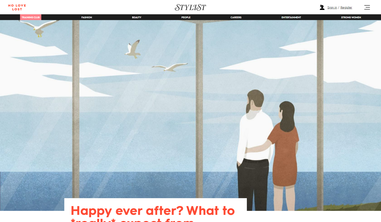

Happy ever after? What to 'really' expect from moving in with your partner for the first time

POSTED BY CHARLEY ROSS FOR RELATIONSHIPS

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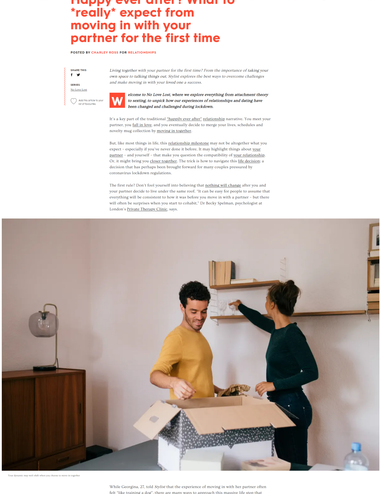
Welcome to Mr Love List, where we explore everything from attachment theory to ousting; to unpick how our experiences of relationships and dating have been changed and challenged during lockdown.

It's a key part of the traditional 'happily ever after' relationship narrative. You meet your partner, you fall in love, and you eventually decide to merge your lives, schedules and mostly snug collection by moving in together.

But, like most things in life, this relationship milestone may not be altogether what you expect – especially if you've never done it before. It may highlight things about your partner – and yourself – that make you question the trajectory of your relationship. Or, it might bring you closer together. The trick is how to navigate this life decision – a decision that has perhaps been brought forward for many couples processed by coronavirus lockdown regulations.

The first rule? Don't feel yourself into believing that nothing will change after you and your partner decide to live under the same roof. "It can be easy for people to assume that everything will be consistent to how it was before you move in with a partner – but there will often be surprises when you start to cohabit," Dr Becky Spelman, psychologist at London's Private Therapy Clinic, says.



Your dynamic may not make sense at first when you move in together

While Georgina, 27, told Stylist that the experience of moving in with her partner often felt "like training a dog", there are many ways to approach this massive life step that doesn't involve obedience classes or a planned escape.

First off, it's important to have really honest conversations with your partner about why you are making this big move in the first place. Are you doing it because it is truly the best thing for you both, or are there financial pressures or other things – or plays?

Dating coach Kate Mansfield states that the motivations behind your decision are crucial. "It's common to seek the process for financial reasons. But often that can backfire because it puts pressure on the relationship, creating issues," she says.

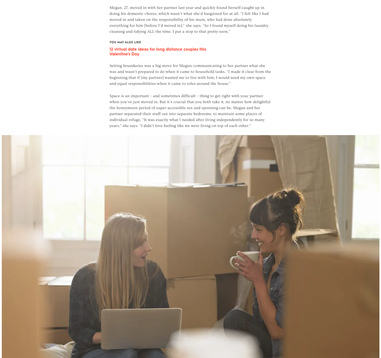
If you can, the best thing is to take money out of the equation completely to make your decision as independent as possible. It's helpful to think: if I put money aside, would I still want to make this decision right, too?

It's important to have honest conversations with your partner about why you are making this big move

After you've worked out these elements, communication is your next step. It's absolutely key at every stage, but is integral at the beginning for setting out how you mean to go on.

Niamh, 28, realised soon after moving in that being super clear about what she needed out of her partner was very helpful – rather than waiting around for him to figure it out and getting frustrated.

"I found I was just expecting [him] to be a mind reader and know exactly what I wanted and needed, and do it before I even asked," she says. "But then I realised we that's bullshit. We're all just people. Most of us want to do right by our partners, and right by our friends. So it's better to just tell people what you need."



To make it work, know what the expectations are in your home

For Niamh, working in communications means that she really values quiet time to herself at the end of a busy day. So telling her partner about this was crucial, limiting the chance of misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Communicating this, she says, has ended up being able to communicate to your partner like: 'Babe, I love you, but can we chat tomorrow or can we just watch a film in silence tonight?' Niamh says.

Couples therapist Dr Kalpesh Bon Ad warns against communicating in a "defensive" way, but instead trying to be as constructive as possible. "When you communicate in a defensive way – by ignoring, avoiding, shaming or criticising – it can create hurt, upset, and a disconnection," he says. "Instead, try to express your feelings and needs in a defensive way. This creates a cycle of negativity, tension and stress."

Megan, 27, moved in with her partner last year and quickly found herself caught up in doing his domestic chores, which wasn't what she'd bargained for at all. "I felt like I had moved in and taken on the responsibility of his mum, who had done absolutely everything for him [before I'd moved in]," she says. "So I found myself doing his laundry, cleaning and tidying ALL the time. I put a stop to that pretty soon."

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Setting boundaries was a big move for Megan, communicating to her partner what she was and wasn't prepared to do when it came to household tasks. "I made it clear from the beginning that if [my partner] wanted me to live with him, he would need my own space and equal responsibilities when it came to roles around the house."

Space is an important – and sometimes difficult – thing to get right with your partner. Georgina, 27, and her partner, Ben, moved in together in a studio flat and found it helpful the homeowner period of super accessible sex and spooning can be. Megan and her partner separated their stuff out into separate bedrooms, to maintain some places of individual refuge. "It was exactly what I needed after living independently for so many years," she says. "I didn't love feeling like we were living on top of each other."

What it looks like to share one space (plus separate personal spaces)

Georgia, 26, lived with a former partner at the age of 20 and insists that having separate bedrooms (if possible) is a lifesaver at times of conflict. "When any friends of mine are looking to move in with a partner, I tell them one thing – you need a door," she tells Stylist. "You really need a door to close if you get into tech arguments. You don't want to be sat in the same room without any space to cool down. That's going to make things SO times worse."

Whatever physical space you're moving into and sharing with your partner, try to take time to do your own thing while also carving out time for your relationship. Dr Bon Ad says these check-ins can make up a regular routine of activities like 'eating together, communicating your deepest thoughts, feelings, desires and dreams, prioritising 'us' time and having dates without technology'.

Living together in close quarters makes it easier for a controlling dynamic to present itself

It's natural not big to want us for to feelings or habits of or dependence – do you feel excessively emotionally or psychologically reliant on your partner? This may spell trouble in a cohabitation setting and living together in close quarters may make it easier for a controlling dynamic like this to present itself.

For Georgina, her and her partner's co-dependent habits while living together were a major part of the relationship's downfall. "Our whole problem was that we spent too much time together, we were really co-dependent," she says. "We would want to take on each other mentally and get on each other's nerves unnecessarily. It left me feeling so drained."

"We'd try and take time apart, but would end up giving up when half an hour. We ended up so unhealthily attached," she says. "And it ended up in us not having a lot in our lives but each other."

Don't lose the essence of a relationship

Sophie Thomas, Channel 4's Love Island and relationship coach, advises that the best thing to do is to find a compromise between codependency and operating completely separately. "Healthy relationships are built on interdependence, rather than being totally independent or codependent," says Thomas. "This means being supportive and encouraging to one another while taking responsibility for our own happiness, rather than transferring it on to our partner."

In spite of the romance that surrounds a decision to move in together, the importance of having realistic and open to both changes and obstacles remains paramount. It's not all morning sex and candlelit dinners, after all.

So within your parameters of domestic bliss, be sure that you are making space for the mundanity – and sometimes ugliness – of the world outside. Including discussions, domestic tasks and the importance of respecting personal space. And through it all, communication remains the best way of ensuring these issues don't spiral out of control.

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