

How sleeping apart could save your relationship



Author Jennifer Adams is an advocate of separate sleeping.

ONCE upon a time, men and women got married, bought a brick-veneer home on a quarter-acre block in the suburbs and set about raising a family. They paid off the mortgage, the kids grew up playing backyard cricket and holidays were usually confined to the annual interstate trip to visit the in-laws.

But these days things are a little different. Our lives are busier, more complicated and less ruled by traditional notions of cohabitation. We maintain love over long distances, live in de facto relationships for years before we even consider marriage, and some of us prefer to stay in committed relationships and never walk down the aisle.

So independent and in charge of our lives have we become that some couples now opt for separate bedrooms, a trend that — unsurprisingly — began with a handful of Hollywood A-listers. Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise allegedly slept separately, while

Tim Burton and Helena Bonham Carter lived in conjoined houses for 13 years before their split last year. A former bodyguard for Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt also claimed the couple often preferred to sleep in separate rooms.

Sleeping Apart Not Falling Apart author Jennifer Adams, 48, says it is a trend that will only become more popular in the future as we wrestle with sleep deprivation and stress. She is a fan of separate sleeping areas for couples who struggle to share their bed sheets.

“There is still quite a bit of judgment surrounding sleeping apart and people tend to think it is a sign that your relationship is in trouble,” the Brisbane-based project officer says. “But not everyone is cut from the same cloth.”

Adams discovered the joy of separate beds when she met husband Fraser Mackay in 2005.

“My sleep is really important to me, but Fraser is a snorer and thrashes around a bit and I knew I couldn’t keep going on with so little sleep,” she confesses. “We decided to only sleep in the same bed on weekends, but pretty quickly it was all the time.

“I got upset at first and cried about it because I thought it meant something was wrong.”

Adams gradually opened up about her new sleeping setup to her friends, and many confessed to feeling envious of her confidence to insist on time alone.

“Some women said they would love to sleep separately, but their husband wouldn’t let them,” she says. “Another would go to her mum’s house and drink too much to drive home and that is how she got a good night’s sleep.”

Adams’ relationship with Mackay thrived after they moved to different bedrooms and she decided to write a book about her experience to lift the veil of shame surrounding separate sleepers.



After two years of being unable to sleep in the same bed as partner Andrew Neilson, Keith Hughson headed for the spare bedroom. Picture: Manuela Cifra

“If you are staying in bed with someone who is keeping you awake, that is a bad health decision,” she says. “But there is this cult of togetherness with couples, and people are worried about it being abnormal.”

Many couples assume, too, that it will be the death of any intimacy but, as Adams points out, “there are other ways to make sure you have sex”.

Adams hopes her book — and the accompanying website of the same name — goes some way to giving couples the confidence to, at the very least, discuss the possibility of separate beds.

“I think in the future things will start to change and people will start to become more comfortable with sleeping separately,” she says. “Not getting a good night’s sleep has negative effects on our health.”

Keith Hughson tried for two years to sleep in the same bed as partner Andrew Neilson, but after long periods of interrupted sleep, Hughson headed for the spare

bedroom and has never come back.

“I am a deep sleeper and a bomb would go off and I would not hear it,” Hughson says. “But Andrew is quite a light sleeper and gets up during the night a bit, and he would want to read but would be worried about waking me.

“This was exacerbated by the fact we have completely different body temperatures. Andrew feels the cold and needs to have the blankets up to his face, but I am the opposite.”

The couple noticed a lack of sleep was causing them to be grumpy with each other.

“We just made each other uncomfortable in bed,” Hughson says.

After Hughson took up full-time residence in the spare room of their Lower Templestowe house, the pair noticed the mood lift.



Couple Natasha Van Noorden and Owen Castley live with housemates Brylee Green and Jack Webster. Picture: Manuela Cifra

“We do everything else together and the only activity we do not actually do is sleep

together, which, let's be honest, you are unconscious for anyway," Neilson, 44, says.

"We didn't take separate rooms for privacy, we spend most of our time together; we did it because we needed to get some sleep."

When the pair, who have been together nine years, bought a house in the Yarra Valley, which they transformed into Wingspread Bed and Breakfast, they insisted on separate bedrooms, walk-in wardrobes and ensuites.

"When we were working with the architects in designing the new house they assumed we fought a lot because of our need for separate bedrooms," Hughson, 39, says. "But that was the thing: we didn't actually fight about anything, the only problem we had was sharing the same bed."

They couple, who divide their time between Melbourne and the bed and breakfast at Toolangi, say sleeping apart is the best move they ever made.

