

the art of living together



lie in skipping the wedding?

does the secret to an endless honeymoon

BY ERIN HAGEDORN

You're his soulmate. He's "the one." You've finally found Mr. Right. Probably. Well, you're pretty sure. Right? Of course. Which is why you've decided to move in together. And why not? Your toothbrush has taken up permanent residence in his bathroom, half of your wardrobe is in his closet, you're at his place most of the time anyway and, let's face it, his furniture is so much nicer than yours. Are you a prospective or current unmarried cohabitor? Then read on.

Even though almost half of U.S. adults under the age of 45 live with a partner at some point without being married, chances are you're bombarded with advice that boils down to the particularly unhelpful "Don't do it." But you want to be together, and you're not ready to get married—or maybe you just don't believe in measuring commitment with wedding rings. So you pack up your things and take the plunge. But the confusion doesn't end there. Once you've moved in, you may

be faced with questions ranging from “Should we marry?” to “Can we make it work for the long haul without marrying?” to the more practical and sobering “Can we get domestic partner benefits?”

While there are scores of magazines, classes and books devoted to helping newlyweds and engaged couples navigate their relationship, there is a surprising lack of resources for unmarried couples. Determined to fill that void, Dorian Solot and her boyfriend/partner/POSSQ (person of the opposite sex sharing living quarters, as the U.S. Census called it) of a decade, Marshall Miller, have devoted their lives and their relationship to helping unmarried partners.

A HANDBOOK FOR LIVING... TOGETHER

“There are tons of experts who give advice on how to date and how to have a good marriage, but a surprising lack of information about how to know whether you’re ready to live together, how to cohabitate successfully, how to decide whether marriage is right for you,” says Solot. “Is society in denial?” The couple’s new book, *Unmarried to Each Other: The Essential Guide to Living Together as an Unwed Couple* (Marlowe & Co.), offers advice for cohabiting couples.

An introductory chapter for those considering living together includes a quiz that helps couples examine their reasons for moving in and determine whether their beliefs and desires match up. Do you want to live with her to spend more time together? To make sure you’re compatible? Because you’ll probably get engaged soon? Or perhaps it’s a convenient escape route from a scary ex. It’s best to find out those answers before calling U-Haul.

The book also offers advice for cohabitants in the midst of the “to wed or not to wed” decision; tips for staying together; ways to handle questions and objections from relatives; guidelines for parenting without a marriage license and for seeking domestic partner health benefits and other legal and financial protections.

Solot and Miller, who met when they were students at Brown University, have plenty of experience with that last topic—they’re also the founders of the Alternatives to Marriage Project (AtMP), a Boston-based nonprofit group they started in 1998 as both a legal and emotional resource and a lobbying voice for unmarried couples. They lobby against discrimination based on marital status and work to build acceptance of cohabitation—both for heterosexual and same-sex couples—as a legally protected, socially accepted form of commitment.

“Unmarried couples constantly have to battle other people’s assumptions and expectations about their relationship,” Solot explains. “The ‘When are you getting married?’ hints can get exhausting. There’s also this sense that no matter how good a relationship is or how long it lasts, it’s not really taken seriously. Cohabitation is often seen as not quite good enough.”

There are other challenges as well. “Landlords sometimes refuse to rent to unmarried couples,” says Solot. “Couples often have to pay twice as much as a married couple when they rent a car or sign up for tenants’ insurance. And there are some much larger discrimination issues, too, when it comes to adoption, immigration, Social Security and other situations where families come into contact with the law.”

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The number of unmarried, cohabiting couples is larger than you might think. In Boston alone, one in five cohabiting couples is unmarried (in the United States overall, that ratio drops to one in 11 couples), according to the 2000 Census. There are 11 million cohabiting people in the United States today, an increase of 72 percent in the past decade alone. Unmarried cohabitation is a rapidly growing trend seldom acknowledged by traditionalists and governmental policies, says Solot.

In *Unmarried to Each Other*, Solot and Miller acknowledge the statistic that half of all marriages end in divorce, but their goal is not to knock the institution of marriage. “We aren’t against marriage, but rather we support unmarried relationships,” Solot explains. “We just point out that in order to understand the whole landscape of relationships and families today, you need to look beyond married couples.” In the book, they argue that cohabitation without marriage is a valid option deserving of the privileges that married couples have—domestic partner benefits, legal and financial protection, to name a few.

