



## Are You Ready to Live Together? Answer these five questions first!

by Sara Eckel

When you're in a happy relationship, moving in together might seem like the next logical step. After all, you're always at his place anyway, and shacking up would put an end to all that commuting back and forth, not to mention the stress of trying to remember where you left your makeup bag. Plus, you'd get to eat dinner together every night, spend lazy Sunday afternoons spooning on the couch, and you'd have round-the-clock access to his gentle wit and heavenly foot massages. All this, and you'd cut your living expenses in half!

Whoa! Before you start packing, it's important to think about what cohabiting really means. First and foremost, it's a huge commitment, says **Nina Atwood**, a Dallas-based psychotherapist and author of *Date Lines: Communication From Hello to I Do and Everything in Between* (Henry Holt). "Couples often talk about moving in together from a strictly logistical perspective, rather than acknowledging that this is a life-altering step. But moving in with the wrong person can be as traumatic as marrying the wrong person," she warns. So before you co-sign that lease, sit down with your partner and ponder the following questions:

### 1. What is our commitment level?

Karen, a New York City college administrator, remembers the day her former live-in boyfriend casually mentioned that they'd be getting married soon. "I looked at him like he was insane — that was never in my plan," she recalls. Karen, who was 23 at the time, said that living with her boyfriend was mostly a matter of convenience and fun, and until that moment, she had no idea how serious he was about their relationship.

This type of miscommunication is all too common, says Atwood. "Often, one person thinks, We'll be planning a wedding next year; while for the other it's a test: If it goes well, then we'll talk about commitment. Those are very different intentions. The one who is waiting for the engagement ring will be

disappointed, which, in turn, will affect the one who's just testing the waters," she explains.

Even if you never utter the M word, a conversation about your goals is essential before you give up your own place. "Whether or not you ask the question, moving in together is usually a step toward making a decision about marriage, so it's very important to discuss this openly," she says. Even if you don't make any decisions, knowing where each of you stands is key to avoiding any hurt later on.

## **2. Am I willing to compromise? Is my partner?**

No matter how wonderful your partner is, sooner or later he's going to do something that really, really bugs you. Inevitably, you'll discover that he leaves his dirty underwear on the floor, drinks three beers a day or is incapable of walking into a room without turning on the TV. Cheryl, a lawyer from Portland, Maine, put it best when she said, "Whatever issues you've already recognized as problems — or even just peeves — will be magnified tenfold when you move in together." So if he's a slob and you're a neat freak, talk about this before you're forced to discuss his less-than-stellar aim in the bathroom.

And don't worry — you don't have to agree to divide every single domestic responsibility equally. It's perfectly fine to do more than your share of cleaning if he takes charge of the grocery shopping or cooking.

## **3. Whose place are we moving into?**

Pam, a technical writer from Minnesota, recalls the horrible sinking feeling she had when she saw her then-boyfriend drive up to her house with a U-Haul packed to the brim. "I knew he was a pack rat and I had seen his little apartment crammed with books, CDs, computer equipment, cooking gadgets and more, but I figured there was plenty of room in my place, because I didn't have much stuff. What I didn't know was that he saw moving in with me as a great opportunity to get all of his precious belongings out of storage — from his parents' basement, his sister's garage, his storage locker, etc...."

Even when the transition doesn't involve your finding a place for his high school hockey trophies, couples often face problems when one invades another's turf. "The person whose place it is will likely feel proprietary," says Lonnie Barbach, a San Francisco couples therapist and author of "For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality." Therefore, she suggests finding ways to turn "my home" into "our home." For instance, decide ahead of time whose furniture you're going to use, or whether you'll be buying new things together. Plan the decorating together, or give the person moving in a room to fill with his or her personal stuff.

## **4. How do we weather bad times?**

When you're giddy in love, it's easy to be around your sweetheart 24/7. But "if you are starry-eyed and blissful, it's too soon," warns Atwood, who advocates waiting until you've had your first big argument. "People often

move in together because of strong attraction, though the relationship doesn't actually have roots. These relationships haven't been tested with conflict — or been deepened with conflict resolution," she explains.

A case in point: Anna, an upstate New York bartender, was crazy about Bruce during their first year of dating. "It was a wonderful year of restaurants, movies, sex," she recalls. They were talking about moving in together, but then Bruce became clinically depressed. "The happy-go-lucky romance turned into a nightmare," says Anna. They stayed together for two more years, but they never moved in together and the relationship never returned to full steam ahead. "Eventually, I realized this wasn't the relationship for me," she says. "I'm just grateful the crisis hit before we made any major commitments."

## 5. What about finances?

"Most couples completely neglect this issue," says Atwood. "But the ability to make decisions about money is essential to the health of a long-term relationship. It's the issue couples fight about most." Instead, the majority of couples make assumptions about how money will be handled but never articulate them. After all, it's not enough to just say, "I'll pay the mortgage; you pay the phone and utilities"; you need to discuss why you're dividing things this way. If one person is a schoolteacher and the other is a banker, then it makes sense that the banker will pay more of a couple's living expenses.

There are also deeper, less practical issues to explore. "It's important to see the hidden 'price tags' in a relationship," explains Atwood. "Sometimes, the person who wants to pay the most also wants the most control." The higher earner may also have unspoken expectations that the lower earner will contribute more after a set period of time, such as when he or she finds a better job, finishes grad school or gets out of debt.

The bottom line: Arrangements between live-in lovers don't have to be perfectly balanced; they just need to be clearly stated. "Once something is out in the open, the particulars can be worked out," says Atwood. But keep potential hot-button issues to yourself, she warns, "and you'll end up fighting over every bill and dirty sock. Doing the talking up front is like shaking the bushes — something will come out." And your relationship will be better for it, whether you move in together or not.

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