

Words by  
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# The joy of group sex: 'It was incredibly healing'

*The group sex scene has exploded in Ireland in the past five years, with social media opening up a world of information to those looking to explore ethical non-monogamy. We talk to experts and enthusiasts about stigma, consent and what it's really like to take part in an orgy*

**I**rish podcaster and performer Mx Bel Morrigan had been dreaming of group sex. The dreams were vivid and Morrigan knew "this was something I wanted to experience in real life."

Rather than wait for the group-sex stars to align, Morrigan, who uses the pronouns they/she, decided to take matters into their own hands and organise an event.

They spoke with a friend who shared the desire. "It's not something that just materialises. So we thought, 'Why don't we make something happen? Why don't we host something?'"

The pair sat down and drew up a list of people who might be receptive, and started thinking through the logistics.

"We thought, 'Who would be safe, and good, and up for this?' We came up with a list and set a date, then rented out an Airbnb."

The participants arrived at the venue and, to ensure the experience was a positive one, they started things with a sharing circle, discussing their respective sexual preferences and what they hoped to get out of the evening.

"We went around one by one and said, 'These are my desires. These are my boundaries. This is what I would like to achieve. This is where I don't like to be touched. This is where I do like to be touched.' We went through everything. It was beautiful and established a foundation of trust."

Morrigan says having this foundation of consent and vulnerability has two advantages. It helps ensure that people leave the experience feeling good about themselves and what happened.

"You want people coming out of it thinking, 'Next time, I would like to do that' or 'I wished I had done that' rather than 'I wish I hadn't done that'. People should leave having had a good time and wanting more at the next one."

For Morrigan, discussing sexual boundaries with the group in advance created an honesty that enhanced the sexual experience. "It made it easier to be vulnerable intimately because we already knew where everyone lay."

The group also designated an intimacy-free quiet room. "People could go there if they needed a moment, or to gather themselves."

The experience provided a space for Morrigan to explore their queerness. "I'm bisexual. I am attracted to multiple people, I want to sample the entire buffet."

As for the sex itself? It was, Morrigan says, "transcendental".

"It was a large-enough group, so logistically it wasn't possible to have everyone doing something altogether at the same time, so you break up into groups. All in the same room, but broken into moments of pleasure."

"There was a moment when it was myself and three other people. We would take turns kissing and caressing one person. It was overwhelming in a positive way. All parts of your body are being pleased at the same time, and then you would open your eyes and see other people across the room doing their own thing. It was an evening of people saying, 'It's okay to enjoy pleasure.'"

Human beings have been having group sex for millions of years. Paleolithic cave art depicts scenes of sexual acts involving multiple partners, while the ancient Romans "were known as much for their orgies as their aqueducts", according to cultural anthropologist Katherine Frank, author of *Plays Well In Groups: A Journey Through the World of Group Sex*.

It remains a common fantasy. In 2021, Feeld, a sexual exploration app for both couples and singles, saw a 670pc increase year-on-year in singles listing threesomes as their top desire, while a 2018 study found 21pc of Northern Irish people had participated in group sex.

Anecdotally, the kink community, and demand for sex parties and events, has grown exponentially in the past five years. And Irish people are becoming increasingly

open to exploring ethical non-monogamy. (Although just because someone is practising ethical non-monogamy does not mean they are necessarily a fan of threesomes or group sex).

The rising interest in this area is partly a result of access and visibility, with a wealth of sex educators on social media, niche apps, websites, and informative sex-based podcasts.

Psychosexual and relationship therapist Aoife Drury says social media has enabled individuals to access people "who are engaging in different types of sex", which broadens our understanding of sexual diversity and "stretches our ability to critically think" about relationships we would like to have.

TV shows have also played a part. There's Channel 4's *My First Threesome*, and *Open House: The Great Sex Experiment*, which gives couples the chance to open up their relationships and engage in group sex. This is captured on night-vision footage — presumably for the titillation of viewers at home.

However, while information about group sex may be more accessible, it is still stigmatised and often viewed as transgressive, or 'other'.

Irish sex and intimacy coach Grace Alice Ó Sé believes this is a consequence of Ireland's Catholic past, when heterosexual, monogamous marriage was viewed as the only sexual template. It's worth remembering that contraception was illegal until 1979, and homosexuality was only decriminalised in 1993.

