

Long Term Open Relationships - A New Survey

By Tom Moon, MFT

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When it comes to the subject of open relationships, absolute and passionate opinions abound. Some people “know” that they are the only kind of relationship that works for gay men; and others “know” that all open relationships are doomed to fail. Opinions are plentiful, but reliable information about what actually happens in open relationships is scarce. That’s why I was very interested in meeting Blake Spears and Lanz Lowen.

Blake and Lanz met in their mid-twenties and have been together for 32 years. After all that time, “We still have great sex,” Blake tells me, contradicting the common pessimistic belief that sexual interest inevitably wanes in a long-term relationship. How do they do it? “One reason,” Lanz says, “is that we’ve been in an open relationship from the very beginning. If we hadn’t been open, we wouldn’t have been able to grow individually or as a couple. We’ve been able to bring what we learn with other sex partners into the relationship, and we’ve also been able to bring some of those partners into the relationship, sometimes as three-ways, but also as friends. Being in an open relationship has helped keep our relationship interesting and alive.”

Their experience contradicts some common beliefs about open relationships. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard people say, “Once you open a relationship up to outside sex, it’s the beginning of the end,” or “When you have outside sex, you lose your focus on each other, and the closeness gets diluted by all the outside activity.” Both Blake and Lanz agree that their experience has not matched those predictions.

But for years they struggled with the issues that inevitably arise in any open relationship in relative isolation. “We felt aberrant.” Blake said, “We couldn’t talk about it with our straight friends because to them an open relationship automatically meant ‘infidelity.’ But it was also hard to talk about with our gay friends. After the AIDS epidemic began, a lot of them just thought having outside sex was irresponsible. We also felt pressure from our friends to be ‘the perfect gay couple.’” And as the gay marriage movement gathered momentum, they felt they were expected to be poster boys for gay marriage, which seemed to

mean monogamy, even though many of their friends were neither monogamous nor aspired to be.

My very subjective impression is that a distinct majority of gay male relationships are open (although I also have the impression that more and more young gay men are opting for monogamy), so learning how difficult it is for so many people to discuss the issue somewhat surprised me. That's why I was happy to learn that Lanz and Blake have decided, as a way to give back to the community, to embark on the ambitious project of using their combined training and experience in research and psychology to do an independent, in-depth study of other long-term open gay male relationships.

They want to find out how other couples navigate the issues, what "rules" they find helpful, what impact the outside sex has on their relationship, and so on. They emphasize that their goal is not to proselytize for open relationships, and that they very much understand and respect the fact that monogamy is the preferred option for some. Their goal is to increase our understanding of how successful open relationships work. So far they've interviewed 20 couples from all over the United States and Canada. Their goal is to interview a total of 100 couples and then to make their findings public, probably in book form.

They've found that while it's been fairly easy to find men in open relationships, it's actually been hard to find very many who are willing to be interviewed about it. Sometimes that's because the couple is still struggling with the issue. Sometimes it's because the men don't want their friends to know that they're non-monogamous. "It's amazing how charged the issue is for a lot of people." Blake tells me.

If you're a gay male couple, have been together for eight years or more, and have explicitly agreed with each other to have "outside" sex, they'd like to talk with you.

Each member of the couple will be interviewed separately for about 45 minutes. Confidentiality will be respected, including not sharing one partner's comments with the other. Names will not be used in the final report, but if participants wish to be interviewed under a pseudonym, that wish will be honored. Participants won't be reimbursed for their time, but Blake and Lanz will donate \$25 to the AIDS or LGBT organization of their choice. Once the interviews are compiled and analyzed, they'll be happy to share their findings with the couples.

I believe their project deserves the support of our community. It may fill in gaps in our knowledge, dispel some misconceptions, and, above all, help to end the wholly unnecessary taboo against open discussion of this issue. If you would like to be involved in the study, you can reach them at lanzlowen@aol.com, or call them at 510-530-6875.

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