

STEPPING OFF THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
ESCALATOR

UNCOMMON LOVE AND LIFE

AMY GAHRAN

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This book is based primarily on original research, through an online survey conducted by Amy Gahran in 2013-14 with 1500 participants. All quotes from this survey presented in this and other Off the Escalator books and content are true, and used with permission of survey participants as a condition of participating in the survey. However, names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the identity of participants. Similarities in names or other descriptive characteristics between any subjects of this book and any other person are purely coincidental.

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**[Bit.ly/OffEscNotes1](http://Bit.ly/OffEscNotes1)**

*For Michael,  
"You are what you is."*



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## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First of all, this book is the product of participation. Your voice counts! I'd love to hear what you have to say. So, please tell me what you think about this book, or your observations and questions about unconventional relationships in general:

**OffEscalator.com/Contact**

Also, this book is a launching point for a variety of resources about unconventional intimate relationships. Some of these resources are my own, and some are offered by other authors, thinkers and communities. You can find these resources on the website for the Off the Escalator project: **OffEscalator.com/Resources**

This is only the beginning. This book is the first in a series of books. I collected more than enough valuable information in my initial survey to support at least two other books. As of this writing, Book 2, *10 Common Questions About Unconventional Relationships*, is already written and will be published later in 2017.

Book 3, *Off the Escalator, In the Closet* has largely been assembled. Due out in 2018, it will address how people navigate being public or private about their unconventional relationships. Also, it will explore how anyone can help make the world a friendlier place for unconventional relationships.

To learn more about this project, and to participate, please subscribe to the Off the Escalator email list: **OffEscalator.com/Updates**

**Twitter:** @OffTheEscalator

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This book also is designed to support discussion and interaction. At the end of each part there is a list of discussion questions. If you wish, you may answer these questions online: **OffEscalator.com/Resources/Book1Questions**

On the website, you will also be able to take surveys, quizzes, or share your own story. You can answer anonymously if you like. Just be aware that by engaging in this online interaction, you grant the *Off the Escalator* project permission to use your responses in future books and other content.

However, you don't need to go online or share any information in order to take what you learn in this book further. Simply considering the discussion questions offered in this book on your own, or using them to start conversations with others, can prove enlightening — or at least, interesting.

Each quote from my survey that is included in this book represents a snapshot in time, from 2013-14. Life moves on. Undoubtedly, many quotes no longer reflect the current circumstances, relationships or views of participants. I cannot rewrite the history of what participants originally said, but I will post online an updated version of my survey. Anyone will be able to take this, including prior participants who wish to offer an update.

This book includes a glossary, since words used to describe traditional relationships often don't suit unconventional relationships well.

Please support this independent project. See **OffEscalator.com** for ideas. Thanks!



## PREFACE:

### THE STORY OF THE ESCALATOR

What is a relationship?

In the broadest sense, we have relationships with everyone we know or interact with to any significant extent: neighbors, friends and coworkers; teammates, classmates and fellow volunteers; parents, siblings and children. Any of these relationships might feel quite close and important, or not. It all depends.

However, those types of connections usually are not what most people mean when they say they're "in a relationship." Instead, that loaded little phrase typically implies a very specific type of relationship: one that involves the intimacy of affection, sex and romance. One that looks and works a certain way, and that generally is deemed especially important.

The ubiquitous phrase, "in a relationship," tends to evoke a familiar storyline with well-known characters and symbols: a fairy tale with a happy ending, or at least a romantic comedy.

There's a name for the common set of social norms that shape intimate relationships in most Western societies: the *Relationship Escalator*. I did not coin this term, nor have I been able to track down its precise origins.<sup>1</sup> However, this term has arisen over the last several years, mostly among people who needed to find ways to talk about how intimate relationships, and society, are changing.

In a nutshell, the traditional Relationship Escalator looks like this: two (and only two) people progress from initial attraction and dating, to becoming sexually and romantically involved and exclusive, to adopting a shared identity as a couple, to

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

moving in together and otherwise merging their lives — all the way up to marriage and kids, 'til death do you part.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this approach. The Relationship Escalator is popular for a reason: it works quite well for many people.

It's just not the only game in town.

There is a broad spectrum of intimate relationships. This book is about the ways that people are stepping off this Escalator to explore unconventional approaches to intimate relationships. If you're curious about what these options are, or whether they might apply to you or to people you know, this book can be your guide. You'll hear what hundreds of people have to say about their unconventional relationships, in their own words.

But first, to understand what can make intimate relationships less conventional, it helps to have a very clear picture of what a very traditional relationship might look like. I've had the opportunity to hear many people describe what they believe makes their own relationships unconventional — that's the process which formed the basis of this book. This insight clarified several common customs that shape how intimate relationships work, and how they tend to fit in with the rest of society and life.

The trouble is, talking about abstract social norms easily gets dry and tedious. People and stories are far more interesting. So, as a backdrop to the real stories of unconventional relationships featured throughout this book, here I offer the fictional tale of a highly traditional relationship — one that rides the Relationship Escalator right from the beginning, and all the way to the top. I will occasionally refer back to this story throughout this book, for contrast.

In the story below, the **bold text** calls attention to the many terms, milestones, value judgments, expectations, obligations, tradeoffs, benefits and privileges commonly associated with Escalator relationships. It can be surprising to realize how thoroughly Relationship Escalator norms are embedded into almost every part of life (in this example, life in the U.S.).

Bundled together and brought into focus, the many indicators of the Relationship Escalator may sound odd since they're often taken for granted. By calling attention to things commonly associated with social norms, I am not trying to denigrate them. "Normal" does not equal "thoughtless" or "boring."

Some of the Escalator indicators noted in this story might sound old-fashioned. However, that is part of what makes them traditional. Society keeps changing, but some norms have surprising staying power.

Real life is always more nuanced than social norms. Thus, few relationships on the more traditional end of the spectrum include all of the indicators noted in this story. Also, many of these indicators (such as falling in love, living together and building a family) also can be found in relationships that are quite unconventional.

