



## Golden Roommates

*Why Older Women are Coupling Up with Their BFFs*

By Brienne Walsh

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Tricia Hoffman and Anja Woltman, both aged 64, knew from the moment they met—on a women's camping trip in Sedona—that they would be friends. What they didn't know is that they would eventually be roommates.

At the time, both women had been divorced for a number of years and were living in the same Northern California town, about an hour from San Francisco. Hoffman, who has seven grandchildren, had recently settled there after selling her house in the country. Woltman was born in Holland and had raised her family in Vermont, but she'd moved to California to be closer to her now-grown children.

Although they loved their respective homes, they were approaching retirement age and had some anxiety about being alone later in life. "When you get older, your life gets smaller," says Woltman. "It's harder to get around. Tricia and I began talking about what it would be like if we could just walk to each other's houses."

The casual talks led to more earnest discussions about sharing a living space. At first, the idea was more fantasy than reality, a series of *what ifs*, until Hoffman looked out her condo window and saw that the duplex next door was for sale. She called Woltman, who immediately came over. Within a few hours, they had placed a bid on the lot.

"It was exactly what we wanted," says Hoffman.

Although the friends worked with a lawyer and signed a Tenants in Common agreement (in the event that one of them moved out, or passed away), it was more of a formality. "In the end, I didn't think much about money," says Woltman. "I just followed my heart."

The duplex was a fortuitous find for the women. Each has her own home, joined in the middle by a garage. Hoffman lives in the larger house in the front, because she prefers having a patio with a view of the street, while Woltman lives in the back, where she has a backyard and more privacy.

"There's something about having your own space," says Woltman. "We will never walk into each other's houses without knocking. When I'm in my garden and I have my garden door closed, I know I have privacy."

Although Hoffman and Woltman may not have a conventional living situation, they are on the cusp of what may become a housing revolution for female senior citizens, who not only live longer than men, but also greatly outnumber them. According to a 2006 Census Bureau, there are 7.4 million older women living alone in the United States, compared to only 2.7 million men. Increasingly, these women are opting for alternative housing solutions, including renting out rooms in their homes to help pay for mortgages, or forming co-housing communities, where residents have their own units located in complexes full of other senior citizens.

"About seven decades ago, it was just assumed that if you became a widow or were divorced, you'd go live with someone else," says Bella DePaulo, a social psychologist and author of *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. "Now, older women don't want to give up their independence." Rather than getting remarried or going to live with their children or at a nursing home, women are choosing to stay in their own homes, and they increasingly turn to each other for support, comfort and safety as they age.

Maddy Dychtwald, co-founder of Age Wave and author of *Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power Will Transform Our World for the Better*, says that she's noticed a trend of older women increasingly choosing to live together through her work. "I think you're going to see this speed up as the baby boom generation gets older," says Mychtwald. Boomers tend to like the idea of communal living better than their parents' generation, she says, and that's a good thing, given that many of them may reach retirement without the means to live on their own.

Especially in our current economy, there's been an increase in shared housing, according to Ryan Cowmeadow, LMSW, HomeShare program coordinator at University of Michigan Health System's Housing Bureau for Seniors. "It is an old idea that just makes sense. I believe people are now seeing the benefits of shared housing and how it could work for them," he says. "The majority of my clientele are females however many males are sharing homes as well."

The very idea that you don't have to be alone as you get older—even if you aren't married—is a game-changer, for women in particular. The possibility of having a situation like Hoffman and Woltman's helps alleviate anxiety that may stem from the myth of the old maid, the lonely spinster who grows old and dies surrounded by her cats, rather than by the people who loved her throughout her life.

By sharing a living space with a female roommate, women are creating the ideal mixture of solitude and companionship. "We're there for each other," says Hoffman of her relationship with Woltman. "We drive each other to the doctor. Anja has a cat, so when she goes away, I take care of it. We pick up each other's mail. Sometimes we go for walks, and sometimes we watch football together. We even go on vacation together. At the same time, we have our own social circles and activities. I can't imagine a better life."

Outside their home, Hoffman and Woltman share a community of roughly 20 women—both single and married—who organize activities such as hikes, museum tours, bike rides and kayaking trips in the area around San Francisco. "When I was married, my circle of friends was really small, because my husband didn't like a lot of my friends. But now, I have a very busy

social life that is very fulfilling to me," says Woltman. "There's no negativity or talking about each other behind backs. Everything is possible with us. It's just such a positive atmosphere."

At one point, the group even joked about buying an old motel where they could all live together. "It was just another option to explore," says Woltman. "With imagination and creativity, you could find the perfect situation for almost anyone."

This community not only provides diversions, but also allows women to support one another, especially when they become less mobile. "Many of our friends live close by," says Hoffman. "If someone is sick, we gather a group together and find out what that person needs."

Focusing on friendships rather than romantic relationships may actually be a healthier way of maintaining balance for older women. "People who get married, they take those love songs seriously," says DePaulo. "They want to be each other's everything. That might be fine if the relationship is going swimmingly. But if there are problems, or one partner dies, they're in trouble."

Friendships, especially once women have matured, tend to be less fraught. "With friendship, there is less exclusivity," says DePaulo. "You like the time you spend with a friend, but you don't feel bereft if they go away for a week. You don't put such severe, exhaustive demands on your friends, because you don't expect them to be your only emotional support."

In many ways, single older women, historically shunned by society, are actually luckier than men. "It's harder for guys to develop really close friendships because of the lingering homophobia that pervades our culture," says DePaulo. "But women can go out to dinner, they can put their arms around each other in public, and increasingly, they can live alone together without questions being raised about sexual orientation or motives."

"I can't see how men can do what we're doing," says Woltman, the mother of two sons. "It just takes such a range of emotions that men don't have an easy time dealing with."

Just because Woltman and Hoffman are happily single now doesn't preclude the possibility that either one may fall in love again at some point in the future. "I'm open to it," says Woltman, although she notes that Hoffman leans more toward staying single.

"This is where I'll probably end up," says Hoffman. "This is the place I want to live."

However, even if Woltman does find a partner, she doesn't ever want to give up the space that she and Hoffman share. "I see myself having this place until the very end," says Woltman. "Even if I met someone romantically, I would never sell out of the partnership I have with Tricia."

"One of us will eventually go," says Hoffman. "But right now, I don't think about it. I'm just happy where I am."

*This article can be found at <http://go.msn.com/relationships/older-in-life-roomies-1534530.story>.*

