



PLAYING HOUSE

How to Protect Your Heart—and Your Wallet— When You Don't Have the Ring

By Elizabeth Kaminsky

Whether it happens in one fell swoop or one dresser drawer at a time, many couples have taken the plunge to share the same space without sharing a name. Statistics on living together are now tracked in the Census. A report by the Centers for Disease Control says that, by age 30, about half of the women in the U. S. have “cohabitated outside of marriage.” It is a viable option for many adults who, for whatever reason, choose the comforts of

home without the confines of marriage.

My first exposure to the concept was when I was in high school. My mom and I had just moved into a brand-new apartment, which, in my mind, was perfect. We had new appliances, reliable heat and only three other neighbors in the whole building. I remember coming home from school that first week to find my mother pouting at the kitchen table. From her expression, I could tell that our new little palace was losing its luster.

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"What's wrong?" I asked, innocently.

"I just met the couple across the hall," Mom said, scowling through a clenched jaw.

"Are they newlyweds? Do they have any kids?" I was eager to know whether there might be potential babysitting dollars to be had.

"They're *living* together!" Mom growled, and that was the end of the conversation.

My mother, like many others from her generation, had definite ideas regarding the rules of engagement, as it were. Imagine my surprise when, years later, a friend of hers was contemplating a third marriage at age 72. "I don't know what the hell's the matter with her," my Mom said. "Why doesn't she just live with him? If she marries him, she'll lose Ed's pension." I looked at my mother in disbelief. Was this the same person who had so swiftly judged that young couple across the hall?

When I challenged her, she reasoned that her friend's decision was a financial one, and that she needed to look beyond love to protect herself for the future. While Mom's black-and-white judgments may have been a little harsh, she did have a point: big decisions always have financial implications, and it is a wise woman who considers how those decisions will affect her future.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Gay or straight, couples cohabitate for a million different reasons. Some live with people for security, some for convenience. One woman I spoke with even said that she lived with her boyfriend, because he was

"neater than any roommate" she'd ever had. But by far the No. 1 reason women gave for "living together" was that they were "in love."

For some women, like Erica*, 26, the pink fog of infatuation tends to cloud their decision-making skills. "I wish I'd thought a *lot* further ahead, before I moved in with Jeff," she says, of her five-year live-in relationship. "We were 18 when we met. My parents were hassling me, and I couldn't wait to get out of their house. Jeff had a good job at a chemical plant and a nice apartment, but, most of all, he had freedom and no one to answer to. I think I fell more in love with that than I did with him. It was great for a few years, until the bills started to pile up. We never talked about money; we just spent a lot of it. I charged thousands of dollars worth of furniture, curtains, and other stuff for the house. When we split up, I was so hurt and angry that I just walked away from all of it. Then I realized what I had done to myself. It's been three years since we were together, and I am still paying the bills for all that stuff."

Renata, 51, tells a similar story. "I was in my mid 30's when I moved in with Carl. We lived together in his house for about eight years. Early on, I was delighted to spend money decorating and sprucing up his home, turning it into our home. Little did I realize I was not only paying half of all his bills, but financing his redecorating as well. Without thinking, I was contributing far more, financially, than I had expected. When →

I started to question the way things were structured, he told me that it was still his house and I was free to leave any time I wished. I was hurt on so many levels. I put my heart, soul and money into living with him, and it turned out to be a very bad investment for me."

These two stories illustrate an excellent point: any living arrangement is as much a financial decision as it is an emotional decision. One way to ease the surprise factor is to make a solid plan. Elizabeth Lewin, certified financial planner and author of "Financial Fitness for Living Together," advises couples to get their own financial house in order and be willing to

estate planning and the like.

Lewin practices what she preaches. She and her beau, both now over 60, have lived together for 16 years. "The success of our situation is open communication," she says. "Each of us has other family members to consider, so we have thought very carefully about our future and the financial decisions we have made." While societal attitudes may have changed to accept and recognize unmarried couples, the law offers no more protection than it does to gay couples. "Unmarried couples have few legal rights when it comes to medical or estate decisions," cautions Lewin. "If your significant other is in a car crash, expect the emergency room to treat you like a stranger

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discuss things with their partners. Lewin says she wrote the book because "unmarried couples do not have many of the financial advantages and legal protections that married couples enjoy." Her advice includes figuring out your net worth, together and separately, reviewing your income and expenses, and deciding who pays for what. She emphasizes that couples should be sure to put all of the important things in writing, like making out wills, designating ownership of property, medical powers of attorney,

when it comes to getting information, let alone giving permission for testing. And, if your partner dies without a will, it doesn't matter how long you may have been together or what your arrangements were. Unless you have legal documents in place, you don't have a leg to stand on."