Still, it's common for intimate relationships to hit many of these familiar, time-honored marks — or for people to hope that their relationships will look rather like this:

*Chris meets Dana, and they feel a strong spark of mutual attraction. They start talking and hanging out a bit, and then they go out on **dates** — just the two of them, quite **romantic**. They kiss. They feel excited.*

*More dates follow — so now they **are dating**. They start **having sex**. When they are out together, they often hold hands or engage in other socially acceptable **public displays of affection**. They develop regular patterns of daily communication, with lots of phone calls, texting and social media interaction. As they **fall in love**, they obsessively think and fantasize about each other.*

*Their kind of love is **reflected everywhere in the media**. Popular love songs and romantic movies and TV somehow all seem to be about them.*

*Things **get serious** when they begin to **tell each other, “I love you.”** That's when they start to feel **committed**. Of course, this commitment involves **monogamy**: they stop dating others, having sex and flirting with others, and frequenting bars alone. Their **online dating profiles vanish**. They become **Facebook official** by tagging each other as being “in a relationship with...”*

*At this point, Chris and Dana start considering themselves **a couple**. They start **saying “we”** quite often. When speaking to others, they usually refer to each other as “**my boyfriend**” or “**my girlfriend**.” And between themselves, they start using **terms of endearment**, such as “honey” or “babe,” at least as often as they address each other by name.*

*As their emotional bond deepens, they become somewhat **possessive** of each other. So they feel, and sometimes act, jealous whenever somebody else seems interested in, or interesting to, their partner. They're also uncomfortable about each other's prior relationships, so it's helpful that they are **not close to their exes**.*

*Chris and Dana now **spend almost all their free time together**. This means they see their friends far less often, but they assume their friends understand and support this.*

*Other people start **referring to them as a unit**: “Chris & Dana.” They are each other's **default companion** for almost any occasion, especially*

high-profile events like holiday parties, where invitations ask for a +1. They **meet each other's family and friends** — although several of their single friends lament how little they see them these days. Now, Chris & Dana **socialize primarily with other committed couples**.

After a few months of serious dating, Chris & Dana do what they've always assumed **must happen next**: they **settle down** and **move in together**. They **share a bed** and start to **merge their finances**.

They **display each other's photo at work**, and they **feel free to note the existence of their relationship** in casual conversations, even with coworkers or strangers. This is **not considered oversharing**, even though everyone assumes that Chris & Dana have sex with each other.

They start **making all major decisions together**, and many minor ones too. They discuss or at least **assume a long-term shared future**. They become **mutually accountable** about their behavior and how they spend their time. They believe they really are **The One** for each other.

When Chris enters a prestigious graduate program in another state, Dana **makes a career sacrifice** so they can move and stay together. They support each other's goals, interests and dreams, which fortunately mostly align well; the ones that **don't align so well mostly fade away**.

One night, Chris **pops the question** to Dana over a candlelit dinner, and Dana enthusiastically accepts. **Flashing their new rings**, they publicly announce their **engagement** with much excitement, and they are **unanimously congratulated**.

They easily acquire a **marriage license**. Their **wedding is held in a church** and is **attended by many friends and family**, who all bear **gifts**.

Chris & Dana save their money — helped, in part, by **marital tax breaks**. Eventually, they purchase a home together.

When they **have children**, there is **no question about their right or ability to parent**. They feel immense pride in having created a **real family**. Their **relatives show respect** for, and take pride and interest in, Chris & Dana's marriage and family.

All along, Chris & Dana's relationship has felt completely **natural** and **meant to be**, as if their lives could not have unfolded any other way.

Inevitably, their marriage is occasionally troubled by conflict and resentment. Sometimes they hurt each other's feelings, and they chafe at each other's annoying habits. At times they yearn for something different — usually silently, since they **fear growing apart**. They believe the only way to significantly change their relationship would be to **break up**. That would entail **divorce**, major life disruption, and stigma for them

and their kids. That would be a **failure**. The idea of **being alone** (without their **other half**) and having to **start over** fills them with dread.

Chris & Dana never consider having other sexual partners, even though sometimes their own sexual connection feels rather stale, and they occasionally feel attracted to others. But **fidelity** is crucial to them, so they stay **faithful** to each other, even after many years together. They still share affection and sex. They still love each other — perhaps not with the passion of their initial romance, but their love is still mutual and genuine.

Overall, their life together feels fruitful. Its patterns feel familiar and comforting, and not just to them. **Other people easily understand how to interact with Chris & Dana**; they know what to expect from the couple, and what's appropriate.

They still each maintain connections with friends, but their friendships mostly don't feel as close or important as they once did.

When Chris has a sudden heart attack, Dana is immediately notified as **next of kin**. At the hospital, Dana need only mention that they are married to **attend Chris' bedside** and **make medical decisions** while Chris is incapacitated. Fortunately, Chris makes a full recovery, with a large part of the costs covered by the **spousal health insurance** that is a benefit of Dana's employment.

Their kids grow up and move out, and the **empty nesters** peaceably share middle and old age. They develop some separate hobbies and renew and deepen ties with friends and community.

After many years, Dana grows frail and ill. Chris, their children and their grandchildren lovingly **provide care and support** to the very end. At Dana's funeral, everyone offers condolences to Chris and praises their **perfect marriage**. And for Chris, who'd never wanted any other kind of life and love, it was indeed perfect. After all, they'd done everything **right**, achieving the kind of **happily ever after** that **everyone should hope for**.

Like many people, Dana neglected to create a formal will. So after Dana's death, Chris **automatically inherits, with no legal questions or tax hassles**, most of Dana's estate, and assumes sole ownership of their joint assets. Also, Chris begins to receive **survivor benefits from Social Security**, as well as Dana's **pension income**. Such material things don't make up for missing Dana fiercely every day, but they do help Chris get through the remainder of life.

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...Again, the story of Chris and Dana's relationship probably doesn't completely mirror your own, or those of people you know. Few relationships ride the Escalator in every detail. Usually, it's a matter of degrees: how much a specific relationship resembles the form, trajectory, milestones and goals of the Relationship Escalator.

