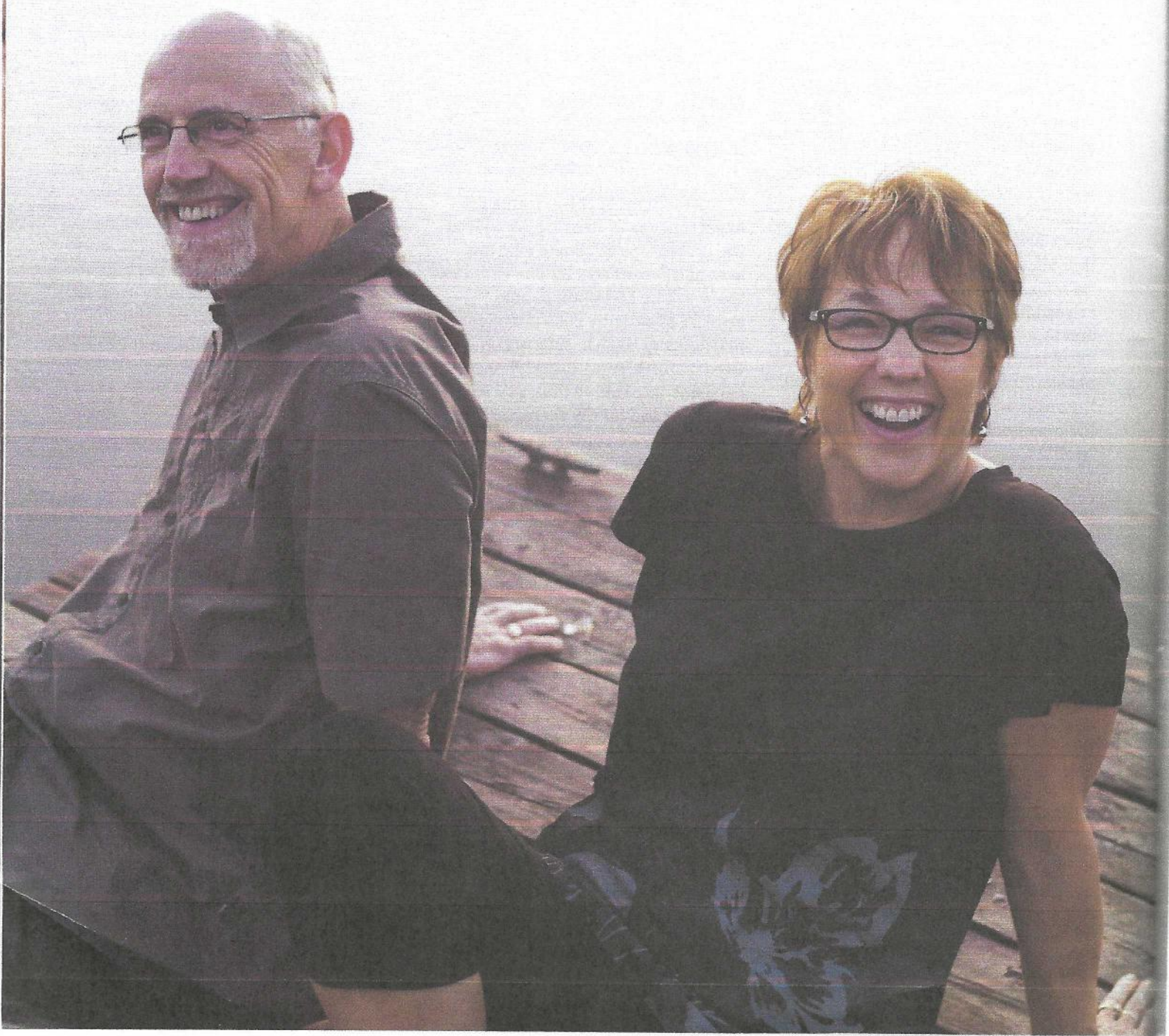
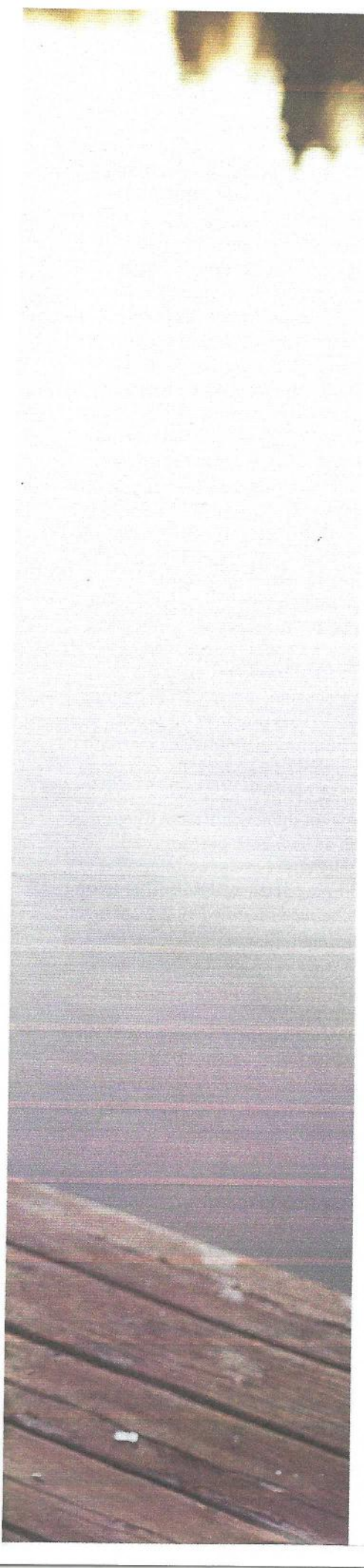


