

This is a special preview of the new book about unconventional intimate relationships, *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator: Uncommon Love and Life*.

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About this book. Most people assume that intimate relationships are supposed to look a certain way and follow a certain path: the traditional “Relationship Escalator” that involves monogamy, living together, etc. until death do you part. That model works very well for plenty of people, and it enjoys many social advantages. It’s just not the only game in town.

In 2013-14, journalist Amy Gahran (who also wrote the blog [Solo Polyamory](http://SoloPolyamory) under the pen name *Aggie Sez*) surveyed 1500 individuals about how their intimate relationships diverge from the Relationship Escalator. In this 25-chapter book, their powerful, personal stories illustrate the five main ways that loving relationships between consenting adults might work differently. Over 330 survey participants are quoted (with permission), and many more sources are cited. ([Endnotes](#) and other [resources](#) are posted online.)

This comprehensive introduction to a full range of unconventional relationship styles can help people jump-start their own explorations — and understand better why more people are choosing different ways to love.

Learn more about the Relationship Escalator: Download the [ebook sample chapter](#) from Amazon. Or [subscribe to our e-mail list](#) to get the book preview plus extra content.

About this sample chapter. Chapter 10 explores the overlap between friendships, romantic/sexual relationships, and life partnerships. Mainstream culture tends to draw sharp lines between these categories. In particular, friendships are often assumed to be strictly platonic, as well as less important and less emotionally/logistically committed than romantic relationships. That’s why people often say, “We’re *just* friends” -- as if friendship is intrinsically diminutive.

This flies in the face of many people’s lived experience, since friendships often include some sex and/or romance. And even in a monogamous context, platonic friends often are some of the most important, committed and longest-lasting connections in a person’s life.

I was moved to offer this particular chapter during March 2017 by the recent untimely death of my dear friend **Michael Kirk**, who left behind his wife and two young children (also dear friends of mine). Michael was an ardent supporter of this book project, and his no-bullshit input helped make this and future *Off the Escalator* books much better. In fact, the print edition of the first book is dedicated to Michael.

If you wish to join me and my friends in supporting Michael’s family in their time of need, please donate (as I and several others have) to help with medical and memorial costs: <https://www.gofundme.com/3fs2b1s>

Thanks, and enjoy this free sample!

Amy Gahran

NOT "JUST" FRIENDS: THE FRIEND-LOVER SPECTRUM

People often discuss friendships and intimate relationships as if these are distinct categories which are, to some extent, mutually exclusive. But in real life, they exist along a spectrum of personal connection.

In mainstream culture, friendships are generally considered close (or at least, somewhat close) personal relationships between people who do not share sex or romance. However, it's actually quite common for friendships to include some sex, affection and/or romance, at least at some times, in a mutually rewarding way. This can even be true for people who consider themselves monogamous.

Before delving into the gray area between friends and lovers, it's worth taking a closer at friendship — especially, how friendship is commonly perceived and discussed. Grasping friendship's potential for significance and intimacy can clarify many aspects of unconventional intimate relationships that might otherwise seem confusing or challenging.

The Language of Friendship

Words get very, very interesting when it comes to friendship.

It's common for people to discuss friendships as if these relationships are inherently less important than sexually or romantically intimate relationships. That is, a friendship, regardless of its depth or duration, rarely is counted as a "real" relationship — even though friendships might be some of the most enduring and meaningful relationships in a person's lifetime.

Consider this: once past teenage or college years, many people believe it sounds odd to call someone their *best friend*. Often, adults lack the vocabulary to clearly acknowledge the depth and intensity of very close friendships.

I am very intimate with my two "best friends" — not my favorite term but most apt out of the usual terminology. However, we don't have sex and aren't in a traditional relationship.

— Grace, nonmonogamous

Furthermore, social norms implicitly assume that if there's any chance that two people might share sex or romance, then they must default to having a sexual or romantic relationship. This is why, when mentioning a potentially attractive friend who happens to not be a sexual/romantic partner, people commonly volunteer this clarification: "*Oh, we're just friends.*"

...That diminutive "just" is telling. It indicates how society prioritizes sexual romantic relationships or above others. It also implies that whether people are sexually or romantically involved is always relevant — even to people who are not involved.

People may assume I'm "just friends" with someone when really our relationship transcends "just friends." I recognize this is often because they've been conditioned to think a certain way about relationships, but it's still frustrating.

There's nothing "just" about friendship in the first place. With that someone, I feel home.
— *Em, aromantic asexual in a queerplatonic, open relationship*

In my survey, many people described friendships as some of their most significant and meaningful relationships. They often noted a strong dislike for how friendships tend to be undervalued, and also for how unusually close friendships are often treated with suspicion.

I have a few friends who I wish could be more like life partners. Some friends I have romantic feelings about living with, creating a home and possibly a family. I would like to be able to raise kids with nonsexual life partners, whether we are romantic with each other or not. I have not felt this way about the people who I date and am sexual with.

