

Negotiating Health Transitions in Later Life: Older Couples, Adult Children, and Assisted Living

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Married Couples in Assisted Living: Study Background

- Demographic change
- The need to make residential and health care decisions
- Increasing popularity of assisted living facilities (ALFs)
- Little is know about married couples living together in ALFs

Research Questions

- What pathways lead couples to live together in ALFs?
- How do couples respond to life in ALFs?
- What experiences do adult children have when their parents live as a couple in ALFs?

The Married Couples in Assisted Living Study: Sensitizing Frameworks

- Life course perspective
- Interpretive perspective
- 'Multiple Voices'

The Married Couples in Assisted Living Study: Data Collection

- Telephone Surveys

- 105 (/132) ALF administrators of homes with 16 or more beds:
 - Married couples make up 6% of this AL population
 - 75% of facilities had a history of having couples
 - 64% of facilities had couples at the time of the survey

The Married Couples in Assisted Living Study: Data Collection

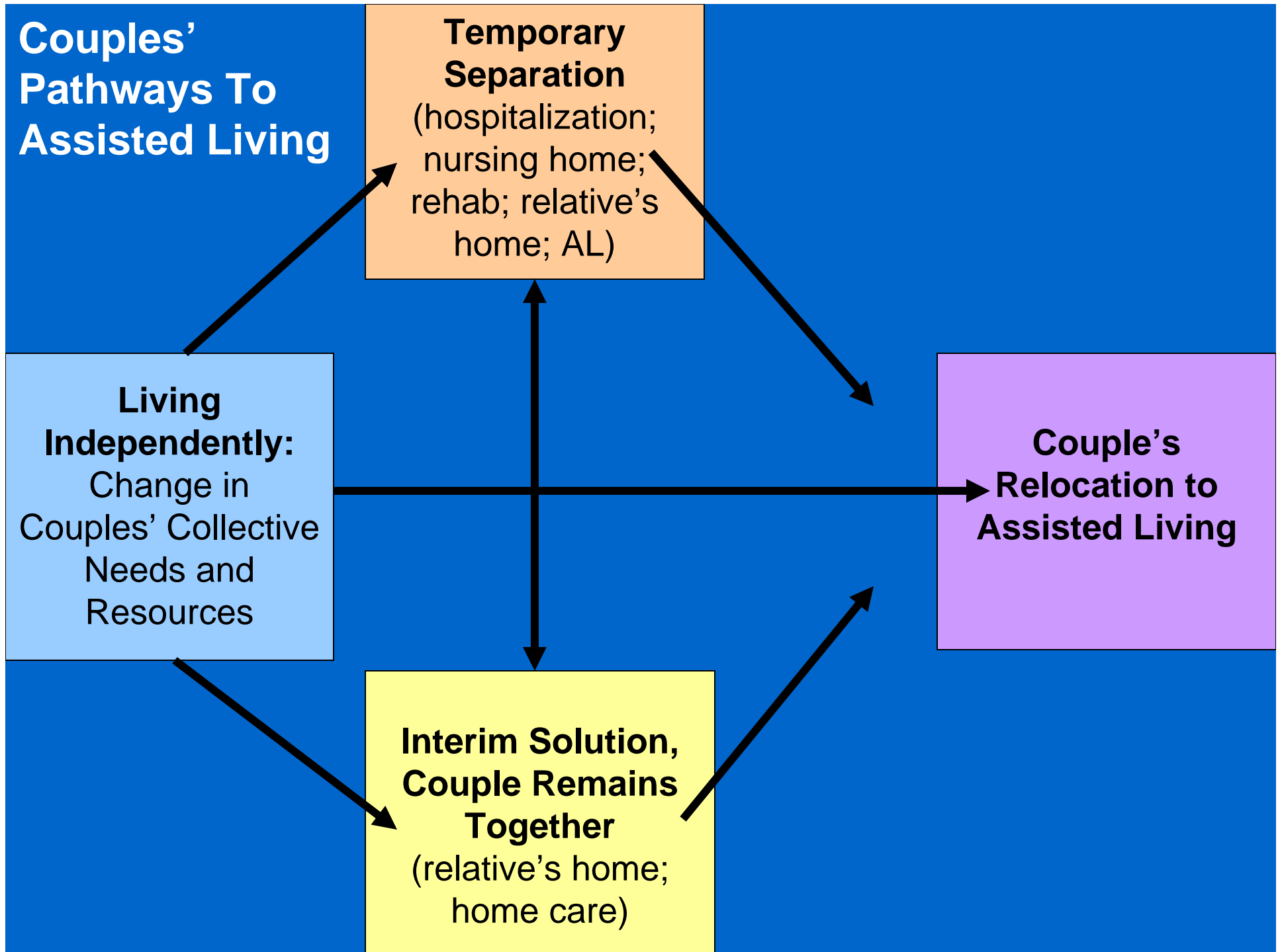
- Semi-structured, qualitative life-history interviews
 - 20 couples (14 conjoint, 6 individual)
 - 10 adult children