"Anything that was judged to be outside the acceptable norm of a post-marital, reproduction-focused, monogamous sex life was considered shameful and wrong," she says. "And although we have shaken off a lot of these rigid beliefs, some shame and taboo remains. I have seen group sex labelled in many ways, from 'wild' and 'kinky' to 'weird' and 'creepy'."

There can be an assumption that a certain type of person is interested in group sex or play.

According to sex educator and professional dominatrix Clarity Mills, in reality, the demographic is varied.

"The people who do this are normal: they have kids and mortgages and boring jobs. It's all walks of life, from very wealthy to students. It's a big cross section."

Mills, who is originally from Los Angeles, has lived in nine countries and says Irish people are more anxious about their sexual proclivities being revealed than other nationalities.

"Ireland is really concerned about privacy... [and] about being outed about their activities. What would the neighbours think? What would granny say? It is a big, small island where everybody knows everybody, so people are concerned about anonymity."

There can also be misconceptions about what group sex looks like, says Dr Ryan Scoats of Coventry University, who wrote the world's first PhD on threesomes, and the book *Understanding Threesomes: Gender, Sex, and Consensual Non-Monogamy*.

Often an understanding or vision of group sex is drawn from mainstream pornography rather than real-life accounts and this can "give us a distorted understanding", says Dr Scoats.

In his research, he found if heterosexual men had only seen group sex depicted in mainstream porn, they may come to the experience with unrealistic expectations.

"[Men] were more disappointed. Whereas sometimes women were pleasantly surprised," he says. "Men expected it to be the best thing since sliced bread."

Dynamics in group sex can become more complicated when couples are involved.

Jealousies can arise, usually as a result of anxieties regarding exclusion, says Dr Scoats.

"It could stem out of not receiving the same amount of attention as the other person. Or worrying that those people are going to instigate something behind the partner's back. I would say that, generally, jealousy doesn't tend to crop up when it is three single people. It's mainly when there is a couple, when there is the perception of something to be lost," he says.

Mills is in a polyamorous marriage and says the key to maintaining a healthy relationship and avoiding jealousy is to talk it out, and not to let insecurities fester.

"There is no such thing as over-communication," she says. "Talk early and often, talk about boundaries, talk about limits, have versions of a safe word... so if you are at a club and someone comes up and says, 'Do you want to come home with us?' you can say to your partner, 'Oh honey, can you go to the bar and get me a coke?' and they will know she hates Coca-Cola so she's not into this."

Mills says it's important to know your limitations and have the confidence to express them clearly.

"It's a good exercise to get people used to saying 'no' in the moment." It is important, Mills explains, to be able to say, 'Yes, you. Yes, you. No, not you. I'm not feeling your vibe or energy.'

"And you can say it in a nice way. You're not trying to hurt people's feelings."

She says the more you say 'no', the easier and more comfortable you become articulating yourself.

"If you don't like it, say it... The community in Ireland is very welcoming and everyone wants everyone to have as good and as pleasurable a time [as possible]."

"Not everyone is digging everyone. That's okay. I have been in situations when my partner is feeling the vibe and I wasn't and I say, 'You guys go crazy... I am going to have a coke at the bar.'"

To try and avoid envy or resentment, some couples choose to outline strict rules about what their partner can and cannot do during sex with multiple partners.

"They may say, 'Well, you can't have penetrative sex with them' or 'You have to orgasm inside of me,'" says Dr Scoats. He says while this can help assuage jealousy, there can





From left: Sex and relationship therapist Aoife Drury. PICTURE: MARK CONDREN; Mx Bel Morrigan. PICTURE: STEVE HUMPHREYS

be a negative outcome as this “constructivist psychological difference” can create a sort of sexual hierarchy.

“Couples can use that as a way to demark that sexual experience from their more regular sex. And that can be beneficial, but it all depends on the third person in that scenario. What is that third person looking for? Are they okay to not have the full menu of sexual behaviours? Are they okay for rules to be put down by the couple?”

Controlling which sexual acts are okay and which aren’t “forefronts the desire of the couple”, he says. “If we are looking to have positive experiences for all, then that third person and their needs should be taken into account.”