In the past, monogamous partners have been uncomfortable with my close or romantic friendships. So now I'm poly, and it works for me. It is amazing to be able to connect with people in whatever way is natural for us, and not be prevented because of social strictures.

— *Emma, queer and nonmonogamous*

I think it's completely bogus that people are taught to value their sexual and romantic relationships above their friendships. I should not be less important to anyone because I'm not fucking them.

— *Clare, queer and asexual*

Such commonplace devaluation of friendships is a bit odd, considering how strong, enduring friendships are venerated in popular media. Substantial same-sex friendships are widely celebrated in TV shows, movies and books — the *bromance* or *womance* plot device. For example:

- Batman and Robin
- Thelma and Louise
- Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy
- Cagney and Lacey
- Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid
- The four female stars of *Sex and the City*

The nonsexual, nonromantic deep bonds shared by these characters are quite central to the story. Certainly, none of them would ditch the others in favor of an Escalator partner.

No, those two people might not be dating even if they've been close for years and cuddle sometimes. They might be intimate friends. Frodo and Sam are life partners; that doesn't mean they're boning. You get the drift.

— *Ety, in an undefined, long-term open relationship*

That said, the socially perceived value of a friendship doesn't automatically rise if it starts to include sex, or perhaps some overt flirtation or affection. Quite the contrary. Under current social norms, if friends develop a sexual or romantic connection that isn't heading toward the Escalator, this is often perceived as foolish or dangerous — or at least, as a sure way to ruin or cheapen that friendship.

I enjoy crushes and flirting, the rush of infatuation, and occasional making out with friends — all of which are things I cannot safely indulge from within monogamy.

Human relationships don't fit well into simple boxes. There's a lot of gray area between friends, lovers and life partners. I enjoy being able to take each relationship for what it is, not imposing a structure on it.

— K, polyamorous

Sexual Friendships

Sexual friendships are a popular, if often underestimated or overlooked, approach to sharing intimacy. This is when friends enjoy sharing sex, either occasionally or regularly — even though they may not especially share romantic feelings or consider themselves to be in love.

Roughly 15% of responses to my survey clearly indicated a current or past sexual friendship. Probably this was significantly underreported since I inquired about intimate relationships — and under Escalator-influenced concepts, people often do not count friendships (even ones that include sex) as “relationships.”

I once had friends-with-benefits relationship that lasted three years. Most people don't understand that. They think that if you get on well enough to keep having sex for years, surely you'll naturally drift into a more traditional romantic relationship? But it worked for us.

I never had any interest in being his girlfriend, and vice versa. Still, we were excellent for what we were to each other — great sex and an affectionate friendship.

It would have been awful if I'd felt pressured to start getting lovey-dovey with him. That was just not what I felt for him; we'd both have been miserable. I have no regrets, even though we had some tough times.

— Melinda, nonmonogamous

Mutual affection, respect, attraction and erotic compatibility are hallmarks of sexual friendships. Sexual attraction isn't also what brings these friends together. Sometimes the sex happens first, and sometimes the friendship.

It's not unusual for people to discover that exploring sexual friendships expands their capacity to deepen any friendship.

In the last five years, I've had a lot of casual sexual connections. Increasingly, most of these have also had some element of friendship. I've also found that my nonsexual relationships have gotten more intimate; I've become more emotionally open to them as well.

— Katharine, polyamorous

The main advantage of sexual friendships is that they generally allow a high degree of autonomy, enjoyment and satisfaction, without much of the emotional or logistical overhead often associated with intimate relationships. Common drawbacks of sexual friendships include awkwardness, mismatched emotions or expectations, miscommunication and the hard-to-unlearn effects of social norms.

Where Sexual Friendships Fit in

In consensual nonmonogamy, often sexual friendships are enjoyed in addition to more intense, committed, or entwined relationships.

Since I got married, I've had a few friends with benefits relationships. They range from friendly acquaintances I see a couple times a year and maybe have sex with a few times, to friends I see often and specifically get together with to have sex.

For whatever reason, not even counting the fact that I'm already in one primary-type relationship, we wouldn't work well as committed romantic partners.

— Jen, married and polyamorous

However, for some people, or at some points in life, enjoying sex with friends might actually be a healthier choice than having more intense love affairs or strong commitments. Deeper, more committed ongoing intimacy often involves substantial effort and emotional turmoil — especially when relationships are new and shiny (perhaps heading toward the Escalator), or when they are troubled or changing. Deeper relationships also tend to consume considerable time, energy and attention, which can hinder progress on other fronts in life.

Just because someone might not want a major romance or life partnership right now doesn't mean they must remain celibate or without romantic spark, or that they must resort to one-off hookups with strangers. Sexual friendships can help people feel happy, more comfortable or less stressed.

I've frequently had relationships of various types evolve into what I categorized as "friends with whom I occasionally have sex." This means we care about and support each other, without the pressures or expectations of being in a romantic relationship. And we still enjoy physical intimacy when the mood strikes us.

I have found this type of relationship actually suits me best, and plan on having only this type in the foreseeable future.

