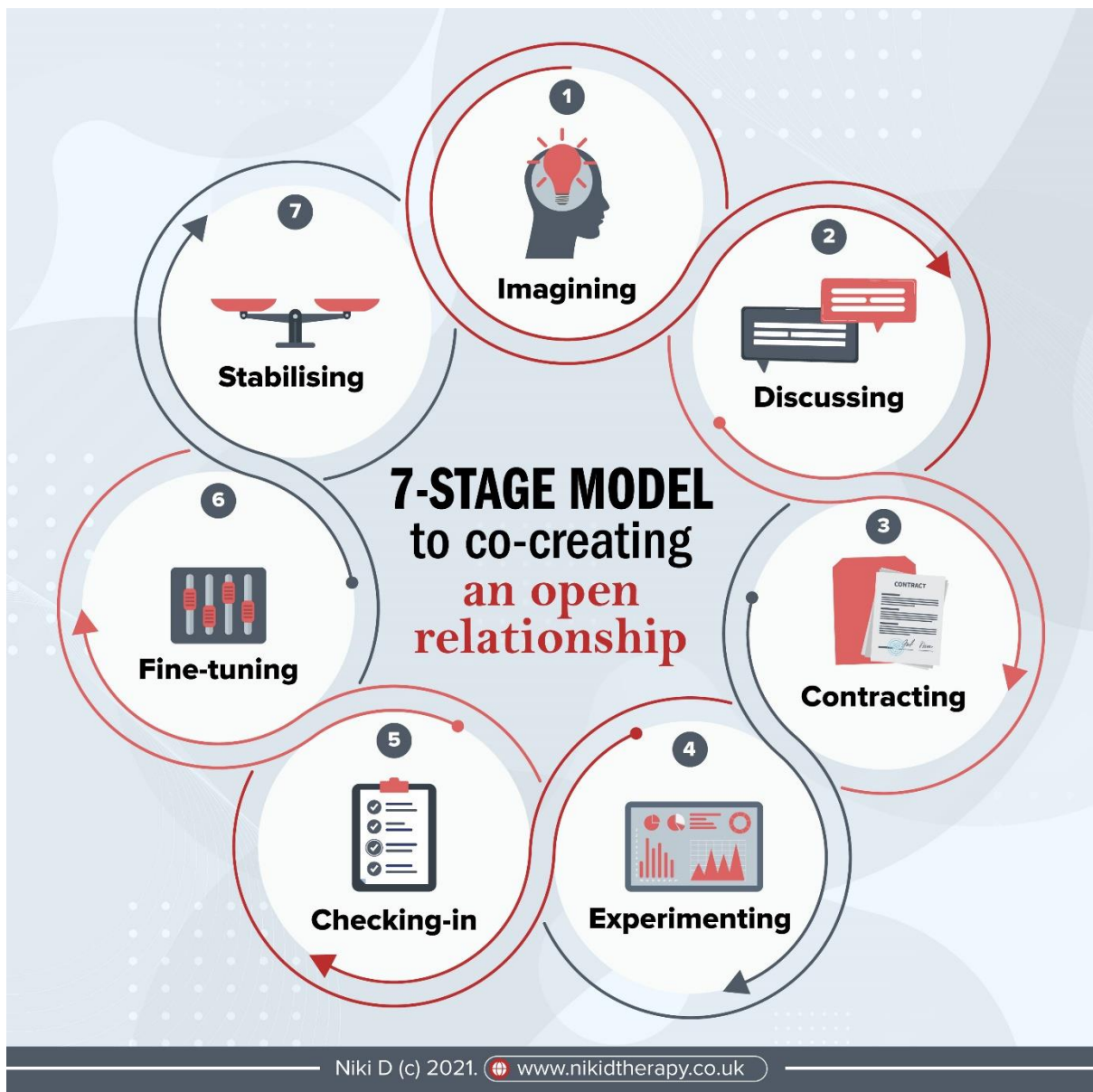


7-stage model to co-creating an open relationship (Niki D)



Stage 1: Imagining

When you think outside the box there is more freedom to be creative, to tailor-make a relationship that moulds to your unique combination. Let your imagination wander, dream without judgements, enjoy playing with other possibilities in your mind. Take yourself and your partner seriously in your daydreaming but also have fun with it. Make it about you and your wishes, desires, hopes and needs. Without censoring, invent and create other worlds, other relationship scenarios.

