

Older adults embracing 'living apart together'

February 9 2017

Since 1990, the divorce rate among adults 50 years and older has doubled. This trend, along with longer life expectancy, has resulted in many adults forming new partnerships later in life. A new phenomenon called 'Living Apart Together' (LAT)—an intimate relationship without a shared residence—is gaining popularity as an alternative form of commitment. Researchers at the University of Missouri say that while the trend is well understood in Europe, it is lesser known in the U.S. This means that challenges, such as how LAT partners can engage in family caregiving or decision-making, could affect family needs.

"What has long been understood about late-in-life relationships is largely based on long-term marriage," said Jacquelyn Benson, assistant professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "There are now more divorced and widowed adults who are interested in forging new intimate relationships outside the confines of marriage. Recent research demonstrates that there are other ways of establishing long-lasting, high-quality relationships without committing to marriage or living together. However, U.S. society has yet to recognize LAT as a legitimate choice. If more people—young and old, married or not—saw LAT as an option, it might save them from a lot of future heartache."

Benson and Marilyn Coleman, Curators Professor of Human Development and Family Science, interviewed adults who were at least 60 years old and in committed relationships but lived apart. The researchers found that couples were motivated by desires to stay independent, maintain their own homes, sustain existing family

boundaries, and remain financially independent. Couples expressed challenges defining their relationships or choosing terms to properly convey the nature of their relationships to others. For example, the majority considered traditional dating terms such as 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' to be awkward terms to use at their ages.

"While we are learning more about LAT relationships, further research is needed to determine how LAT relationships are related to issues such as health care and caregiving," Benson said. "Discussions about end-of-life planning and caregiving can be sensitive to talk about; however, LAT couples should make it a priority to have these conversations both as a couple and with their families. Many of us wait until a crisis to address those issues, but in situations like LAT where there are no socially prescribed norms dictating behavior these conversations may be more important than ever."

More information: "Older adults developing a preference for living apart together," was published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. "Older adult descriptions of living apart together," was published in *Family Relations*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Older adults embracing 'living apart together' (2017, February 9) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-02-older-adults-embracing.html>

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