

Relationship anarchy is about creating bonds that suit people, not social conventions

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By its very nature, friendship is [anarchic](#): it has few rules and is not regulated by the government. Our friendships are usually egalitarian, flexible and non-exclusive. We treat our friends as individuals and care

about their interests. We support them and don't tell them what to do; our friendships fit around, rather than govern, our lives.

But interestingly, friendship is the exception when it comes to [intimacy](#). Few of us want anarchic love lives, or to treat our children as equals. We gravitate instead towards more rigid, hierarchical, structured forms of intimacy in these relationships.

[Relationship anarchists](#) do not hold with these ideas. They argue we must try harder to relate as equals, reject hierarchy between relationships and accept that intimate life can take many forms.

Critics would suggest relationship anarchy is just a lifestyle—an attempt to evade commitment. But the concept is best understood as political, and a development of the core themes of anarchist thinking. This reflects the values and practices involved, and reminds us that the flourishing of intimacy might require radical change.

These core themes include rejecting the idea that there should be one dominant form of authority—like a president, boss or patriarch; wariness of social class or status which arbitrarily privileges some people over others; and a deep respect for the idea that individuals should be able to govern their own lives and support each other. Applied to intimate relationships, these themes define relationship anarchy.

But political anarchism is not above violence and disorder. As someone whose work explores the philosophy of love, sex and relationships—and different approaches to intimacy—I view it as an attitude towards our social predicament where people try to relate as equals and reject unnecessary constraints.

Equals without constraints

Relationship anarchists critique society and imagine alternatives. Their main target is the idea that there are different kinds of relationships and some are more important than others.

They reject how relationships appear in the media; good relationships needn't last forever, be exclusive, between two people, domestic, involve romantic love or practical entanglement. This critical eye also extends to our attitudes towards children, animals and the environment.

Relationship anarchy's aversion to hierarchy separates it from [swinging](#) or forms of [polyamory](#) which distinguish between sex and romance, ["primary" and "secondary" partners](#), or which think the government should privilege some relationships through marriage law.

The practical heart of relationship anarchy is the idea that we design relationships to suit us, not mirror [social expectations](#). Do we want to share a home? Is sexual intimacy important? If so, what kind exactly? This process also involves creating a framework to guide our broader intimate life. How will we choose together? How and when can we revise our framework? What about disagreements?

Relationship anarchists will disagree about the content of these frameworks. Can two relationship anarchists agree to be romantically exclusive, for example, set rules for each other, or decide to never revise their framework? Should they retain, repurpose or reject common labels such as "partner"?

My own view is that agreements are acceptable if they support our [ability to be intimate](#), but we should embrace "minimal non-monogamy" and remain open to the possibility our desires will change.

Community and self-development

Community is central to relationship anarchy. From queer feminist Andie Nordgren's "[short instructional manifesto](#)"—which jumpstarted relationship anarchy—to [zines](#) like Communities Not Couples, the [relationship "smorgasbord"](#) and [social media influencers](#), relationship anarchists educate each other and share resources.

They also embrace [supporting each other](#) when [social institutions](#) are inadequate. This might involve providing money, establishing accessible community spaces, sourcing contraception and caregiving.

Relationship anarchy requires self-development. Since we are shaped by our social context, we often lack the skills needed to overhaul our relationships, whether that's communicating effectively or managing emotions such as jealousy and insecurity.

Relationship anarchists embrace the idea that we cannot behave now in ways that would be [unacceptable in our ideal society](#). We cannot be callous or dishonest in trying to bring about open and equal relationships. Instead, trying to embody our desired changes in our actions helps us develop the skills needed to ensure these changes are sustainable.

Talk of relationship anarchy often prompts objections. Liberals think government involvement in private life prevents harm, and that common social norms and ideals of relationships prevent anxiety. A relationship anarchist would ask us to consider the real source of these worries.

We are well able to harm each other within existing government frameworks: police, immigration, social and health services often harm people in unconventional relationships through policies that [do not recognize the family life of non-heterosexual people](#). Or which make it hard for immigrant families to be together, or deny visitation rights to unmarried people, for example.

Community networks of care are active in resisting and repairing these harms, and their efforts are evidence that we can successfully oversee our own needs when it comes to intimacy.

Similarly, a more active approach to our relationships, where we reflect on our needs and desires, set boundaries and communicate, [builds confidence and decreases anxiety](#). A realistic and flexible attitude towards intimacy makes it harder to trip on the [gap between ideals and reality](#).

Realism, not revolution, is at the heart of relationship anarchy. Social criticism can be radical—ranging from love and domesticity to childcare, companionship and co-operation—but efforts to remold our relationships should be done with care. We can both expose social contradictions and oppressive laws and accept common ground with other views and initiatives.

Most of all, we should be wary of attempts to cast relationship anarchy as a fad or lifestyle. It is political—a commitment to nurture agency when it comes to intimacy. Like conversation, [relationship](#) anarchy is a process; it can be messy, loud, and unpredictable, but it can change us entirely.

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