From the expansive freedom of these ideas, start imagining what these scenarios might feel like in your life. For example, imagine how it would be to go on a date then return home to your partner, imagine it the other way around. Imagine having an exciting threesome and seeing your partner's arousal and pleasure with someone else. Imagine your partner seeing your sexual pleasure also. Picture falling in love with someone else or vice versa. Imagine you both fall for the same person or living in a triad, a quad. Envisage going to play parties, picture being the one who stays home. Picture your friends, family, colleagues, neighbours, unexpectedly seeing you kissing someone else. Visualise coming out to those groups of people. Keep going. Follow where your imagination takes you. Notice if you avoid thinking about certain inevitable aspects of being in an open relationship. Find the honesty within yourself to face this and identify what your resistance is about.

Stage 2: Discussing

Now is the time to pull your ideas out of the clouds and the rainbows and into the space between you and your partner. Start talking about it all and don't rush it. Do what you can to ameliorate any stress or pressure when discussing this topic. Decide on the attitude you want to take when you discuss it. Agree on pausing the conversation if it gets tough.

Consider as a couple how you deal with differing opinions, disagreements and with conflict. Do you become adversarial? Does one of you sulk, become defensive or emotionally and physically withdraw. When conflict arises, how might you stay connected? Can you rise to the challenge of differing viewpoints and see it as an exciting aspect of your relationship dynamic that keeps you on your toes, intellectually, emotionally, politically?

Identifying and articulating your relational values is important. If you go off track, come back to your intention with your partner. What values are important to you both and are you living them or not? Hold an attitude of curiosity about each other and the topics you are discussing.

Agree on a time frame. Notice each other as you talk. Observe each other's body language as much as what is said. This conversation is about something you will co-create, so you both need to talk, and you both need to listen well also. This type of discussion will interweave throughout the rest of your relationship together. The more sophisticated you get at communicating clearly and respectfully, the easier the process becomes.

Stage 3: Contracting

Out of dreaming and discussing comes decisions. If you continue to discuss and imagine and never live out any of your ideas, then work out what is going on. Is it safer to stay in this comfort zone? How your contract can be as varied as you both are. It can be written, verbal, drawn out in thought bubbles. The point of this stage is getting realistic, uniting in your decision, teasing out the grey areas and the sticking points. It is about clarifying expectations, conjecture and half-truths under the bright light of a relational conversation. Be real about the limitations you may need to face together. It is not a legal document; it is a focus for you both to come together and do the relational work in a deliberately thoughtful way. Ensure you attend to this stage when you are both calm and clear headed and feel emotionally open and connected to one another. This type of relational contracting is about respect, negotiation and clarification. It isn't about manipulation or dominance. Consider if you want to use veto power, no rules or somewhere in between. What will your hard boundaries be (limit situations) and soft boundaries (limits that can be negotiated). Try and cover it all. Except of course you won't!

For more information on contracting read Tristan Taormino *Opening Up* (2008). Or for therapists, Rhea Orion's *A Therapists Guide to Consensual Nonmonogamy* (2018).

For this to be effective, you will both need to be honest, even when that honesty conveys something your partner, or even you, might struggle with.

People can feel that having a contract offers something solid to hold onto. Yet you cannot contract out uncertainty! Everyone and every relationship pose the same risks. So, what you are actually committing to is uncertainty, but with some clear guidance to help pave your way over life's rocky ground.

Stage 4: Experimenting

Relationships are always an experiment and now it is time to get out there and start experimenting. Go on that date, follow up that lead on Grindr, Feeld or OkCupid. Invite that gorgeous group of open-minded people you met recently to dinner. Check out a swinger, trans, BDSM or polyamorous event. But try something. Smaller steps might be the more prudent idea at first, but not always. Honour the limits you decided on in your contracting. There will be time to make changes to your agreement later.

Most important is the respectful manner you continue to hold towards each another (and others of course).

