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OPINION

By Dr Julie Hannan

My husband and I tried moving in together for the first time - here's how it went

Solitude and time apart for me are more than luxuries

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Dr Julie Hannan with her husband: 'Time apart definitely helps us continue to live in harmony and when we are together at home by choice, it feels fresh' (Photo: Supplied)

When I tell people that I married my partner and [we didn't move in together](#), their eyes widen. I'd been a single mum for many years, with no intention to remarry, let alone cohabit. When the kids left home, [I created a new life I valued](#). But a few years later, at the age of 52, I met my partner, and something shifted.

We were committed to each other and got married in 2022. That part was easy. Living together? I wasn't quite ready for that until now.

Our Living Apart Together (LAT) model worked well for us for a couple of years, and we're far from alone. We would speak on the phone most days, meet for coffee a couple of times a week and spend four nights a week together, usually at his apartment. In the UK, more than one in 10 adults are in committed relationships but live separately. The number is even higher among those over 50, often due to the presence of blended families and caregiving responsibilities.

In January 2025, when my eldest stepchild left home, we decided to try living together. It wasn't an easy adjustment. What I found was that I genuinely enjoyed living with my partner. But what I missed, almost immediately, was the solitude I'd come to value so deeply since I'd become [an empty nester](#). Virginia Woolf was on to something in 1929 when she famously wrote: "A woman must have... a room of her own." I needed a space of my own, not just a room.

Solitude is different to loneliness. It is intentional, restorative, and a chance for quiet, clarity, and creativity. Living together, I felt restless; I needed movement and needed to feel free.

But like everyone else, I also had commitments: my partner, friendships, family, and a grandchild on the way. To feel existentially free within a committed life is a challenge for me. But freedom isn't about running away from responsibility; it's about holding the tension between the part of me that seeks out new experiences alone and the part of me that values love and loyalty.

During the pandemic, I made a conscious decision to move my business online, creating more flexibility in how, where, and when I work, and I've never looked back. My partner's job is community-based, and he needs to stay in the local area. When I met my partner, I'd just moved to the area – a place I'd always wanted to live. He had grown up there and spent most of his adult life in the town, so it just made sense to build our life there together.

Once we moved in together, for a while, I considered renting a place by the coast – somewhere I could retreat to. But I didn't want the permanency of returning to the same four walls every time I needed space. And so, in midlife, I began experimenting with solo trips, which brought a new kind of freedom: less of an

escape, more like a life expansion.

The rise of digital nomads in their fifties looks quite different from the hostels-and-backpacks version of earlier times in life. Many chose to settle in one comfortable place for three to six months, usually a place with good healthcare options. They create routines and establish favourite hangouts, while absorbing the rhythms of local life before moving on. It turned out that wasn't quite right for me either.

What I discovered was that after a couple of weeks in one place, I felt satisfied – and ready to move again. I'd never seen myself as a traveller, not really. I'd travelled extensively in my twenties for work, but that was business travel – efficient, scheduled, transactional. What I was doing now felt different. It was slower, more curious. Less escape, more expansion.

“Compromise is the best and cheapest lawyer,” wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, but when the foundation of a marriage is made up of both spouses wanting the other to thrive, compromise comes as part of the package and doesn't feel like a sacrifice.

It looks like this today: we travel together in April and August, his quiet months at work. This year, we've already motorcycled through Spain and Portugal. In between times, I often head off on [solo trips](#), most recently to the South of France. He stays home, visits family, and spends as much time as possible on his Harley-Davidson, touring the UK with his mates. It works.

Time apart definitely helps us continue to live in harmony and when we are together at home by choice, it feels fresh – even inevitable everyday tasks feel less like we're going through the motions.

As a psychologist who works with people in midlife, I've seen how autonomy can be particularly challenging for women to maintain in a relationship. Many were raised – explicitly or implicitly – to put others first, to accommodate, and to nurture, and can subsequently easily lose their sense of self. That's why solitude and time apart for me are more than luxuries – they're a way of staying connected to myself.

Communication, of course, is essential, and my husband and I are continually improving in this area. Respect, clarity, and a 30-minute catch-up each day ensures we discuss the important things when we are apart. We might be in different countries, but we talk more than some couples who share the same sofa.

Solo travel offers aloneness, something that midlife women often hunger for after years of being needed, busy, or on call. Solitude provides a space where no one's watching, no one needs anything, and you're free to remember who you are or consider who you want to become.

Now, when I'm home, I'm home by choice, and I love it. I feel like I'm truly living my life, a real midlife odyssey.

Dr Julie Hannan is a psychologist and founder of [The Midlife Academy](#).