There is considerable variation on the Escalator. The details of what it looks like, and the amount of pressure to ride it, vary by nation, generation, culture and subculture.

Also, the Escalator is a bit of a moving target, thanks to social evolution. For instance, these days, many couples manage to pretty much ride the Escalator without getting married, having kids, or being socially joined at the hip. And now in many countries (including, as of this writing and for the time being, the U.S.), any two unrelated adults can legally marry, regardless of sexual orientation.

That said, the Relationship Escalator does not exist in a vacuum. Race, class, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability and other context can color what it means to ride the Escalator. That's because social norms tend to accommodate social privilege — a thorny topic explored in this book.

Part 1 of this book examines how the Relationship Escalator works, and why some people step off the Escalator.

People ride the Escalator for many reasons. Often, this is a conscious, deliberate choice that honors innate desires, preferences and goals. It can support the kind of life that many people wish to lead and help them be the kind of people they wish to be. This traditional structure fits and serves many people well. Usually, its tradeoffs feel acceptable.

Meanwhile, some people hop on the Escalator without being fully aware that they have other valid options.

While the Escalator comes with steep obligations, it also offers many perks that can be difficult to achieve otherwise. As the amount of bold text in Chris and Dana's story indicates, society has developed myriad ways to accommodate, encourage, recognize, support and favor Escalator relationships. This creates a strong incentive to ride the Escalator, even when it might not be such a great fit. It's also a big reason why it can be so daunting to step off the Relationship Escalator.

Nevertheless, many people do step off the Escalator. Here's why...

# INTRODUCTION:

## WHAT UNCONVENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS CAN LOOK LIKE

Love is not one-size-fits-all. Fortunately, neither are intimate relationships. But that might not seem obvious, based on almost every love song and relationship advice book ever written.

It's quite common to treat loving, intimate relationships as if there is one basic blueprint for how they should look and work. This popular approach does not guarantee that you'll find love, or keep it, or that a relationship will feel wonderful and be trouble-free. However, it may seem like the only viable path to love, happiness and connection.

If you haven't felt quite comfortable in your intimate relationships, if you haven't been finding love that feels right or works well for you — maybe it's not just about you, or the partners you've chosen, or how good your relationship skills are. The problem might be your expectations about how intimate relationships are supposed to work.

In this book, unconventional relationship options are not about the gender or sexual orientation of partners. Rather, this is about the role that intimate relationships can play in life, how they can be shaped to suit the people in them — and even what counts as a real relationship.

Understanding the diversity of intimate relationships can help you have better relationships, no matter what they look like. This awareness also can help you appreciate relationships that might look pretty different from your own.

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

The *Relationship Escalator* is the set of traditional social norms for intimate relationships. Most of us are raised to believe that the Escalator is the only option for how intimate relationships should work. For some people, the traditional approach feels quite natural and good. For others, not so much.

What might it look like, and feel like, to make relationship choices that depart significantly from the Escalator?

Together, you and the people you love can craft relationships that honor what makes you unique — your emotional needs, preferences for housing or sex, desires for variety and stability, life goals and changes, and capabilities and constraints. You can define what family, home and commitment mean to you, or strike your own balance between independence and interdependence.

The result might not resemble a Disney movie. Still, it can work. It even can work quite well.

The catch is: options for stepping off the Escalator are not always obvious. It can be difficult to consider, let alone explore, paths you don't even know exist — or which you've heard (or assumed) always lead to failure.

Remember Chris and Dana, the fictional couple who rode the Escalator so perfectly in the preface? What if the Escalator had not been such a great fit for them? Their story might have unfolded very differently.

Here are a few alternate storylines for Chris and Dana. Parts 2-6 of this book explore each of these options, and many others, in greater depth.

First, Chris and Dana might adapt their relationship to accommodate profound differences that would be deal breakers on the Escalator, such as:

- *Dana does not wish to be a parent, and Chris strongly wants children. So, with Dana's consent, Chris helps a close friend, Izzy, become a parent. Chris spends time at home with Dana, and also at Izzy's home nearby, where they co-parent their child.*
- *Dana prefers to live a nomadic life. Chris is very much a homebody. They share periods of intense, meaningful intimacy, punctuated by gaps of weeks or months where they focus on the rest of their lives and barely communicate. These pauses feel natural to them and keep their relationship vital. Over the years, they enjoy many blissful reunions.*

Or they might find ways to embrace logistical issues which would bar the path to the Escalator, such as permanent distance or limited time:



- *Although they live two time zones apart, Dana and Chris meet by chance and connect deeply. Neither wishes to relocate. They enjoy their visits every few months, with lots of communication in between.*
- *Chris and Dana fall in love while Chris is on a six-month work assignment. They explore and enjoy their relationship during that time, and let go of it when Chris returns home. They remember each other fondly and remain in occasional contact.*

They might blur traditional lines between friends, lovers and partners; or they might not always give top priority to a lover or spouse:

- *Since high school, Dana and Dakota have had an exceptionally strong, close friendship. Although they are not sexual or romantic partners, they are very affectionate. They often hug, cuddle and express mutual affection and commitment. Dana marries Chris — but for big occasions like weddings or holiday parties, Dana sometimes invites Dakota rather than Chris. When Dakota suffers a serious accident, Dana moves in with Dakota for a year to provide care and household support. Chris appreciates their friendship and supports these choices.*
- *Chris and Dana enjoy each other's company, and their sexual chemistry is smoking hot. However, they do not share romantic feelings for each other, nor do they wish to live together. They develop an enduring friendship where they regularly share sex, as well as considerable mutual respect and appreciation. They also hang out together socially and collaborate on projects.*

Or they might agree that their relationship does not require sexual exclusivity:

