



OPINION

By Dr Julie Hannan

My husband and I live apart and it's been great for our marriage

To honour my midlife values in my day-to-day married life we negotiated living apart together

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I wanted to de-centre marriage and cohabitation, and prioritise intimacy and freedom (Photo: Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images)

The first half of life is spent fitting into the worlds of those around us. We strive to be like others and follow the well-established and expected trajectory: school, job, partner, house, **marriage**, kids. Our lives are constructed around the rules, traditions, beliefs and values we've taken in from others.

Values refer to what we find meaningful and motivating in life, guiding our sense of right and wrong and acting as the compass directing our behaviour. Values start forming around the age of 10 and tend to be firmly implanted by our early twenties, impacting not only how we live, socialise, work, and form **friendships**, but also our partner choices.

But people and their values change through the life cycle. As Muhammad Ali said: "The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life."

I totally agree. In my twenties and thirties I was a committed Catholic mother of two living with my first husband. I valued commitment, family and career. In my fifties I am a confirmed atheist, empty nester, married and living apart from my second husband, valuing freedom, choice and autonomy.

The second half of life (35 to 60 years) can be spent creating a world that fits around you. **Taking this approach may result in people feeling unhappy in a relationship you have outgrown.** Generally, people don't tend to consciously reassess their values in adulthood or consider if they've changed. The values of a 20-year-old might be centred around success, status and money, yet the values of a 50-year-old may prioritise authenticity, companionship and contribution. Such a shift will inevitably affect behaviour, choices and relationships.

The partner you choose at midlife might be completely different to the person you married in your twenties, unless you've changed and grown together at a pace that maintains compatibility. In my experience as a therapist, **clear, honest communication and negotiation** keeps relationships flourishing. If these behaviours are accompanied by high motivation to stay together on the part of both partners, the relationship can be maintained.

At midlife, you know how the world works, you know yourself better, your expectations, boundaries and what you can tolerate. If you are considering dating or marrying again you can set out your stall, aware of what you're offering and the kind of person you want to attract.

After marrying at 26, I lived with my then-husband, had two children, and divorced at 40. I then spent 10 very happy single years bringing up the kids and launching them into the world. I founded several businesses and finished my doctorate. I loved living alone, organised my will and pension and felt set for life. I became increasingly introverted (research suggests this is very common for midlifers) valuing freedom and autonomy. I downsized, bought an apartment in the countryside and took a sabbatical to pursue my writing career.

And then I met Richard.

He lived nearby and after a bit of convincing, I agreed to go on a date with him. We became serious about each other very quickly. We both worked in mental health, loved motorbikes, prioritised family, and

harboured ambitions to travel. We talked about marriage and a year later I asked him to marry me. He said yes, we signed a prenup and married in a Cornwall registry office 12 weeks later.

We both wanted a small ceremony, so only invited our four children and his parents, who had missed out on attending his first wedding as he had eloped. I had a big Catholic wedding in my twenties, but was now a 53-year-old atheist who didn't want the meringue, priest and bevy of bridesmaids.

Marriage was the most meaningful way we felt expressed our commitment to each other. A verbal promise to stay together wasn't going to cut the mustard for us. We differed in our views, however, on our living arrangements. Richard wanted us to live together and I was resistant to this. I knew I didn't want the same domestic set-up I'd had in my first marriage, and I wanted to de-centre marriage and cohabitation and prioritise intimacy and freedom.

To honour my midlife values in my day-to-day married life we negotiated living apart together (LAT). LAT relates to couples in committed, intimate relationships who live separately and is becoming increasingly popular with the over 45s.

We currently live one mile from each other (most LATs live within a one to five-mile radius), make arrangements every day to see if we want to meet up and generally spend three to five evenings a week at his place or mine.

We may at some point live together and we discuss this regularly. We both know that if we co-habitat I will always need a place of my own to reboot, recharge, honour my inner introvert and stay true to my midlife values.

I enjoy Richard's company immensely. There is no-one I'd rather spend time with – other than myself of course.

Recognising and staying true to my changing values allows me to live an authentic life I feel connected to, and which reflects who I am now. LAT means life feels less boring as we don't get caught up distributing household tasks and don't feel like overfamiliar housemates. Sex and intimacy are more varied and spontaneous, and because it's not routinely planned, it keeps us both on our toes.

I feel visible in my own life and in the world, I have agency and am uncompromised. It can feel joyful to throw off the shackles of social convention and to choose how you live and love. Why not try it – surely at midlife, there is no better time?

Dr Julie Hannan is a chartered psychologist, psychotherapist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook* (Morency; £10.88) 

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