— Dragon Fox, polyamorous

Swingers often establish ongoing sexual friendships with their play partners — as do people who consider their relationships open, monogamish or nonmonogamous, but not necessarily polyamorous.

We fall somewhere between being swingers and strictly polyamorous. We are both allowed to have sex with anyone we want, apart or together. By choice, both of us really only want to sleep with people we feel a connection with. So far, that has meant sex with friends.

— JH, swinger/poly

We were monogamously married, but have since opened up our relationship to include sexual and emotional connections with other people. My wife and I have a group of friends who we are sexual with.

— Cecil, in an open marriage

Friends with Benefits: Mainstream Sexual Friendships

The now-popular term friends with benefits (FWB) grants an acknowledged, if not always respected, place in mainstream culture to sexual friendships — while still reflecting cultural presumptions about what's supposed to differentiate friends from lovers or partners. For many people, sexual friendships provide comfort and joy between “real” (Escalator-bound) relationships.

Our friends with benefits relationship worked for us. It ended because he found someone to settle down with, in a 100% conventional, monogamous, cohabiting Escalator relationship — currently at the stage of buying a house and planning kids.

That was never going to be my thing, but he's ecstatic — and hardly because he's unaware of any alternatives. Takes all sorts!

— Melinda, nonmonogamous

Sexual friendships occupy an interesting social niche since monogamy is rarely assumed in these relationships. In particular, sexual friendships often happen among people who may wish to ride the Escalator someday — but until “The One” comes along, they're open to sharing sex with some friends.

This makes sense: it's now generally considered acceptable for adults to have sex, whether they're partnered up or not. So while one is waiting for the Escalator, having some regular or familiar sex partners, especially friends, can feel more comfortable and safer than hooking up with strangers or leaping into relationships. And often, the sex is better, too.

In such cases, people usually wish to remain available to potential Escalator relationships. Therefore, their sexual friendships cannot be exclusive. Typically in sexual friendships, the norm is to cease having sex with friends once someone decides to jump on the Escalator. Sometimes people discuss these expectations with their sexual friends. They might even make agreements about it early on. And sometimes this intention is just assumed — which can lead to misunderstandings.

However, there is a big potential disadvantage to how sexual friendships are commonly perceived. In mainstream culture, people often view friends with benefits arrangements as strictly casual. In turn, *casual sex* is commonly construed to mean no emotions involved, no strings attached, sex-only hookups. Hence, another common and sometimes derisive label: *fuck buddies*.

Friendships, whether they include sex or not, involve real people with real feelings — and ideally, some level of mutual appreciation, consideration and respect. Also, strictly recreational, no-commitment sex is fine, with mutual consent.

That said, social presumptions that devalue casual sex sometimes lead people to treat their sexual friends with stunning inconsideration. When one person sincerely values the “friends” part, while the other is solely focused on the “benefits,” hard feelings can result — even if neither of them ever wished to ride the Escalator.

Sex with someone you're not committed to doesn't have to be empty. It is a sharing. It's a way to grow closer.

— Slyph, in an open relationship

Romantic Friendships

Less commonly reported, but no less valid, are when friends harbor romantic feelings for each other — expressed through flirting, overt affection and endearments, love notes, cuddling, gifts and gestures, etc. This can go with or without sexual attraction or contact.

Romantic or passionate friendships are well known in history, especially between women. Although they're usually assumed to be a thin cover for an unacknowledged sexual relationship, that often is not the case, especially in the online age.

I have an online romantic friendship with a heteroromantic demisexual guy who lives in another country. We haven't met in person yet, but are open to doing so in the future.

— Cynthia, asexual and polyamorous

I tend towards monogamish relationships because of time, trust and habit — but ultimately I would like to feel comfortable expanding into other areas of loving. Romantic friendships are also a category I tend to fall into. There are so many ways of being in a relationship, I am open to suggestion and dialogue.

— Jenn, nonmonogamous

Story: Experimenting via Sexual Friendship

People embark upon sexual friendships for many reasons, including a desire for sexual variety and exploration. This can provide a sense of safety for people taking their first uncertain steps off the Escalator. As long as everyone's feelings and needs are treated with consideration, these forays can work out well for all involved. H shared this story:

Our relationship is heterosexual, but we are both bisexual. My male partner had little same-sex experience at the start of our relationship, and I had none. Both of us wanted to explore same-sex attraction while maintaining our relationship, and neither of us wanted to keep the other from doing so.

We have invited a close female friend of ours (also bisexual) into our shared bed. While she is not part of our relationship, sex has become an aspect of our friendship, when she is not in a relationship of her own.

My partner and I are currently discussing where our comfort level would be if we invited a man in. We would ideally involve a close friend again, although we have no close male bisexual friends. If it is to be someone who is not a close friend, then I would not be involved. However, my partner could possibly have same-sex encounters with my prior knowledge. This is still in early discussion, so boundaries have not yet been properly established.

I think I could comfortably explore polyamory, but he is less certain. So for now, our external relationships stop at close friendships.

End Ch. 10

Buy the Book!

[Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator: Uncommon Love and Life](#), by Amy Gahran