- *Chris has never wanted sex, and Dana is a highly sexual person. Their marriage is focused on love, commitment, family and companionship. Dana explores sex with others, with Chris' consent and support.*
- *Dana and Chris value sexual variety, so they have sexual encounters with others at swinger clubs and resorts. This keeps their own sexual connection vital. Several fellow swingers become close friends.*
- *Chris travels frequently for work, and on these trips sometimes enjoys brief sexual liaisons with others. They discuss this. Dana approves but prefers not to hear details. Occasionally Dana also discreetly enjoys other sexual liaisons under the same don't ask don't tell arrangement.*

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Perhaps they don't wish to merge their lives, and so maintain more individual autonomy than the Escalator normally allows:

- *Dana and Chris each adore their respective homes and treasure having time alone. They never move in together, but visit each other several times a week and talk daily.*
- *Chris and Dana cringe when people refer to them as a unit, "Chris & Dana." They actively maintain their own friendships, and they often socialize and travel independently. They share a home but keep separate bedrooms, sharing a bed only when they both really want to. They also maintain separate finances. When Chris moves for graduate school, they continue their relationship long distance, while Dana's career advances.*

They might foster deeply emotionally invested or committed relationships with other partners:

- *Over the course of their 10-year Escalator relationship, Chris and Dana realize that monogamy is not a good fit for either of them, sexually or emotionally. They both wish to have other intimate partners, without sacrificing their connection. They discuss this thoroughly and agree to explore consensual nonmonogamy. They attend various local groups and navigate a bumpy learning curve. Eventually, they arrive at an approach that works well for them and their other partners, whom they love dearly.*
- *After falling in love with Tracy and developing a sense of commitment in that relationship, Chris also falls in love with Dana. Tracy knows about this and supports Chris and Dana's relationship. Both relationships involve sexual and romantic intimacy. Both relationships grow to coexist in a peaceful, complementary fashion. Over time, Dana and Tracy develop their own friendship.*

And if their desire or ability to continue their relationship subsides, they can let go and move forward in peaceful ways that don't cast this as a failure:

- *After many years of marriage, Dana's sexual orientation has evolved profoundly, so Dana can no longer be a sexual or romantic partner to Chris. They discuss this, sort through many difficult feelings, and plan to peacefully transition their relationship. They continue to share a home until their children are grown. In the meantime, they also agree*

*to explore other sexual and romantic relationships. They remain very close friends — even closer in some ways since they no longer need to keep secrets from each other.*

These scenarios are not the product of imagination or speculation. All of them are quite real — as are many, many other options for unconventional relationships.

More than 1500 people in unconventional intimate relationships shared their experiences with me, through an online survey I conducted in 2013-2014. I was stunned by the level of response to this survey. Many of the responses were 1500-2500 words long, or longer — really, personal essays.

These stories described a rich diversity of circumstances and creativity, of joy and heartbreak, of dreams and reality. Many participants expressed enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity to let people know they exist. Too often, their kind of love is overlooked or discounted by society.

The vast majority of people who answered my survey have managed to find viable, if unusual, ways to share love and intimacy. And while unconventional relationships also have their ups and downs, they can be fulfilling and rewarding. For instance, three-fourths of the people who responded to my survey reported that overall, they feel very, or mostly, satisfied and happy in unconventional relationships.

In this book, and others in this series, I share their stories with you.

This book features plenty of quotes, shown in italics. These are attributed to real people who took my survey. I've identified participants by name or pseudonym, according to their wishes. Where no preference was expressed, I selected a pseudonym at random. A few quotes come from conversations I've had online and elsewhere — and I've used these only with direct permission. Also, some quotes come from publicly available documents, articles and resources (sources cited).

Altogether, 334 individuals are quoted in this book alone. In the two forthcoming books in this series, even more participants will be quoted.

What can you expect from this book?

If you are contemplating stepping off the Relationship Escalator, then this book offers useful guideposts. You won't be flying totally blind into uncharted territory. Seeing the unconventional relationship choices that others have made can show you what's possible. This book also highlights many issues to consider about venturing off the Escalator.

If you prefer more traditional relationships, this book can help you think more deeply and broadly about this choice, too.

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

This book is not a how-to guide. It does not list instructions for stepping off the Escalator; there are too many options, and everyone's path is unique. However, reading this book can jump-start your personal process of inquiry and exploration. It can help you think creatively and clearly about any kind of intimate relationship. It can help you ask better questions, clarify what you might want (or not want), and negotiate more compassionately and effectively.

This project is about stories, not statistics. It is a journalistic effort, not a scholarly study. The goal of my survey was to gather personal accounts, identify themes and patterns, and share experiences and insights. While a fairly large number of people responded to my survey, this group was entirely self-selected and definitely does not represent the population at large.

Thus, this book can tell you what is happening in many unconventional relationships. But it does not attempt to answer questions such as "What percentage of all relationships are consensually nonmonogamous?" or "How common is it for unconventional relationships to last longer than five years?" The few statistics I do offer are drawn strictly from my survey and should not be applied more widely.

Where possible, I do cite relevant research done by others. I wish there was more of this. However, surprisingly scant research has been done into relationships that don't fit neatly into categories such as monogamy, infidelity, married, single or dating. There are many relationship experts and researchers, but so far, their work has mostly been shaped by Escalator assumptions.

I have attempted to present unconventional relationships fairly. I try to be fair to the Escalator, too. My core assumption is that any intimate relationship involving informed, consenting adults has the potential to be healthy and mutually beneficial — or not, depending on individuals and circumstances.

I also bring my personal experience to this project. After many years in traditional relationships, I began to consciously explore unconventional relationships in 2001. I discovered that this suits me better than the Escalator ever did. Personally, I practice a form of consensual nonmonogamy called *polyamory*. I also know many people in various kinds of unconventional relationships.

I've seen the Escalator work well. I've witnessed the pain that can result when people ride the Escalator mostly because they think it's the only way to love or to be loved. Similarly, I've also seen unconventional relationships work well, and not so well. I am motivated to do this project because I believe people should be aware of their options for relationships that can so profoundly shape their lives.

If reading this book affirms that the Relationship Escalator is indeed the best choice for you, that's great. Also, wouldn't it feel better to know you're making such a crucial life choice consciously, rather than by default?