If their needs and desires are not considered, it can lead to feelings of objectification. “Some people are okay with that experience,” he says. “Whereas other people resent the idea that they are a sex toy to come in and be used like that.”

Ó Sé agrees: “Never treat a ‘third’ to your sexual experience as a means to fulfil your fantasy — they should be getting as much pleasure and fulfilment as you are out of the experience.”

It’s not always simply about pleasure, says Morrigan, who describes group sex as “healing”. Several years ago, they were the victim of sexual abuse and, as a consequence, have trauma relating to cisgender men.

“It wasn’t until the last two years I could admit that it was something that happened,” says Morrigan. “I am bisexual and attracted to all genders and I used to say, ‘Oh I am just picky when it comes to men.’ After lots of self-work, I realised, ‘No, it’s not that I am picky. I am protecting myself because I don’t know if I can feel safe around men.’

“With this group event, I got to experience sexual intimacy and pleasure with cis men. It was something I have known I was always into but I could never permit myself into that type of intimacy because... I didn’t want to go through what I had gone through before.”

Being in a setting with people who cared for one another created a secure space for Morrigan to explore.

“I experienced things I wanted to do for a long time but couldn’t. It was incredibly healing. The next morning, we had another sharing circle, and I just broke down because I didn’t think I would be able to do that. I was so thankful for that space to enable me to be held that way, and be intimate that way, and know I could do that safely. It was something that was so profound and, since then, I haven’t looked back. I can embrace my sluttiness,” says Morrigan, laughing.

Dr Scoats recognises that having considered chats before and after a sexual experience may not always be possible.

“Some people don’t want to have long, drawn-out conversations where they deconstruct everything before it happens,” he says. “For some, it can kind of ruin the mood. And if you think of the context in which some people have group-sex experiences... Things can happen when people are intoxicated, when they have had a few drinks or they have had a joint. So they are not necessarily in their clearest state of mind.” However, to ensure that it is a positive

experience, it’s important to be adaptable and to seek consent.

“Don’t dictate that things have to go a certain way because that’s your vision. Much like you would in a two-person sexual encounter, check in on people. Do you like this? Do you want something else? Read body language. Just being aware of what’s happening and being willing to close a situation down at the drop of a hat if things aren’t going well.”

Also be aware that while group sex can be euphoric, it can also be draining.

“It can lead to a bit of cognitive overload when you are trying to consider what two other people are into and not just your interactions with them, but their interactions with each other. People have said that it can be quite mentally draining.”

For those interested in exploring group sex, Mills advises connecting with a like-minded community, going to meet-ups and talking to others about their lived experiences. And, above all, taking things slowly.

“There can be kid-in-a-candy store syndrome... people go to clubs and they think, ‘I want to screw everyone!’ And it’s like, ‘Slow your roll and pump the brakes a little,’” she says. “How about we have a chat first and treat people like people?”

“Connecting with people is the most interesting thing. I have been at parties in Ireland where 200 people are having sex, and I have also been at ones where it’s only 10 couples and some people are having sex and everyone else is just chatting. And they are all wonderful. There is only one wrong way to do it and that’s not consensually, not safely... and not without communicating boundaries.”

## How to speak the language

### Ethical/consensual non-monogamy:

The practice of non-monogamous intimate relations that are distinguished from infidelity by the knowledge and consent of those involved.

**Swinging:** When couples swap partners and engage in sexual activity.

**Hard swap:** Term used within swinging circles. A hard swap is when a couple agree that their primary partner can engage in all different types of sexual activity during a swap. This may include penetrative sex.

**Soft swap:** When a couple agree on physical/sexual boundaries that their primary partner cannot cross during the swap.

**Closed-door swap:** Refers to open couples who feel comfortable engaging in separate sexual activities in different rooms or locations from their primary partners.

**Unicorn:** A bisexual woman who will take part in a threesome with a couple

**Pegasus:** A bisexual man who will take part in a threesome with a couple.

**MMF:** A threesome consisting of two men and one woman.

**FMF:** A threesome involving two women and a man.

**Cuckold:** A man who is sexually stimulated by the thought or sight of their female partner having sex with another man.

**Cuck queen:** The female equivalent of the above.

