

Living Apart Together

Helena Bonham Carter and Tim Burton do it. Would you ever live apart from your spouse? **By Elise Pitt**

Fed up with picking up his socks and bickering about whose turn it is to do the washing up? For some couples the secret to relationship bliss is to keep domestic independence. It has been dubbed Living Apart Together (LAT) and may be more common than you think.

The 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes revealed that 2 per cent of the adult population has a partner who lives in another household. While that might not sound like a lot, it works out to be about 420,000 people.

Other studies conducted in the UK, the US and Sweden reveal that the trend is becoming more popular and widespread with couples who don't want to lose their independence after they say "I do".

The University of Oxford estimated that up to 2 million couples in the UK were living in separate homes in 2005 and the US Census Bureau showed in 2006, that more than 3.8 million twosomes weren't

shacking up together in the land of Stars and Stripes.

The new social phenomenon was spotted on our radar a few weeks ago when kooky Hollywood couple Helena Bonham Carter and Tim Burton revealed living apart was the key to their nine-year relationship.

"To me it makes complete sense. If you've got some money and you can afford it, why not have your own space?" Bonham Carter said.

The couple and their two children (Billy Ray, 6, and Nell, 2) live in three adjoining townhouses in London. "My side is cutesy, Beatrix Potter, which is fine for him to visit but there's no way that he could live in it. He thinks his side is James Bond," she said. The third area is a big play room for the children.

The queen of quirk admits that while it's not a traditional arrangement, it works for her. "There's a snoring issue ... I talk, he snores," she said. "The other thing is, he's an insomniac, so he needs to watch television to get to sleep while I need silence.

"Having two houses means we can get out of each other's hair – which, let's face it, we've both got a lot of."

Respected Australian author Mandy Sayer has been with her playwright partner, Louis Nowra, for 10 years, married to him for eight but has never lived under the same roof with him. "We're both writers who work at home and who enjoy complete solitude and silence while we're working. If we were in the same house we'd be bumping into each other too often and would quickly tire of the distractions," she says.

"Another good thing is that it keeps the relationship fresh – we meet up each night to talk about our day and usually Louis cooks a meal for us at my place. It's a little more romantic this way and we don't fall into a pattern of taking each other for granted.

"Louis lives just around the corner from me (in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs). When the trees lose their leaves on his street I can semaphore him from my study." How very *Anne of Green Gables*.

For Sayer, the best part of living on her own is the "solitude, furnishing my home with pieces I love, maintaining my own identity in a close relationship, and not having to listen to my husband's heavy metal played at top volume – even the dog can't stand it".

While domestic independence may be the key to some matrimonial bliss, for others the very thought is a nightmare. Sydney legal editor Laura Stefani says

living in separate abodes would be a step backwards for her relationship with chef fiance Tom.

"It would be difficult for us living apart as it is our main way of seeing each other – with Tom working the hours (nights) he does as a chef, and our separate timetables.

"When we didn't live together, it was hard to make valuable time to see each other," she says. "This day to day contact has become really important in our relationship. It means we can look after each other and give each other advice that we didn't do before."

Sydney relationship counsellor and psychotherapist Clinton Power, says the living arrangements of the couple is not as important as the issue of whether the needs of each person are being met by the relationship.

"Some couples can maintain a degree of autonomy as well as intimacy that is supported by the separate households. Some couples may find they can be even more intimate in their relationship as the time they spend together is quality time and comes to an end when they return to their respective households", Power says.

But "for another couple, living separately may be an avoidance of intimacy and a way to easily exit the relationship".

The danger with LAT is that it could be very easy to slip into living parallel lives. "Trust and jealousy may develop as issues for couples in this situation. The couple would need to be very secure and grounded with no distrust or jealousy," Power says.

Living Apart Together means seeing your partner less and paying the cost of running two households. But is it worth it for never having to trip over his dirty clothes in the hallway again or put up with her sickeningly girly furniture full time? For some it signifies a lack of commitment, for others it can be the key to keeping the romantic flame alive.

If we've learnt anything from Carrie being stood up at the altar in *Sex and the City*, it's that following rules of what "you're supposed to do" may not always be the best option. Make your own happily ever after we say.

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