Reading this book also can help you make the world a friendlier place. If diversity and fairness matter to you, then this book can help you find more ways to practice those values.

The Relationship Escalator enjoys substantial social visibility, benefits and privilege. Consequently, there is considerable prejudice against less-common approaches to love. In a December 2016 interview,<sup>2</sup> filmmaker Jackie Stone (creator of the fictional web series *Compersion*,<sup>3</sup> which is about being black and polyamorous) mentioned being surprised by the severity of this stigma:

*The amount of fear that people have about talking publicly about [this show] has been amazing. Even monogamous people have a fear of saying "I watch this show," or sharing this show [on social media]. It really opened my eyes to the fact that just the idea of doing relationships differently is very scary and frightening.*

— Jackie Stone, filmmaker, writer, director and producer

The stigma against unconventional relationships causes real harm, to real people, every day. Many people who took my survey reported facing discrimination, loss or invalidation when others learn about their unconventional relationships. Their jobs, housing or the custody of their children have been put at risk. They have sometimes been ostracized or vilified by friends, family and community. Sometimes their social status drops or their ethics or character are questioned. Their relationships sometimes become the subject of heightened scrutiny and invasive, inappropriate questions — or ignored entirely, as if they don't count or are shameful. Simply living in fear of these potential outcomes can be immensely stressful.

Furthermore, many people in unconventional relationships suffer from isolation and lack of guidance. They may have scant opportunity to learn from the relevant experiences of others. When their relationships are troubled, they can have difficulty finding appropriate support. Too often, counselors and confidantes assume that the cause of their problems is the fact that their relationship is unconventional.

Self-doubt is another challenge. Relationship norms are deeply ingrained and loaded with psychological and emotional triggers. As the stories in this book show, it can be tough to shake the feeling that doing relationships differently means you're doing it wrong.

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

Consequently, many people keep their unconventional relationships a secret, more or less. So: if you think you don't know anyone in an unconventional relationship, it's likely that you actually do. They're probably in the closet — perhaps because they're worried about what you might think, say or do if you knew the truth about their love life.

Ask anyone who's not 100% heterosexual: the closet can be an uncomfortable and scary place to live, and to love. Fortunately, there is less need for the closet when more people understand, accept and value relationship diversity.

Book 3 in the *Off the Escalator* series will address such concerns in detail.

The beauty of unconventional relationship options is that they can make more relationships — and thus more love, joy and support — possible. They can transcend obstacles that would be deal breakers on the Escalator.

This is, I believe, a good thing. This world could probably use all the love we can bring to it.

## PART 1

# WELCOME TO THE RELATIONSHIP ESCALATOR





## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP ESCALATOR?

“Is this relationship going anywhere?” If you’ve ever heard (or said) that catchphrase, then the Relationship Escalator may be something you already know quite well. When people think of what a “relationship” looks like, usually they mean something like this:

***Relationship Escalator.*** *The default bundle of societal expectations for intimate relationships. Partners follow a progressive set of steps, each with visible milestones and markers, toward a clear goal.*

*The Escalator is the standard by which most people gauge whether an intimate relationship is significant, serious, good, healthy, committed or worthy of effort.*

*The goal at the top of the Escalator is to achieve a permanently monogamous relationship: sexually and romantically exclusive between only two people. In addition, Escalator partners are expected to live together permanently, and to have their relationship legally sanctioned and publicly recognized — typically via legal marriage.*

*Partners are expected to remain together at the top of the Escalator until death. Common related (but no longer heavily required) Escalator milestones include shared ownership of a home, combined finances and having kids together.*

The Relationship Escalator is what most people grow up believing, or at least assuming, that intimate relationships should look like and how they are supposed to work. This model typically is deeply ingrained at an early age, and it's reinforced

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

through all stages of life. Because this model is so familiar to most people, traditional relationships often seem simpler or easier, as well as propelled along by their innate momentum. Thus, it's the Relationship Escalator, not the Relationship Staircase.

Furthermore, the Escalator is widely presumed to be what any emotionally healthy adult should want. Since Escalator relationships follow a key set of social norms, they usually are considered *normal*.

The Relationship Escalator is popular for a reason: it works well for many people. But it doesn't suit everyone.

*Let's face it: At least half the relationships that people think are going somewhere are, in fact, not going anywhere good.*

*— Nika, in a long distance open relationship*

Whether an intimate relationship is wonderful, healthy or mutually beneficial depends on the individuals and circumstances involved. This is true in Escalator relationships, and it is true off the Escalator, too.

As described in the introduction to this book, in 2013-14 I surveyed 1500 people about unconventional intimate relationships. Many participants reported that stepping off the Relationship Escalator allowed them to discover a sense of love, belonging, support, intimacy, fulfillment and authenticity that they hadn't been able to achieve otherwise.

*The biggest benefit, for me? Happiness! That feeling of just being right, natural. Feeling okay and accepted for being who I am, for the very first time. Extreme feelings of love and support. Incredible closeness.*

*— Yoni Wolf, queer and polyamorous*

*A really big advantage is finding out firsthand that people will care for me — look after me, love me, want my company — rather than needing me (or some other interchangeable woman) in order to get to the top of that Escalator. That they will care for me because of, rather than in spite of, who I am and what I want out of life and relationships.*

*— Amazon Syren, married, polyamorous, queer and kinky*

Unconventional relationships might be enduring, deeply emotionally invested, or strongly logistically entwined. Or, they might be shorter-term, more casual or discontinuous. Or anything in between.

## 1. What Is the Relationship Escalator?

*I am 66. I first married at 32 after living for seven years with my partner in a nonexclusive relationship. We continued our nontraditional marriage except for a few brief periods of monogamy. We were married for nine years until I was widowed.*

*My present partner and I have been living together now for 10 years and we will be married next May. Our relationship has always been polyamorous.*

— Daniel, polyamorous

*I have a few meaningful pause/play type relationships with loves who I only see at Burning Man festivals. One has been going on for 10 years.*

— Lyndsay, nonmonogamous

Notably, off the Escalator there's far more room to value and savor relationships that might otherwise get dismissed as trivial, pointless or not real.

