

RELATING

Making a move to the middle

Cohabiting holds promise of a few debates

By M.B. Roberts
Special to the Tribune

When a couple decides to move in together, visions of leisurely breakfasts in bed may dance in their heads. But what if one partner insists on topping that bed with a purple comforter that her partner finds less than tranquil? Enter the first blip on the big-screen TV of domestic bliss.

Bob Shapiro, 31, and Debbie Garber, 29, who are engaged, recently left their respective homes and moved in together in Evanston. During the first night in their new place, Shapiro found himself facing the prospect of sleeping beneath Garber's feminine bedding.

"Besides the comforter, she's got flowered sheets and nine pillows," Shapiro says. "Who needs nine pillows?"

After a brief argument, it was decided: He would get over it—or under it, as the case would be.

Talking—and, yes, sometimes even arguing—is the key for couples who have just moved in together, says Julie Delarosa, interim coordinator at the University of Chicago Marital Therapy Clinic.

"The biggest problem [newly merged] couples face is they feel like they're constantly fighting," Delarosa says. "Choose your battles. Because if you fight about everything you'll never get anywhere."

One advantage Garber and Shapiro had, Delarosa says, is that they started fresh. Neither moved into the other's space.

"When it's 'her into his' or 'his into hers,' it can create a lot more conflict," she says.

Doug and Jodi Siewert have been married for eight years. During their early years, they actually lived in different states. (He: Wisconsin. She: California.) This spring, Jodi, 43, moved into their Glendale, Wis., home to stay. She and Doug, 52, had some adjustments to make as she entered what was essentially his territory.



Photo for the Tribune by Jeremy Fischer

After moving in together, Bob Shapiro and Debbie Garber had to negotiate over some matters of taste—namely her purple comforter, flowered sheets and nine pillows.

Jodi says Doug has a place for everything and is loath to make any changes. She once put a 3-by-5-inch silver-framed picture on top of the TV set. It was gone the next day.

Then, there was the coffee-table book.

"He had this 'Freshwater Fishing' book on the table," Jodi says. "It was there for years. Literally. It had been in the same place for so long that there is a faded rectangle on the table."

Jodi moved the book and replaced it with a big, baby blue candle. Doug was not happy. But this time, her addition prevailed.

Delarosa and Ann Sullivan, a New York City-based professional organizer who has worked with many Chicago-area couples, agree that compromise and tolerance must be foremost in couples' minds.

"She has to respect what was formerly his turf but he has to understand that it's her home too," Sullivan says.

Understanding is the first step toward good communication—essential for couples setting up households. But Sullivan says there are things we will simply never understand about our mates. For instance, Doug says he will never comprehend

why his wife owns so many shoes.

"She has 372 pairs," he says. "And those are just the black ones."

"Conversely, she may never understand why he has so many fishing rods," Sullivan says. "So, they each have to agree to let it go. The focus should be on making a happy, functional home."

Sullivan says when she consults with a couple, she immediately moves the focus away from one person's distaste for the other person's stuff.

"I like to start by getting couples to set goals," Sullivan says. "If they see benefits, they're motivated to follow through. For example, if their goal is to eliminate clutter, the benefits would be less time spent dusting or trying to find things."

That approach helps prevent one partner from taking it personally when the other says, "Your fill-in-the-blank [couch, mounted fish, velvet Elvis painting] has got to go."

Mary Sullivan (Ann's sister) puts many of Ann's philosophies into practice in the Wilmette home she shares with her husband, Bryn Jessup.

"Bryn is such a content guy," Mary, 44, says. "He has no inner

stirrings for change."

Mary's challenge is to get Bryn, 41, to see the benefits of disposing of something that may not technically have anything "wrong" with it.

"For instance, he wanted to keep all the index cards from his thesis project," she says. "I asked him to paint me a picture of when he might actually need one of these cards again. That helped."

The index cards are gone, but getting him to dispose of a certain loveseat was a harder sell.

"He couldn't see why we should get rid of something that was 'perfectly fine,'" Mary says. "Even though it was disgusting beyond belief. He said, 'That's just cosmetic.' When I explained that 'cosmetic' was important to me, he understood."

The key is making decisions together. Every couple could benefit from Sullivan's advice: "Take it on slowly and take it on together." Once the closet is cleaned and the compromise reached, there may indeed be time and inclination for leisurely breakfasts, even if they have to be taken in another room.

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