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# Modern Families, Modern Living Arrangements

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"It's complicated!" There's no denying that modern families are doing what it takes to come up with workable living arrangements. Creativity and flexibility are key to managing relationships that don't necessarily align with conventional definitions. Here we examine two contemporary trends: couples who are "living apart together" and those who are "living together apart."



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## Part 1: Living Apart Together

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Living together has long been the hallmark of a stable, committed relationship. Historically, marriage was the only gateway to legitimacy for a couple seeking a life together under one roof. It wasn't until the 1960s that non-marital cohabitation emerged as a new social institution, blowing the doors off marriage as the essential precursor to sharing an address.

More recently, the boundaries of a committed relationship have expanded beyond the "one roof" limit to include couples sharing a relationship, but not a home and often not even a city. These couples are part of a new phenomenon called "living apart together" (LAT). Unlike their contemporary cousins "the commuter couples" (who have one main household in common and one or both commute long distances so they are apart for a period of time such as weekdays and together on weekends), members of an LAT couple reside in separate households entirely.

A sizeable minority of Canadians (7%) over the age of 20 is part of an LAT couple.<sup>1</sup> LATs defy narrow description. They are spread across all social and age groups, but are largely the purview of youth: nearly 1 in 3 young adults aged 20 to 24 (31%) claim to be in an LAT.

Fewer older adults pursue LAT relationships (5% among those aged 30 to 39 and to 2% among those 70 and over), but those who do enjoy them for longer. The average duration of an LAT couple is 2.3 years among young adults, compared with 3.8 years among those age 40 to 49 and 7.5 years among those 60 and over.

The reasons LAT relationships form help to explain their relative longevity. Being part of an LAT couple as a young adult is largely a function of circumstances (going away to university/college), financial necessity (living with parents) and social expectation (don't "settle down" too soon). The motivations driving older

couples to establish LAT relationships are more complex. For many, it is a matter of choice enabled by financial security and fuelled by individuality.

Some couples simply don't want to live together: it could be that neither wants to move or that the benefits of having private, personal time and space outweigh any of the costs associated with regularly sharing space in two different homes. In some cases, it is employment that keeps couples living in separate locations or the presence of children from a previous relationship. And in others, it may be past relationship experiences that drive the desire to maintain spatial autonomy.

As LAT relationships continue to trend as a "viable choice," some of the stigma that older women, in particular, experience around living alone may ease. Given the tendency to equate relationship status with living arrangements, it is easy to conflate being single in relationship terms, being single in residential terms and being alone in life. As LAT couples are showing, living alone does not necessarily mean being lonely, isolated or disengaged. Nor does it reflect an inability or unwillingness to "commit" to a partner.

In reality, 46% of surveyed Canadians living in an LAT relationship reported living in the same neighbourhood as their spouse<sup>2</sup> and wouldn't have it any other way.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2013), *Living Apart Together* by Martin Turcotte, <http://bit.ly/10bGi78>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada (2011), "Table 7: Distribution of Persons in an Intimate Relationship, Whose Partners Live in a Different Household, by Place of Residence of the Spouse, Canada, 2011," 2011 General Social Survey: *Overview of Families in Canada*, catalogue no. 89-650-XWE, <http://bit.ly/1bbXXBk>.