*Here's the interesting element of my entanglements: they are often highly emotional, sweet and meaningful — but not necessarily romantic. They're also sporadic and don't require much maintenance or upkeep.*

*They can involve a lot of time spent discussing other relationships (past and present) in a very friendly, not at all jealous manner. All integrated smoothly with playful flirtation and "Let me fill up your wine glass. No really, I am trying to get you drunk!" These are some of my favorite kinds of relationships.*

— Siobhan, nonmonogamous

*By far the biggest benefit is that I don't have to conform to social norms that would be actively damaging to me: specifically, the norm of having sex in a relationship. Being able to have the sort of committed emotional intimacy I want without the expectation of sex is important — and very hard to find.*

*I am part of a four-person relationship that isn't sexual or romantic. However, it is very emotionally intimate and long-term committed — in ways that don't really correspond to what's normally thought of as friendship or family-like bonds.*

— Helen, asexual

Especially touching were stories where people shared how they felt profoundly empowered by releasing Escalator norms and goals for their intimate relationships. They stopped seeing themselves as fatally flawed, or their future as devoid of joy.

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

*I feel more myself. I trust myself more. I don't feel like I have to hide who I am or make excuses for feeling trapped. I no longer feel like there is something wrong with me, or that I was meant to be alone.*

*I used to always dread the day when I would start to look at other people. I knew I still loved my partner but I felt... not right. I thought I was broken. It is great to know I am not destined to always hurt people. It is nice not to feel broken for thinking the idea of one true love is flawed or that "the One" is a ridiculous notion. Now things feel so much better.*

— *Moni, polyamorous*

That said, no relationship style can guarantee joy. Traditional and unconventional relationships can both be difficult, unsatisfying or painful. But off the Escalator, the hard parts of relationships might have unusual twists.

*Once two of my significant relationships (including one which lasted nearly five years) fell apart in one week. That was intensely devastating.*

— *Cherad, polyamorous*

*Sometimes potential lovers think that since you're already in a relationship, you can't (or won't) have a deep relationship with them. Or that they don't need to treat you with the respect they'd give someone they were dating monogamously.*

*This happened to me once, with someone I was dating for most of a year. I fell deeply in love with him, even though I knew we weren't 100% compatible. Our relationship seemed strong and deep, and I looked forward to maintaining a friendship even if our romance didn't last. However, when he met a woman who he wanted to date "for real," he immediately cut off all contact and never spoke to me again.*

*That breakup scarred me deeply and was incredibly painful. I really felt used! And since he completely cut off communication once he decided he didn't need me anymore, I had no way to say my piece.*

— *Sabrina, nonmonogamous*

## Steps on the Relationship Escalator

Relationships that follow social norms typically progress through eight stages. This is the "escalation" that occurs on the Relationship Escalator, and it is illustrated by the story of Chris & Dana in the preface to this book.

This progression is not always uniform. Some couples might skip some steps, or the order may vary slightly. For instance, these days, many people have children

before getting married or perhaps before moving in together — and some Escalator couples never get legally married at all. But on the whole, this is how the Relationship Escalator typically works:

1. **Making contact.** Flirting, casual/social encounters, possibly including making out or sexual hookups.
2. **Initiation.** Romantic courtship gestures or rituals, emotional investment or falling in love, and usually sexual contact (except in religious or socially conservative circles).
3. **Claiming and defining.** Mutual declarations of love, presenting in public as a couple, adopting and using common relationship role labels (boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.). Having expectations, or sometimes making explicit agreements, for sexual and romantic exclusivity. Ending other intimate relationships, if any, and ceasing to use dating sites or apps. Transitioning to barrier-free vaginal/anal intercourse, if applicable, except if this would present health or unwanted pregnancy risks. Once this step is reached, any further step, including simply remaining in the relationship, may be considered an implied intention to continue the relationship indefinitely.
4. **Establishment.** Adapting the rhythms of life to accommodate each other on an ongoing basis. Settling into patterns for regularly spending time together (date nights and sexual encounters, time at each others' homes, etc.). Developing patterns for keeping in contact when not together, such as email, phone calls, video chat or texting.
5. **Commitment.** Explicitly discussing, or planning, a long-term shared future as a couple. Adopting mutual accountability for whereabouts, behavior and life choices. Meeting each other's family of origin.
6. **Merging.** Moving in together, sharing a household and finances. Getting engaged to be married, or agreeing to similar legal or civil formalization of the relationship.
7. **Conclusion.** Getting legally married or making similar equivalent formal, recognized, legally binding arrangements. The relationship is now finalized; its structure should remain fairly static until one partner dies.

8. **Legacy.** Purchasing a home together, if possible. Having and raising children — not mandatory, but still strongly socially venerated. This part of the Escalator is no longer as obligatory as it once was. However, often couples may not feel, or be perceived as, fully valid until they hit these additional milestones post-marriage.

The preface to this book tells the story of how a traditional relationship can move through all of these steps, and how this can affect people's lives.

The majority of intimate relationships don't progress very far up the Escalator. In fact, it's typical for a relationship to not be deemed "real" until it gets to at least step 3 or 4. However, the early stages aren't necessarily fleeting.

*I had one significant relationship which we both described as "no strings attached" and "just about sex" — even though we saw each other very frequently and were a major part of each other's lives. We slept together for over a year and even celebrated our anniversary.*

*But we didn't call it a "real" relationship — I suppose because we weren't on the Relationship Escalator. It was perpetual, pointless dating.*

*— Rose, polyamorous*

Traditionally, people who are dating usually seek to determine quickly whether a new connection has Escalator potential, and proceed accordingly. If at some point a partner or relationship becomes disqualified from the Escalator, usually it gets sidetracked to a less important status; or it ends or simply fizzles out.

If a relationship ends after about stage 4 or 5, this is usually deemed a *breakup* — or getting dumped or ditched, if it didn't happen by mutual choice.

