



Last month we started a series called “**Living Separate Lives ‘Together’.**” We felt that it was an important subject matter for family and friends of our residents to be introduced to. Many of our residents are living apart from their spouse for the first time in years. This series goes through different subjects like the struggle of separating, what living apart is like for the first few months, different emotions that are felt, how there are changes in the relationship, and how to stay close while living apart. This month we are focusing on the struggles of separating and the first few months apart.

The Struggle of Separating

Betty and John were married 57 years when John fell and broke his hip. Following hip surgery, John went to the nursing home for routine therapy. A previous stroke at the age of 48 had significantly weakened his body; thus, he was now unable to rally and achieve mobility again. For the past 30 years, Betty had physically and emotionally stood by John through a myriad of serious and even life-threatening medical issues. Sadly, this final incident was the impetus for their physical separation and John would not be able to return home.

Arnie and Jean were best friends and were married for over 50 years when Jean began to show signs of Alzheimer’s disease. Arnie faithfully cared for her over the next three years. Then a 24-hour vigilance began when Jean became incontinent, would not sleep through the night and began wandering away from the house. Arnie brought her to the hospital and, upon evaluation, she was transferred to an assisted living facility with a security system for her safety.

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The ravages of Alzheimer's disease also separated Nancy and Jim who had been married for 48 years. Jim paced the floor and attempted to leave their apartment every day to catch a ride to "go home." When his behavior could no longer be redirected, Jim had to be moved to a local assisted living home where he received 24-hour supervision.

These spouses faced an unwanted separation when their loved one needed full-time care and could not safely remain at home. All three are now on a new journey, facing this time of transition, adjusting to living alone and seeking optimism for their futures.

The First Months

Caregiving can end so abruptly that the caregivers are overwhelmed by the drastic changes. Living in "limbo" apart from a life mate can be one of the most difficult events that couples will ever face. This time of transition may be met with both resistance and acceptance. Life as they know it has ended and a new chapter is unfolding with each day. The marriage is strongly impacted and couples face many struggles and challenges, especially in the first few months.

Nancy was focused on caring for Jim for over 10 years. She describes herself as a compassionate, patient and caring person; yet over time, she grew weary as Jim became fully dependent on her. As his behaviors escalated, he had to be hospitalized and was then transferred to a care facility within days. Nancy expressed a feeling of "shock" when she suddenly had to "let go" of her familiar role as his caregiver. She felt a sense of relief, yet a loss of control and had difficulty facing the silence at home and the empty time she had on her hands. The feelings were bittersweet. She recalls that the first month was the hardest as she faced life without the daily presence of her husband.

Arnie found the separation from Jean was nearly unbearable in the beginning. He recalled, "This was never a part of the plan for our lives." He was fraught with guilt and angry at what the disease had taken from their lives. Yet, he also knew he was losing sleep daily and he felt very close to having a heart attack from the worry and stress of caregiving prior to moving his wife.

For many years, Betty dreaded this day of separation. She recalled the fear and uncertainty she felt when John was hospitalized after his fall and realized their future together hung in the balance. She had been John's caregiver throughout most of his adult life and now they would both encounter the adjustments of living apart.

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Questions? Would you like a tour?

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