

# The Wife Left, but They're Still Together

After a pandemic dip, the number of married couples “living apart together” has started to rise again. And women, in search of their own space, are driving the increase.

**By Kelly Coyne**

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Jeff Ordway at his home in Ashland, Mo. He and his wife, Connie, needed “to figure out how to give her what it is she needs in order to be happy.” And that meant living apart after months of pandemic lockdown. Credit...Chase Castor for The New York Times

**J**eff and Connie Ordway had been married for 18 years when Ms. Ordway approached her husband about getting her own apartment.

It was July 2021 — 17 months into the pandemic — and Ms. Ordway, an extrovert, wanted to live closer to the city of Columbia, Mo. Lockdown on their rural farm in Ashland, Mo., “was a lot harder on her than it was on me,” Mr. Ordway, 58, said.

They needed “to figure out how to give her what it is she needs in order to be happy,” he added. They have two children, ages 17 and 14, and felt that one of them would benefit from going to school in a less rural area.

So, in March 2022, Ms. Ordway, 62, found an apartment in Columbia, a 20-minute drive from Mr. Ordway; she also got a job as a shuttle driver at the University of Missouri, which allowed her to be more social. They visit the other’s home a couple of times a week, and speak on the phone every morning and every night.

The decision has stuck. Though pandemic restrictions have eased and their child has left school to work, the distance is working for them. “It feels like we’re dating again,” Ms. Ordway said.



Connie Ordway at her home in Columbia, Mo. Living apart from her husband helped her “remember who I am by myself, remember what I like doing by myself. And that was a lovely gift.” Credit...Chase Castor for The New York Times

After a pandemic-induced dip, the number of American couples who are “living apart together,” as sociologists call the arrangement, or L.A.T., has started to grow again.

While the percentage of the population that is married declined between 2000 and 2019, the percentage of married people who live apart has increased. According to the Census Bureau’s “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” data, the percentage of married couples who live apart rose by more than 25 percent between 2000 and 2019.

In 2021, it started to rise again. As of this year, there are 3.89 million Americans who are living apart from their spouses, or approximately 2.95 percent of married Americans. (These statistics do not include separated couples considering a divorce, but do include couples with circumstances that force them apart, as in the case of military families.)

The pandemic may have played a role in the increase, because [gender disparities](#) in marriage became [more pronounced](#), [especially](#) for [mothers](#).

“I am a mother. I am a wife. I am a farmer. I don’t know where I fit,” Ms. Ordway said, recalling how she felt before moving into her own place. “Where’s the me part?”

Ms. Ordway said that having her own home helps her “remember who I am by myself, remember what I like doing by myself. And that was a lovely gift.”



## What Women Want

Even before the pandemic, women’s well-being had been a driver of the decision to live apart. Living apart can be a way for women to reap the benefits of marriage — love, commitment, support — while avoiding the burdens that traditionally come with being a wife, including the [disproportionate amount of work](#) that tends to fall on them at home.

Sana Akhand, 33, who lived a 30-minute walk from her husband in New York City from October 2021 to June of this year, said that living apart allowed her to create the life she aspired to since girlhood, which included having a successful career in addition to finding love. Ms. Akhand’s parents immigrated to the United States from Pakistan and founded their own business here, and she always wanted to be an entrepreneur as well.

But in 2015, when she got married, Ms. Akhand, who is also a writer and motivational speaker, found it difficult to balance these aspirations. She said she began to lose her “rebellion and independent nature” and “just fell into super-traditional roles and paths of life, like being the wife.”



These challenges only deepened with the pandemic. She and her husband, Adnan Akhand, an accountant, were “working, living, breathing” in a one-bedroom apartment, and Ms. Akhand felt herself spending more and more time being a caretaker.

“Being a wife is subconsciously really draining, because you’re just thinking about this other person, their well-being,” Ms. Akhand said.

The idea to live apart came about during the summer of 2021. She had never lived alone before, she said, because “my parents were super-strict about women not leaving the house until marriage.”

When she told her husband she had felt she missed out, Mr. Akhand responded, “Well, why not? What *is* stopping us from trying it?” He added, “I definitely would never dismiss” any of her thoughts.