I experienced the medical side of that coin firsthand. My boyfriend (and weekend live-in) of several years was rushed to the hospital with a brain aneurysm. He and I were prepared for just such an emergency,

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‘He said I’d be able to stay in the house for the rest of my life,’ says Anna. ‘His children took care of that, selling the house right out from under me.’

having fully discussed what we each would want in a situation like that. However, even saying that I was his fiancée didn’t get me any closer to talking to a doctor. I waited for hours, like a total stranger, for a “blood” relative to arrive and “authorize” me to be a part of his care. It was one of the most frightening and humiliating experiences I have ever had.

And Baby (or Puppy) Makes Three . . .

Many couples enter relationships with children. Some unmarried couples adopt, or become pregnant together. Other couples choose to dote on a mutually acquired pooch or parrot, whom they love as much as they would a baby. Additions to your family require careful consideration.

With children in the picture, financial planning becomes critical. In some cases, getting pregnant prompts the couple to get married. “Pete and I were really happy with our arrangement, but when I found out I was pregnant, we started looking at the future,” says Jeanne, 27. “There was so much pressure from our families, too. We

wrestled with what was best for us, but ultimately decided it would be better if we did get married. I wanted to stay home with the baby for at least six months, and Pete’s health insurance wouldn’t cover us unless we were married. Mine would stop when I left my job. So, we felt like it made sense.”

Sometimes, things can get messy, even when the “kids” are grown men and women in their 50’s. “Stan’s kids were horrible to me,” says Anna, 78. “He and I moved in together after my husband died. We made the choice not to get married, because I would lose my husband’s Social Security and some other benefits from his pension. I moved into Stan’s home, but we used my furniture, because it was in better shape. We split the bills, and we even had a joint travel fund for our trips together.”

Anna became Stan’s primary caregiver when his health began to fail. “When his prostate cancer spread to his spine, Stan needed constant care. I did it all—learned how to give him shots, bathed him, fed him, everything. I did it out of love, and I’d do it all over again. He hadn’t seen his son

MORE RESOURCES: For more useful information, surf on over to these Web sites:

American Association of Retired Persons (www.aarp.org): There’s lots of good financial advice here, even if you don’t think you’re old enough to need it!

NOLO “Law for All” Law Center (www.nolo.com): An on-line “encyclopedia” of all things legal—wills, powers of attorney, real estate, etc. They even have specific information on living-together contracts.

Social Security Administration (www.ssa.gov): Check this out for advice on your benefits and how they are affected, if you marry, divorce, remarry, etc.

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or daughter in more than 15 years. One day he had a stroke and ended up in the hospital. It was looking like he might not make it much longer, so I called his kids to let them know. I figured they might want to see their dad, to make peace or whatever. His daughter showed up and started making funeral arrangements. She came in like a whirlwind, going through his drawers, demanding to see his bank records and other important papers. The fights were terrible. My love was dying, and his ungrateful kid was looting our house, piece by piece."

Unfortunately for Anna, Stan's good intentions didn't hold up after he died. "It was one of those things we said we'd get around to someday," she says, sadly. "He said he'd make sure I was taken care of and that I'd be able to stay in the house for the rest of my life. His money-grubbing children took care of that, selling the house right out from under me. There was nothing I could do about it."

Lewin stresses that a situation like this doesn't have to happen. "The key is having the tough conversations, especially for couples later in life. If you love each other enough to live together, you should love each other enough to protect one another." Getting the conversation started involves asking the right questions. She suggests starting with the following:

Who is better at paying bills, being organized? Who likes to do it? How and when will it get done? Who owns what, and who owes what: Are the CD's mine, is the couch yours? What assets am I bringing into

the relationship that I want to stay mine? How will this loan affect both of our credit ratings?

We have a child together; do you intend to help support her, if we don't stay together? We bought Fido together, but who gets custody, if we split up? Am I leaving you the china and silver? Do I want to leave money to my kids? Who makes decisions for me, if I'm ill and can't make them for myself? Then put it all in writing, and get any contracts or agreements notarized. Create legal protections for yourself wherever possible.

If it all seems a little distrustful and unromantic, think about it this way:

Knowledge is power. When you know where you and your partner stand on all the important issues, you have a firm, powerful foundation upon which to build your relationship. What a wonderful way to honor one another!

A few years ago, the nicest couple moved in next door to me. I'm only guessing, but they seem to be in their mid-to-late 60's. She's a retired professor, and he's a career military man. She tells me that their love affair has lasted for the better part of 30 years. It has spanned continents and triumphed cancer. It has far outlasted many of the marriages I know. I asked her once what she thought was the secret to their success. She said, with a wink, "Darling, I never married him, and I never will." Somehow, I think Mom would approve. □

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