Cultivating new possibilities in old age.

LIVING APART TOGETHER





Beth (63) and Gary (65) met through mutual friends and have been in a significant relationship for seven years. They both decided to live apart together, early in their relationship. Living apart together (LAT) allows “long-term intimacy without necessarily involving marriage or cohabitation” (Karlsson & Borell, 2002, p. 13). For this couple, loving each other and sharing a life together do not require the same address.

Beth says, “It is wonderful to have someone in your life who you care about and to care for, without feeling pressure to be his caregiver. I just can't do that again.” Beth was married when she was 28 to her husband Ian, who was 48 at the time. They were married for 25 years when Ian was diagnosed with bone cancer, and Beth became his primary caregiver for the next 5 years, until he died. A couple of years later, Beth then became primary caregiver for both of her parents.

Gary was married to Joan for 35 years, and they had three children together. Unexpectedly, Gary's wife died of a heart attack at age 55. Six years after the loss of his wife, Gary, feeling lonely, longed for companionship, but also wanted plenty of time to spend with his grown children and their families. In living apart together, he can be the father and grandfather he wants to be, while also enjoying Beth's company. Gary says, “while we may not see each other often, the time we do get to spend together feels exciting and novel.”

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For Beth and Gary, money was an important consideration in their decision to live apart together. As Gary says, "When you are at our age, it just makes sense to keep your finances independent." This is also true for other LAT couples in later life, as Benson and Coleman (2016) found that financial independence is a key reason for these couples, and in some cases, may be less of a choice and more of need.

Living apart together

While LAT is more common in young couples, there is an increasing prevalence of these arrangements in old age (Benson & Coleman, 2016; Connidis, Borell, & Karlsson, 2017). In particular, baby boomers are paving a new path for pair bonding, as they experiment with living arrangements and reestablish patterns for companionship in retirement. This is unsurprising as baby boomers lived through the sexual revolution and early feminist movements, developed new coupling patterns such as cohabitation, and engaged in divorce more frequently than previous generations (Bowman, 2018).

In many cases, women in LAT relationships are able to abstain from inequitable, gendered divisions of domestic labor, and men can safeguard their leisure time and engagement in social groups (Benson & Coleman, 2016; Bowman, 2018). At the same time, LAT couples also continue to provide substantial caregiving and support for other family members, showing how it is possible to remain involved with each other's family, while maintaining their own living space. LAT satisfies both individual and family needs for couples in later life and creates an opportunity for rethinking gender and resisting gender normative expectations (Brothers, 2015).

Tips for working with LAT couples

Tip 1: Understand and legitimize.