Sana Akhand, who had never lived alone, approached her husband, Adnan Akhand, about living apart in the summer of 2021. Sana Akhand



“I definitely would never dismiss” any of her thoughts, Mr. Akhand said. So they lived separately for eight months. Sana Akhand

She moved out that October. For a few months, Ms. Akhand held off on telling her family and friends. “I was so scared that people would think that we don’t love each other and are on the verge of divorce,” Ms. Akhand said.

Her parents each had different reactions when she told them, Ms. Akhand said. “My mom was like, ‘Oh my God, this makes so much sense. This is amazing. You’re probably so liberated and free.’ And my dad was like, ‘Wait, what the hell, what’s so bad about living with a boy?’”

Living in her own apartment gave Ms. Akhand a chance to reconnect with herself. “When I wasn’t with him 24/7, it truly was out of sight, out of mind. Like I wasn’t worried, is he eating, is he OK — he’s in his own house, that’s his responsibility.”

She spent more time with girlfriends and focused on her work. Her career took off, and she got her first book deal. While living apart, Ms. Akhand said she could “fulfill my cup in more ways.”



In May, the couple visited Los Angeles after Mr. Akhand began working remotely for a company there. During this visit, they realized how much they liked California, and Ms. Akhand realized she wanted to live with her husband again.

“I missed him a lot, honestly,” she said. “I wanted to see him every day.” But she also knew she needed a place to go in her home where she could be alone. Living in Los Angeles would allow them to have more space.

This June, they moved there from New York and back in together. Ms. Akhand now has her own bathroom and a room to herself, where she meditates, dances and does creative projects. Speaking of the experience, she said, “I can’t believe I made my childhood dreams come true.”

## **A New Way**

There are many factors that appear to contribute to making the model more socially acceptable. One is the growing visibility and acceptance of relationships that don’t look like the traditional heterosexual marriage, with all its attendant pressures and stereotypes.



Living apart “made caring for myself, and really putting my own pleasure and my needs first so much easier,” said Ev’Yan Whitney, right, pictured here with their spouse, Jonathan Mead. Ev’Yan Whitney

In 2016, Stephanie Coontz, a historian, predicted that “the advent of same-sex marriage may provide new models for how heterosexual couples can combine equality, intimacy and sexual desire.” Living apart may be one of these models.

For Ev’Yan Whitney, 35, and Jonathan Mead, 37, a queer couple, living apart helped challenge heteronormative scripts. They are both children of divorce, and Mx. Whitney — a sexuality educator, writer and podcast host who identifies as a nonbinary wife — said both sets of parents struggled with the “lack of freedom and lack of agency and identity that you get into when you’re in a marriage.”

The couple got married in 2007, in their early 20s, and Mx. Whitney went straight from living with family to living with Mr. Mead, a health educator and podcast host. Mx. Whitney wanted the experience of living alone.

In February 2020, Mx. Whitney moved out of the apartment they shared in Astoria, Ore., and into a new place in Los Angeles.

“It made caring for myself, and really putting my own pleasure and my needs first so much easier,” Mx. Whitney said.

Mx. Whitney and Mr. Mead lived apart until January 2021. Initially, they were going to live apart for a couple of months, but the pandemic started shortly after, and they ended up living apart for 11 months.

In the end, the couple wanted to live apart for even longer. But they moved back in together for safety reasons after the 2020 election. In Mx. Whitney’s words, they “weren’t sure how much fallout there would be.”

They now live together in Los Angeles, and their time living apart continues to influence their marriage. After living apart, it was suddenly easier for Mx. Whitney and Mr. Mead

to figure out what marital norms they wanted to hang onto, and which ones they wanted to toss aside.

For instance, Mx. Whitney and Mr. Mead realized that even if they live together, they don't have to eat the same food for dinner. "It's so much easier when you don't have to worry about someone else's dietary needs," Mx. Whitney said.

After they moved back in together, the couple talked about their marriage. Among the questions they discussed, one stood out: "What does it look like for us to continue to stoke individuality and agency and autonomy within our relationship?"

And they are living their answer.