

Are couples who choose to 'live apart' tested when partners require caregiving?

January 9 2018

Previous research has shown that unmarried adults are choosing long-distance or cross-residential relationships as a way to have companionship and independence later in life. Jacquelyn Benson, an expert of older adult relationships from the University of Missouri, has found that such couples safeguard personal autonomy to maintain partnerships and relationship satisfaction. While autonomy is paramount for these couples, participants in the study also emphasized the importance of having a flexible mindset about their relationships, especially when one partner needs additional care.

"Living Apart Together," or LAT partnerships is a growing phenomenon among [older adults](#). The term refers to an intimate, committed relationship that exists between two partners without a shared residence. While the trend is well understood in Europe, it remains lesser known in the U.S. This means that certain family issues that become important in later life, like caregiving or medical decision-making, could be difficult to navigate for LAT couples and their relatives.

"The societal standard for elder caregiving in the United States is to expect spouses and adult children to step in as primary caregivers; however, we do not know how these expectations apply in LAT arrangements," Benson said. "In our research we are learning that, while living apart seems to be almost universally viewed as a necessity for maintaining [relationship satisfaction](#) for these couples, paradoxically couples also are willing to make changes in living arrangements to provide caregiving support to one another."

Benson interviewed adults who were at least 60 years old and in committed relationships but did not live together. She found that for most of these couples, living apart and being independent was considered ideal. Participants in the study recognized that keeping separate homes was the simplest strategy for safeguarding their autonomy.

Benson cautioned against making any conclusions about actual caregiving behaviors. "Most of the individuals we interviewed had not been tested by the realities of [caregiving](#) within their current LAT partnerships. It will be important to follow LAT partners over time to see if their willingness transforms into action and understand the mechanisms that explain these care provision decisions," she said.

Benson acknowledges that further research is needed to better understand repartnering in later life. She is seeking older [adults](#) from around the country in committed, monogamous relationships who are choosing to live apart (in a LAT [relationship](#)) or living together and unmarried (cohabiting). Those willing to participate in her research can email loveafter60lab@missouri.edu. To find out more about Benson's research, visit www.loveafter60lab.com.

"Living apart together relationships in later [life](#): Constructing an account of relational maintenance," was published in *Intimate Relationships And Social Change*.

More information: Jacquelyn Benson et al. Living Apart Together Relationships in Later Life: Constructing an Account of Relational Maintenance, *Intimate Relationships and Social Change* (2017). [DOI: 10.1108/S1530-353520170000011009](#)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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