Culturally, we’ve come leaps and bounds from times when hotel registration clerks requested evidence of mar-

riage before handing over the room key (although eight states still have laws, albeit rarely enforced, making unmarried cohabitation illegal). But the United States is still far away from the progressive laws that exist in countries like Sweden, Canada and France, where unmarried partners can register and gain “marital rights.”

In their book, Solot and Miller don’t hold back on the subject of how the United States needs to change its legal codes so that all families are treated fairly. They also attempt to debunk what they feel are misperceptions about unmarried couples, for example, the statistic (often cited by right-wing groups) that there’s a 50 percent higher divorce rate among couples who live together before marriage than among couples who don’t. Solot and Miller say the statistic fails to take into account that people who marry without living together beforehand tend to be more religious, conservative and strongly opposed to divorce. What the data prove, they say, is that people who are historically opposed to divorce have a lower divorce rate.

SHOULD WE OR SHOULDN’T WE?

The divorce rate shows what too many couples have learned: A wedding ring isn’t necessarily a passport to happiness. But even so, singles’ views on unmarried “shacking up” vary widely. Some see cohabitation as a state of limbo for those seeking to avoid the personal and social commitment that marriage represents. “I’d never live with a guy,” says Candice, a 27-year-old Boston professional. “I think when people live together it’s a cop-out. You’re just trying it out, so there’s no real commitment. If you have it in your mind if they leave the toilet seat up it could end your relationship, you don’t work through problems. When you get married, it’s for better or worse.”

Julia, a 30-year-old professional writer, sees living together as an obstacle to getting engaged. “I don’t want to move in with my boyfriend because it will drag the process out longer,” she says. “I want to get married,

and what’s the incentive if we’re already living like we’re married?”

Others see cohabitation as a necessary stepping stone on the path to marriage. Wilson, a 25-year-old financial consultant, recently made the jump to a live-in relationship. “I know we disagree about how long a ‘trial’ period should last, but we both agree that ‘living in sin’ for a while is an invaluable test of whether our relationship can last the trials and tribulations of marriage,” he says. “Living together has been great, and I’ve actually fallen more in love, so it won’t be long now, but I’m not sure I could have felt this way without knowing what it would be like living together beforehand.”

But what if you’ve gotten used to living together, like it, and worry that marriage might snuff out your relationship’s lively spark? What if you can’t legally marry because you’re gay? For some, it’s as simple as Noel Coward’s statement, “I’ve sometimes thought of marrying, and then I’ve thought again.” The question for many live-in couples, then, often goes from “Why haven’t we gotten married yet?” to “Honey, what’s the rush to get married?” and sometimes even “Why get married at all?”

For example CB, an engineer, doesn’t view living with her boyfriend as a stepping stone to marriage but rather the final commitment in itself. They’ve been together for 10 years, own a house in Arlington and share a car. Neither wants to get married (or start a family). “Most people just don’t view that living together can be the end goal,” she says. “I still view the institution of marriage as repressive, not to mention intrusive. But I also recognize that it’s important to most people, and they view it differently. What are personal choices for some of us become moral crusades for others. But that’s the same for most any lifestyle decision.”

PRESSING POLITICAL BUTTONS

With such a large population of unmarried couples these days, especially in metropolitan areas like Boston, it’s surprising the issue can be so controversial—and not just among the Jerry Falwell constituency. (Solot recently debated Falwell on TV.) Hosts of a radio show in the South had booked Solot and Miller as guests but canceled when they looked more closely at the book. They didn’t think their audience could handle it.

Controversy also came from the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that released an article denouncing an AtMP report, *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings*, which derided the government’s use of welfare dollars to promote marriage. Ron Haskins, a senior fellow at another research organization, the Brookings Institution, and adviser for welfare policy in the Bush administration, recently told the *Washington Times*, “Cohabiting is a plague, and we should do what we can do discourage it.”

“The longer I do this work, the more convinced I am that there’s a need for this project,” Solot says.

These days, in between speaking and reading junkets, Solot and Miller spend most of their time writing op-ed pieces and making media appearances on NPR and other outlets. They recently added the 5,000th household to AtMP’s mailing list. “Of course, given that there are 5.5 million unmarried couple households in the country, we have a ways to go,” Solot says.

As far as their own unwed relationship goes, Solot and Miller have been together for 10 years. What’s their reason for not sealing the deal with a wedding ceremony? First and foremost, they say they’re happy this way. They’re committed; they live together; and they’re in love. And, well, getting married would ruin their gig. Solot says, “It’s a strange thing to be sort of professionally unmarried. It’s not what I expected to be when I grew up!” **IB**