Ask yourself what you want from this beginning stage. Are you wanting to plunge into a new world of sexual and relational possibilities with abandon or with caution? Do you want to commit yourself to new ways of connecting with others and not replicate old, unhelpful relational habits? Although this stage is about discovering more about yourself and new people, hold in mind what might be discovered about your existing relationship too. Your time, attention and energy need to be directed here also.

Be mindful of what I call the **3 D's** - of discomfort, disruption or damage. Situations which elicit discomfort might prove useful to stay with as you adapt to something new. Other scenarios may become disruptive to your life in ways that can be positive and transformative or be problematic and create damage. I recommend Jessica Fern's book *Polysecure* (2020) for clear guidance on addressing relational wounding and attachment panic. It is really important that you do not push yourself to adapt to a scenario which generates an emotional crisis and attachment trauma.

Stage 5: Checking-in

Do this often! It doesn't have to be a lengthy and serious review every time a new experience outside of your dyad takes place. However, there does need to be a 'how are you feeling about?' 'What was it like when this happened?', 'I would really like to talk to you about...'

There can also be more regular, quick check-ins when you notice you or your partner struggling. If the timing isn't right, let them know it is something to return to. If you find yourself swerving the check-ins, identify why and address it. Hold realistic expectations. Things will go wrong. There will be boundaries crossed, there will be poor communication, there will be other people's feelings and situations to factor in. You are likely to find out lots of useful information in this stage. Stay attuned to yourself and your partner as you talk. You might notice jealousy, anxiety and excitement. All these feelings offer you a guide towards what needs attention. If you feel insecure and uncomfortable with the level of sharing, or with certain activities or people involved, speak about this so you avoid acting it out instead. Identifying and then articulating your feelings is important, but so too is understanding what led to a

particular emotional response. What is that emotion conveying? What needs to be either soothed or addressed in relation to how you are feeling? Is it ingrained socio-cultural messages that don't sit with your values and need to go? Is it an indicator that something is not right in your relationship dynamic? Or is it an emotional clue that a certain boundary is needed or that you want to slow the pace down?

Checking-in is a way of giving and receiving information so you can move into the next stage of this opening up process.

Stage 6: Fine-tuning

With the ongoing checking-in process, you both will have far more information and experience, more wisdom and humility, to fine-tune your open relationship and the peaks and dips along the way. This stage may involve going through the other five stages again, and again. It helps smooth off the rough edges in your relationship. It might mean you need to start therapy; or address a relational trauma you have avoided for years. It might mean coming out to others, changing your living situation, or a shift from sexual to non-sexual in an important relationship. It could mean tightening your safer-sex agreement, or loosening your veto powers. Your values and views may have changed. You certainly will have altered in ways that could be wanted or unwanted. In this stage you will need to tease out imbalances in your relationships, communication problems, sexual issues and emotional challenges like possessiveness, guilt, insecurity and neediness. This is the stage where you realise that equality in your relationship is not about perfect balance and symmetry. There will be an imbalance in an open relationship. One partner may be having a wonderful time with multiple lovers, whilst you are struggling to get some dates on the go. We all come in a context and the factors of your context might mean there is a smaller pool of people to choose from.

Look for the information in your emotional reactions and use it to make decisions that are healthier for you and your relationships. Look for where you feel a threat (perceived or actual) and where you find safety. This stage is not the time to hide in either naivety or cynicism. Both positions mean you are avoiding dealing with something important. Resist the urge to be self-critical or judgemental about the

feelings you have. This is the stage for the development of emotional intelligence and emotional resilience.

Stage 7: Stabilising

You got there! Don't make this stage your aim, as you will miss out on some of the complexity and fun along the way. However, feel proud of yourself and your romantic and/or sexual others when you realise how steady and special your open relationship is. Because of course it won't always be, so enjoy the calm waters for now. Honour your personal growth and resilience, your capacity to 'walk your talk,' and show integrity by living out your values in your relationships. Keep cherishing your relationships and yourself. Keep humble too – it is likely you will be plunged back to any of the other stages at some point.

Stabilising can also include a return to a closed relationship. In which case celebrate your courage for trying out something many people swerve and instead have non-consensual affairs. Celebrate your dignity in reaching limits in yourself and your relationships and deciding to accept these. Turning away from open and polyamorous relationships can also mean turning away from strongly held principles and a group or community that supported and encouraged you. Notice this, grieve this, and find allies.