Research indicates LAT couples in old age consider their relationship to be a legitimate arrangement rather

LAT arrangements are an innovative paradigm and relationship choice that allows couples in old age to try on different roles and rules that might not be possible in traditional living patterns.

than a stepping stone to marriage or cohabitation (Karlsson & Borell, 2002). Given the invisibility of these couples in old age, therapists must first affirm the stories of these couples as real and valid. Therapists should:

- Use language, questions, and statements that reinforce the credibility and legitimacy of LAT relationships.
- Use clients' terminology and language to ensure you capture the meaning and essence of their relationship.
- Convey LAT relationships as intentional and enduring, rather than temporary or transitory. For example, using expressions such as "dating" and "going steady" may not fit for these couples and may unintentionally diminish their significance and commitment to one another.
- Deepen their understanding by becoming more informed through training and research on couples in old age.

Tip 2: Highlight strengths. We often use youth as the standard to compare individuals in old age. For example, society tells us to conquer our aging bodies through exertion, work, and independence,

yet these are discourses associated with youth (Rozanova, 2010). This framework pathologizes aging bodies by positioning youth and old age as either/or and solidifies youth as success (Sandberg, 2013). To highlight the strengths of LAT couples, therapists must expand their understanding of old age, to one that affirms and transcends the binary view of aging (Lambert-Shute, Nguyen, & Fruhauf, 2020). Operating from this lens requires therapists to embrace the complexities of couples' lived experiences, integrate an affirming both/and stance, and the ongoing possibility of becoming in later life (Sandberg, 2013). Thus, LAT arrangements are an innovative paradigm and relationship choice that allows couples in old age to try on different roles and rules that might not be possible in traditional living patterns. This provides therapists with opportunities to emphasize strengths within these relationships, including how LAT couples:

- Allow for more egalitarian dynamics, such as how both partners can equally share in the emotional wellbeing of the couple, rather than this being demanded of one partner.
- Maintain financial independence and find ways to share, but not combine expenses. This allows couples to retain their personal financial goals and preserve their plan for children's inheritance. In addition, keeping financial independence decreases the risk of losing their individual social security benefits.
- Living one's own pattern and lifestyles, such as being able to decide how to manage the household, who and when to entertain family and friends, whether or not to have pets, and determining when to sleep, exercise, eat, and engage in recreational activities. Thus, one does not have to accommodate to another person's ideal way of living.

Tip 3: Consider the family. LAT couples in old age may be concerned about how their children and other family members perceive their relationship (Benson & Coleman, 2016). This may impact their level of disclosure regarding their arrangement due to fear of disapproval. When working with these couples and their families, whether they are in the therapy room or not, therapists can:

- Support the couple in having a voice in the family's discussion and understanding of their relationship.
- Validate and address each family members' concerns and fears that might be influencing their response to the couple.
- Help family members understand each person's position.
- Encourage the couple to allow the family to be part of their life and get to know the partner to alleviate any fears, uncertainties, and/or concerns.
- Discuss possible ways for the LAT couple to negotiate their involvement and closeness with each other's family.

Tip 4: Staying connected during COVID-19. During the pandemic, all couples are navigating new terrain in their patterns of communication and living. LAT couples in later life, who have had practice balancing separateness and togetherness, may be able to apply these principles of negotiating time and space to face the challenges of a global pandemic. However, their usual coping strategies may need to be expanded to handle the additional stress during this unique time. The following strategies can encourage LAT couples to stay connected:

- Value quality over quantity by honoring the time and space these couples share. Focusing on how they spend time together, rather than the amount of time, whether it is face-to-face, or through phone and video.

- Give space to grieve their losses together. For example, each partner can be a witness to each other's loss by listening and validating their partner's grief.
- Reflect on the value of missing one another and use these moments to highlight the things they love and cherish in their partner.
- Accept each other's quarantine decisions. Partners in LAT arrangements may make different choices and hold various viewpoints in response to the pandemic. These couples can express their honest concerns and positions about keeping safe and social distancing during the pandemic.
- Share and genuinely hear each other's fears and uncertainties about the pandemic. It is important to convey respect towards each other's concerns, and how their lives and families are affected differently during this time.
- Cultivate connection through virtual platforms, such as online video chat (e.g. Google Meet, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc.) that allow them to see each other's faces, which may help humanize the digital experience.
- Discuss the pragmatics of being able to support each another if one person is ill and strategize how they can still care for one another given the constraints associated with COVID-19.

Old age is not a destination, but a place of possibilities (Sandberg, 2013). LAT arrangements exemplify how couples in old age can continue to redefine their relationship and utilize their strengths as individuals and as a couple; they are still *becoming*.



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