"Of course, there was a bit of a period of adjustment because I always assumed I would sleep in the same bed as my partner," Hughson says. "But now I am actually very proud of it."

Melbourne Sleep Disorders Centre's Dr David Cunnington treats numerous couples who sleep apart due to insomnia. He says a lot of patients become unnecessarily anxious over their sleeping arrangements, and it is important to put things into context.

"It has only been since the 1960s that people have slept in the same bed," he says. "For decades before that it was twin beds, and prior to that at one point people slept communally."

A desire for separate sleeping arrangements is not the only trend altering the way couples share their space.

Sales rep Natasha Van Noorden, 26, has been with her architect partner Owen Castley, 25, for about three years, and while their university days are long behind them, they love the buzz of sharing a home with other people.



Sophie Chishkovsky, 26, and Greg Foyster, 31, live in a Murundaka Co-housing Community in Heidelberg Heights. Picture: Sarah Matray

They have a dog, well-paying and secure jobs and flatmates Brylee Green and Jack Webster, who rent rooms in their Fairfield rental. Green moved in about a year ago, and Van Noorden knew pretty much immediately that the three of them would hit it off. Webster moved in this year.

“I work in sales so I am used to these kinds of interviews with people,” she says. “And I could tell straight away we would all get on.”

Share houses, it would seem, are no longer the preserve of broke university students who have no option but to flat with each other, and many, like Van Noorden and Castley, have made a clear choice to share their space.

“Honestly, if I was to answer why we do it, it is because we really like sharing things with others,” Van Noorden says. “We are very social and this is about more than just saving money, we just really like being around other people. This is really common among our friends who are in relationships, too.”

The couple has lived in various Melbourne share houses for their entire relationship, and while they are saving for a house of their own, they are in no hurry to put their share house experience behind them.

“We are really aware of not creating a negative vibe in the house,” Van Noorden says. “If we have a disagreement, we are forced to go for a walk and talk it out so it is great for our relationship.”

“The best thing though about living with other people is that you learn to look at things from other people’s perspectives and that is something you can then apply to your relationship.”

Some couples take the flatmate concept a step further and share their space not only with each other, but as part of a collective, like Greg Foyster, 31, and his partner, Sophie Chishkovsky, 26.

The couple are in a committed relationship, but prefer to live in a co-housing community in Heidelberg Heights. They moved into the Murundaka Cohousing Community about 18 months ago after despairing over the state of the rental market in Melbourne.

The couple had just returned from a cycling trip from Melbourne to Cairns, which Foyster wrote about in his book, *Changing Gears: A Pedal-Powered Detour from the Rat Race*.

“We were in that housing bind that many young Melbourne couples face with housing being so expensive,” he says. “The rental market was quite precarious and we had been moved on by a number of landlords who were selling and been through many share houses that had disbanded.”

The co-housing community includes 18 self-contained private apartments, plus two freestanding houses, along with a large common area with kitchen, multipurpose dining and lounge area, activity room, laundry, recycling room and workshop.

The rent is a maximum of 25 per cent of a household’s income — but always below the

market rate — which goes towards maintaining the property. About 35 people live there — a mixture of singles, couples and small families — and there are monthly meetings to iron out any problems or discuss issues.

“This kind of housing is very popular in Europe, particularly Scandinavia, but is yet to be fully adopted here,” Foyster says. “You get the sense of living in a village with other people, but it is in a very urban setting which makes it unique.”

Foyster and Chishkovsky initially moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Murundaka, but ended up “downsizing” into a small, 46sq m one-bedroom place.

“We love it, but people think we are crazy,” says Foyster, who was a successful Melbourne ad man before he quit to become a writer.

“But we found that if we live in a small space, our relationship is much stronger. We like things to be organised and to run an organised house, but we found that is much easier when you don’t have a lot of space because you tend to have less stuff.”

Foyster says living by cohousing rules has changed his relationship with Chishkovsky for the better.

“There are certain conflict-resolution tools that we use in the house whenever conflict arises and Sophie and I use these ourselves,” he says. “We had a grievance the other day and instead of arguing back and forth we sat and listened to what the other person said and then repeated what they said so we each felt heard.”

Though he concedes co-housing took a bit of getting used to, he now finds it hard to imagine another life.

“At first it was a massive change because you are not used to having to sacrifice anything or give anything up as an adult,” he says. “But you learn so much about yourself and grow as a person, and I actually think it is a better way to live. I can actually see us here for a very long time.”