a Tommy in your life, dear readers, if you were lucky enough to have an early sex and/or romantic partner who left you in better shape than they found you, reach out to them and express your gratitude. You'll be glad you did.