

January 23, 2017

How to avoid conflicts in combining households when you get married late in life



The trend to get married later in life is on the rise, resulting in a growing percentage of the population combining households that come with decades of furniture, dishes, decor, memorabilia, old towels and hard-to-break habits.

This sounds like the perfect storm for an unavoidable disaster. Living with someone at any age can be challenging. Adding our perfectly aged quirks to the mix can spell trouble.

After living on my own for most of my adult life, I recently tied the knot for the first time, at 50 years of age. It is my husband's first marriage as well.

Our situation is more simple than most — neither of us have children or ex-spouses, and we were both living in two-bedroom condos rather than five-bedroom single-family homes.

Despite our minimal belongings, there were still some items that needed to be negotiated — not an easy task when, over time, we develop a personal attachment to our precious and valuable stuff. It is no secret that one person's trash is another person's treasure.

Fortunately, my husband agreed that it was time to donate the posters of his favorite football players hanging in his bedroom. In exchange, I agreed that the collectible Hanna Barbera Limited Edition Sports Cels (cartoon characters playing sports) and figurines could stay in the home office.

He is the cook in the family, so I happily handed over domain of the kitchen. But I did manage to slip a few of his timeworn pots and pans into the trash.

One significant difference in our decorating styles is the size and quantity of flat-panel televisions needed in one home — a fundamental difference of opinion in many homes, I have learned. I believe that one 60-inch TV is enough. My husband, however, believes that a large flat-panel is necessary in every bedroom and in the living room. We don't have a basement, but if we did, I am sure that we would need one there, too.

While we were making the transition from living alone to living together, we happened to catch a rerun of a "Friends" episode in which Chandler moves in with Monica. Their first argument is about decorating. She wants the spare bedroom to be a warm and welcoming guest bedroom with fresh flowers on the side table and a guest sign-in book. He wants a game room with a Barka lounge and foosball table.

Although we never find out who wins this battle between Chandler and Monica, we can guess.

"Is it safe to assume that the woman always wins?" I asked my husband.

"I didn't think so before, but I have learned that whatever she says goes," my husband said in jest.

"Who did you learn that from?" I asked.

"Jill Chodorov," he replied.

"Many a true word hath been spoken in jest." (King Lear)

I did get some good advice from other couples who have recently married at a mature age.

"Put your head in his head," said Jodi Berman of Cherry Hill, N.J. Berman, who got married recently for the first time, also at the age of 50, already owned a home and has an 11-year-old son. Her new husband — his first marriage as well — moved in with them.

"When someone moves into a home that is already set and established, you must work together and allow that person to bring in things and add to the house," Berman said. "I had a big screen — he wanted a bigger one. I had to let him feel like this is his home, too," Berman said.

Rick and Roberta Spees of Washington met at church where both were teaching Sunday school and then married at ages 59 and 57. Rick, who has two adult children from a previous marriage, already owned a large home in D.C.'s Chevy Chase neighborhood. This being her first marriage, Roberta was living in a condo and did not have nearly as much furniture. Since getting married, they have built a home in Bethany.

"We have three houses and three sets of everything," Roberta said.

For now, the Speeses will rent out her condo and live in the house, since his children visit frequently. In a few years, the Speeses say they will sell the house and downsize into the condo.

In anticipation of downsizing, the Speeses have already started discussing the process of consolidating their belongings. They have agreed to keep family heirlooms and negotiate the remaining items.

The Speeses say they are feeling very hopeful of their ability to agree on what to pare down and what to keep.

“My motto at this stage in life is that people are more important than places and places are more important than things,” Rick said. “It comes with age. You finally know what is important and not important.”

I thought back to some of the items I asked my husband to discard, which he did dutifully but reluctantly. Perhaps I could have gone easier on him. I suppose we could have kept the faded plaid swivel chair in the master bedroom that he used for tossing clothes. He has brought it up a few times since its demise.

On second thought, he will forgive and forget someday.