Couples Sample Characteristics (n=20)

- **Age**
 - 66 to 94 years
 - Mean ages: husbands = 86 years; wives = 83 years
- **Length of marriage**
 - 2 to 72 years
 - Mean years: 56
- **Race and Ethnicity**
 - 3 African American; 17 Caucasian of European-descent
- **Parental Status**
 - 19 had living children; 17 had children living within an hour's drive
- **Length in current ALF**
 - 1 week to 6 years
 - Mean years: 2.1
- **Facilities**
 - All private pay; 2 not-for-profit
 - Monthly rates for couples ranged from \$2800 - \$8000
 - Resident capacities of 28 to 100

Adult Child Sample Characteristics (n=10)

- **Relation to Couples**
 - 5 daughters; 4 sons; 1 daughter-in-law
- **Age**
 - 45 to 68 years
- **Race and Ethnicity**
 - 1 African American (son), remainder Caucasian of European descent
- **Marital and Parental Status**
 - 8 married; 2 divorced
 - All had living children; 3 with dependent children
- **Education and Employment**
 - All college-educated
 - 5 in the paid labor force
- **Proximity**
 - 2 out-of-state (MA and TX)
 - 8 living within a 15 minute drive from parents



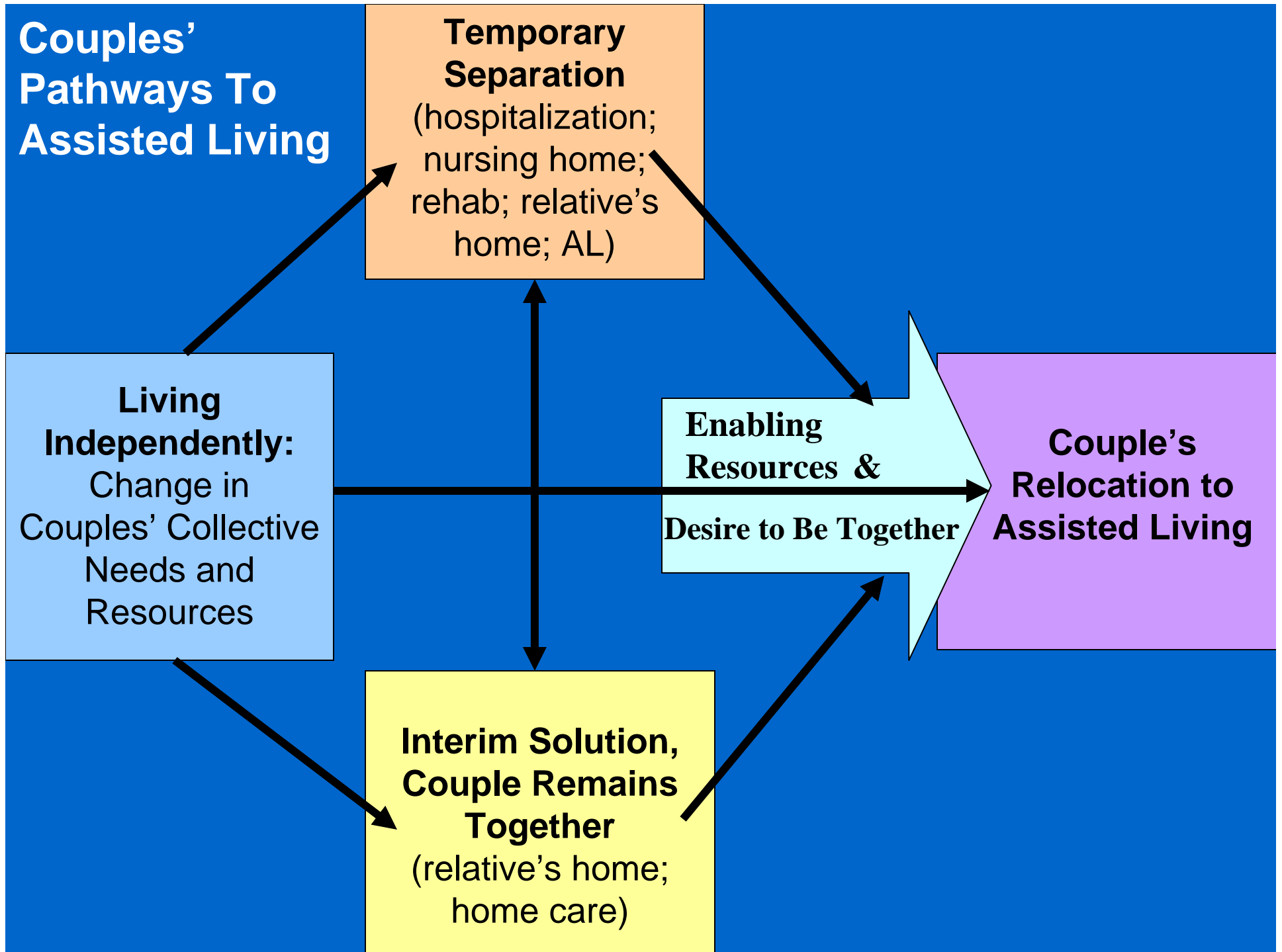
Couples' Health Transitions

- **Synchronous**

- Spouses experience health declines at relatively similar rates
- Enter AL because of both spouses' health needs

- **Asynchronous**

- Health transitions do not occur simultaneously
- Enter AL primarily because of one spouse's health needs



The Desire to be Together

I think this is the best option for us. . . .
we get to be together. That's what my
son said. He said he wanted to keep us
together as long as he could. I like that
too.

Mrs. Peters, Age 90, Married 68 years

The Meanings of Marriage

When we got married, I didn't ever, you know, we didn't get married thinking, "Well, if we don't like it, we can divorce." I mean, I just figured it's for a lifetime. I made that lifetime commitment. It's just like now. I didn't need to come to assisted living, but he did and I, we just didn't want to separate. So, I just came with him.

Mrs. Bridgeman, Age 82 Married 63 years

The Meanings of Marriage

I want to be with her. I want to make sure that she is okay. I wouldn't put her in a place where I couldn't be. That's my job. Living here was hard, especially in the beginning. Seeing the people here, they all have some kind of problem.

Mr. Greenberg, Age 76, Married 59 years

Couples in AL

- **Benefits:**

- companionship; emotional support; continuity; having a helper and an advocate with them

- **Challenges:**

- public settings
- share very tight quarters
- presence of others

Independent Couples

Mr. Kovack: I can sit and watch TV or something and she's downstairs doing something else. I say, great. It gives her something that is separate from me.