## The Language of Love, Off the Escalator

The very words that most people use to discuss intimate relationships tend to reflect Escalator assumptions. This can make it difficult to discuss, or even consider, unconventional relationship options.

For example, sexual/romantic relationships typically are distinguished from *friendship*: a potentially significant relationship that usually is defined by its lack of sexual or romantic connection, or of family ties.

In mainstream culture, relationships that include both sex and romance often tend to be emphasized and prioritized above friendships and other types of connections that one might have with other adults. The socially acceptable exception to this is obligations to family members who are dependents. (*Family* is usually construed as

people who are directly related by blood, adoption or marriage.) This doesn't mean that people must always prioritize an existing or potential Escalator partner above friends on every occasion — but when they do, friends typically are expected to gracefully understand and accept it.

Here's one way that the traditional pecking order for relationships becomes apparent: relationships that do not include sex, romance or family ties tend to get a diminutive label: "*just*" friends. This can seem like a rebuff not only to the power of friendship, but also to asexual or aromantic people, whose deepest relationships often get dismissed or devalued.

Furthermore, when people say that a relationship is *real* or *serious*, they usually mean that the couple in question appears to be riding the Relationship Escalator. This can have the unfortunate side effect of marginalizing people whose treasured intimate relationships somehow diverge from social norms.

*Often, when surrounded by monogamous friends, I feel like they do not consider or take my loves or relationships as seriously as they do their own. Also, should I need advice or an ear to discuss my thoughts, it can be hard to get advice or have discussions that are applicable to nonmonogamy.*

— Jason, polyamorous

Because of the limitations of traditional relationship vocabulary, many people have begun repurposing existing words, or inventing new ones, so they can more accurately and easily discuss unconventional relationships. For instance, *polyamory* means being willing to engage in more than one significant intimate relationship at a time — that is, deeply involved in a sexual, romantic or emotional sense, with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved.

## Knowledge Is Power

Knowing one's options is crucial when it comes to envisioning how intimate relationships might look and function. For some people, this has enabled them to finally have great relationships, as well as other rewarding and fulfilling intimate experiences.

*Until discovering polyamory, my past relationships all fit on the Relationship Escalator perfectly. I never considered that this might be why I felt so unfulfilled by them.*

— Matt, polyamorous

## *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator*

*Until four years ago, I only ever had monogamous relationships — about a dozen, serially. Then my marriage ended and I went on a sex binge for two years. That was fantastic! I fucked close to 100 guys, totally on my terms, with respect and consideration on all sides. This was incredibly liberating and empowering.*

*I got that out of my system, learned about ethical nonmonogamy and started building the relationships I have today. I have a great life.*

*— Antipodienne, nonmonogamous*

Several survey participants wish that they'd learned about relationship options much sooner. This might have spared them, and their partners, considerable distress.

*The amount of heartache I could have skipped by not having to blunder into what I wanted by chance would have been incalculable.*

*— Allen, polyamorous and kinky*

*As an asexual, aromantic person in a poly relationship, it can be difficult to figure out how my relationships work. People like me are so far outside social norms that we don't have any norms or templates to base our relationships upon. It would help to have more relationship templates out there, as viable and widely known options.*

*— Indigo, asexual and aromantic*

## Story: Putting New Knowledge to Use

Jackson feels that he is probably polyamorous by nature, if not yet in practice. He described how he is putting his newly acquired knowledge of relationship options to use, to consciously renegotiate an existing relationship.

*I am a man in a committed partnership of one and a half years. My partner and I live in different apartments in the same neighborhood, and we have been seeing each other almost every day for the past year. We have both had sexual experiences outside of this primary relationship — though generally carefully, and after much discussion.*

*At this moment, I am waiting for her to come over so I can explain that I would like to step off this Relationship Escalator we've been on. I'd like us to think about taking a few steps... sideways? "Back" seems pejorative. Point is, I'd heard the term. In my search to find it so I could reference it as part of this discussion, I ended up here, at your survey. So...*



1. *What Is the Relationship Escalator?*

*I think the primary advantage of stepping off the Escalator would be the level of honesty and self-examination it requires. I didn't experience this in my previous life of serial monogamy.*

*Unfortunately, I'm not sure the two of us are secure enough yet to really make it work. Hence my interest in taking a step back so we can work on the independence part of interdependence.*





## FIVE HALLMARKS OF ESCALATOR RELATIONSHIPS

How can you tell whether a particular relationship is mostly on or significantly off the Escalator? As I read through 1500 survey responses and saw why people consider their own relationships to be unconventional, this clarified the sometimes-vague conventions which collectively define what makes a relationship more traditional.

Five hallmarks of Escalator relationships became apparent. Each hallmark is a key attribute of how intimate relationships are expected to function, under current social norms. All five hallmarks are present in relationships that are firmly on the Escalator. Diverging from any of these hallmarks is how people step off the Relationship Escalator.

Once a relationship diverges from any Escalator hallmark to any significant extent, there are fewer social conventions guiding how that relationship should proceed or function. Partners must figure this out on their own, or seek guidance from other people in similarly unconventional relationships. Fortunately, the internet has made it much easier to find such support.

Here's a quick overview of the Relationship Escalator hallmarks. Each of these was evident in the example Escalator story of Chris & Dana, in the preface to this book. Parts 2-6 of this book explore in greater depth the types of unconventional relationships that can result by diverging from each of these hallmarks, or some combination of them.

1. **Monogamy.** Under current social norms, this means a closed relationship where sex and romance are shared exclusively between two partners. Monogamy is actually about who a person is *not* allowed to share sex or romance with. Sex and/or romance commonly wane in long-term monogamous relationships, so monogamy does not ensure access to sex or romance — but it does preclude seeking it outside a monogamous relationship. In contrast, *consensually nonmonogamous* relationships (where everyone involved understands that the relationship is not

exclusive) are the most visible way, and probably the most common way, that people step off the Escalator. Some popular approaches to consensual nonmonogamy are *polyamory*, *swinging*, *don't ask don't tell* or being *monogamish*.

