

Maria (29) is struggling with anxiety and feeling the need to perform rituals which get in the way of her daily life (such as checking that electric switches and taps are off, and windows and doors locked, several times before leaving the house). Maria is fairly recently married, now sharing a house with her husband, Carlos, and they are trying for a family. She also has a busy job in publishing. She finds that she is less anxious when Carlos is away on business although she is very happy with him and sees him as the love of her life.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Maria?
- Do you see any place for exploring monogamy? If so, how?
- What assumptions might you have about Maria's relationship on the basis of this information?
- How would you proceed?

It might be useful to explore further with Maria what it means to be married and how she understands her role as a wife. For example, she may feel that it is her duty to keep the relationship in a good place, to keep Carlos happy, and to provide a family, and she may worry that the relationship will fail if she does not. Such pressures may be hard to reconcile with the other demands of her life and work. It may be useful then to explore whether Maria has checked assumptions such as that Carlos will want to have sex every night, or to have children as soon as possible, or for Maria to take on all the domestic chores. It may also be helpful to open up values which Maria and Carlos have about honesty and sharing in relationships, in relation to Maria keeping some of her expectations and anxieties hidden from Carlos.

Sheila and Amy are a civilly partnered monogamous white couple in their mid fifties who have been together since their early thirties. They come to see you together hoping that you can resolve a conflict that is threatening to end their relationship.

Sheila does most of the talking in the initial session. She says that they have always had a mutually fulfilling sex life which settled down into a regular once-a-week pattern after they'd been together for a few years. Last month she logged on to Amy's computer when there was a technical

problem with hers. She noticed some odd bookmarks on Amy's web browser. Clicking on them she found pages of highly sexual stories concerning characters from a popular TV series. On confronting Amy she discovered that for the past two years Amy had been both writing and reading such stories, and discussing them in chatrooms with internet friends. Sheila feels betrayed and as if she doesn't even know Amy any more.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Sheila and Amy?
- Do you see any place for exploring monogamy? If so, how?
- What assumptions might you have about their relationship on the basis of the information given?
- How would you proceed?

Given the high emotions and the fact that Amy has been very quiet in the first session, you suggest having individual sessions and then coming back together. In the session with Sheila you explore further what the perceived betrayal means to her. She reveals that she has begun to feel quite alienated and disconnected from other people lately as her hearing has deteriorated. Amy was the one person to whom she still felt deeply connected, and she is shocked at the sense that the person she thought she knew was really someone else. Exploring this further Sheila clarifies that she is troubled that Amy has friends now who Sheila doesn't know, and by the fact that there are practices and (male) characters in some of the stories which she had no idea that Amy was interested in and which play no part in their sex life together.

Amy opens up more in her one-to-one session as you explore what she gets out of her stories and communities, separate from the impact that they are having on Sheila. She speaks of being able to explore different sides of herself (particularly more masculine and dominant sides). Also, she feels that she has become more sexual over the years while Sheila has become less so, and she wanted an outlet for this rather than putting pressure on Sheila. Amy feels devastated by Sheila's reaction, and also – it emerges – somewhat resentful at having her privacy invaded, her fantasies ridiculed, and being presented as the “bad guy”. She is terrified at the prospect of losing Sheila, and also at the prospect that some of what was opening up for her may now be closed down.

You continue the individual-then-joint session model for a while, initially focusing on bringing out into the open the various meanings, values and vulnerabilities in play (e.g. what sex means to both people, their values about shared/separate space, and the vulnerabilities around Sheila's

hearing and Amy's fantasies). Once they have committed to staying together, you use the continua to explore where they would each like the relationship to be. Sheila realises that a lot of her bad feeling relates to the fact that she is losing friends just as Amy is gaining them, and she joins some groups which are inclusive in terms of hearing impairment. Sheila and Amy negotiate to include some aspects of what Amy has been exploring in their sex life, and agree on some aspects to keep more separate.