2. **Merging.** Riding the Relationship Escalator means that partners eventually move in together and otherwise blend the infrastructure of their daily lives, such as sharing finances. Furthermore, Escalator partners also tend to merge their identities to some extent. Typically they start to view and present themselves as a unit — for instance, saying “we” more often than “I.” Relationships where partners deliberately choose to limit or avoid this kind of merging may be considered more *autonomous*. This can include choosing not to live together at all, or not full time. It also can mean socializing separately, making big choices (like career moves) independently, or not treating an intimate partner as a default companion or sole/primary source of support.
3. **Hierarchy.** Traditionally, some types of relationships typically are presumed to be most important — which means they usually get to trump other relationships by default. Typically, an Escalator relationship is deemed more important than almost any other adult relationship someone might have, such as friendships. (Parenting, and certain other responsibilities to immediate family, usually are permissible exceptions to this pecking order.) In contrast, off the Escalator and especially in consensual nonmonogamy, hierarchy gets more complex and can become ethically and emotionally fraught. In *egalitarian* relationships, decisions about spending time, attention and other resources are made case-by-case, not based on a default or predefined ranking of relationships.
4. **Sexual and romantic connection.** People tend to assume that Escalator partners do (or at least, at some point, did) have sex with each other, as well as feel romantically “in love” with each other. Furthermore, it’s widely assumed that if an Escalator relationship is healthy and strong, then partners should continue their sexual and romantic connection — barring considerations such as age, illness or disability. There’s a subtle stigma that if partners never connected sexually and romantically, then something must be wrong with, or at least not fully valid about, their relationship. However, many people fall along the spectrum of *asexuality*: sex is not an important, necessary or desirable part of their intimate experience. Also, people who do enjoy and desire sex sometimes choose to form committed nonsexual relationships, even life-entwined partnerships, with people who are not sexual or romantic partners.

5. **Continuity and consistency**, at least as a goal. The Escalator is a continuous, one-way trip. Escalator relationships are not supposed to pause or step back to a less-merged state. Also, Escalator partners have defined, permanent roles — for instance, partners aren't supposed to shift between being lovers and platonic friends. (Well, actually this does often happen in long-term traditional relationships, but it's usually not overtly acknowledged.) And finally, the Escalator is supposed to last forever; death is the only way to end an Escalator relationship that isn't automatically branded a failure. Nevertheless, many intimate relationships are *fluid* (shifting form or roles over time), *discontinuous* (on/off, or pause/play) or *finite* (agreeably limited by time or context, such as a summer romance). These can be deeply meaningful and significant — even though by Escalator standards, such relationships can be dismissed as insignificant, unhealthy, a waste of time or a failure.

## Degrees of Stepping Off the Escalator

Stepping off the Escalator isn't always a huge, obvious matter. For instance, someone might diverge slightly from one hallmark — say, by choosing not to get legally married, or by not treating attraction to others as a threat.

*Our relationship is close to the standard Relationship Escalator; it is the center of my life. We live together, plan our lives together and plan to have kids in the next 3-5 years. We are known as a couple in our families, workplaces, etc. The only deviation is: we don't plan to get married.*

— Sarah, in a nesting relationship

*We are allowed to comment on how good or sexy others look.*

— Kevin, in a long-term relationship

Or, partners might step off the Escalator in a bigger way, just rarely. Say, by occasionally sharing sex with others, with all-around consent.

*My partner and I are now currently monogamous, aside from occasional threesomes with friends. We have explored nonmonogamy in the past, and we are not closed off to it in the future. We may still discover our nonmonogamous niche.*

— Annie, monogamish

Steps off the Escalator get bigger the more they become an ongoing feature of someone's life or relationships.

*My husband and I are swingers. We have sex with others, couples and singles. Sometimes we are together when we have sex with them, and sometimes we go off alone to have sex with others. We are both bisexual, so if we were in a monogamous relationship, we would have to suppress that side of ourselves.*

— *Trudy, married swinger*

Finally, it's possible to diverge from several Escalator hallmarks all at once — for example, an intimate relationship that is asexual, nonmonogamous and long distance.

*There are four of us in this asexual relationship. We're spread out over three different countries.*

*Ideally, we'd all like to live together at some point. But we realize this is pretty unlikely to happen. One person moving to another country is tricky enough when they're in a traditional Escalator Relationship, with the option of marriage or civil partnership. Moving two or three of us to another country when we don't really have that option would be tough.*

— *Helen, asexual and polyamorous*

## Story: Married But Not on the Escalator

Just like you can't judge a book by its cover, you can't always tell whether a relationship is on or off the Escalator based on one or two characteristics. For instance, people marry for a variety of reasons, not just to ride the Escalator.

Sabrina's story shows why it's important not to make assumptions about any relationship — even a legal marriage.

*For nearly five years I have been in a long-term, committed relationship with my partner. Throughout this time, we've had an open relationship. I've had two long-term dating partners, as well as the freedom to explore feelings with several others.*

*My partner and I recently moved abroad. We got married for visa reasons. I never thought I'd get married. Adjusting to this new status, while keeping our true to our unconventional values, has been more of a challenge than when we were just dating. For instance, there's a lot of baggage that comes with the terms "marriage," "husband" and "wife."*

*It's a struggle to feel pride in being married, even though I love my partner very much. I've been tempted to get a divorce once our residency papers go through. Not to break up, mind you. More as a statement of my personal devaluation of the institution of marriage.*

## 2. *Five Hallmarks of Escalator Relationships*

*I understand the concept of a marriage-like goal at the top of the Escalator. However, as a poly person who recently married due to immigration concerns, I have an issue with this. Not all marriages are alike. Vilifying marriage as the bastion of 1.5 children, middle-class monogamy does people like me a disservice. Basically, it makes me feel shitty(er) about being married.*

*Some people arrive at marriage through the back stairs, not by riding the Escalator. I'd appreciate not being lumped in the aforementioned group simply because of a legal status.*

*— Sabrina, married and polyamorous*

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