Mrs. Kovack: Yeah. Like this morning they have men's club every Wednesday morning for an hour and he'll go down there and I say, "Go." It's something for him to do.

-Married 40 years

Interdependent Couples

We do everything together. We're together. I'm alongside [my husband] all of the time. . . . Anyway, I think we don't fit in here. We're different from most of the people here.

Mrs. Gold, Age 86, Married 62 years

Limited-Independent Couples

I feel like I need to be with him when he's, when he would be by himself otherwise. I don't feel like I have a right to make a bunch of friends and take off someplace.

Mrs. Davis, Age 87, Married 48 years

Limited-Independent Couples

I promised to take care of her, which I am still trying to do Yesterday they were playing volleyball. I would have been down there with them you know, if it wasn't for [my wife], if I was single. So, I just go and have my meals downstairs and come back up.

Mr. Anderson, Age 93, Married 72 years

Limited-Independent Couples

I'll ask him if he wants to go outside for a walk or he wants to walk in the hall. Sometimes he walks in the hall, but usually down to the end of the hall and back is about the size of it and you don't keep very active like that. Actually, I'm losing part of my ability to walk because he doesn't do anymore than he does.

Mrs. Davis, Age 87, Married 48 years

Adult Children's Experiences

- **“Typical” support**
 - Social, emotional, financial, health, transportation
 - Advocates
- **“Double the work”**
- **Unexpected roles**
 - Counselor
 - Mediator

Unexpected Roles

Sometimes [my father] can get really ugly to [my mother]. . . .I've found myself, I'm the counselor now - in a role that I never envisioned myself doing as he's aging.

Mr. and Mrs. Morgan's Son

Unexpected Roles

She's grown incredibly impatient over the last year and a half. I have to stop her privately and say, "Mom, don't you think that he would move faster if he could?"

Mr. and Mrs. Green's Daughter

Unexpected Roles

I have to say to my mother sometimes, “You know mom, dad doesn’t remember, you know, it’s from the Parkinson’s or from his memory problems or from the medication.” Oh, oh. Yeah. They each forget that the other one has issues.

Mr. and Mrs. Gold’s Daughter

Unexpected Roles

I schedule their doctors' appointments at different times so I can get them alone in the car. He'll vent to me or she'll vent to me or whatever in that private space. It's kind of our little sanctum. Usually when I go over there, they're both in the room.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis' Daughter

Conclusions

- **AL is a possible solution, yet not an option for all**
- **Couples' pathways to and experiences in AL are variable**
- **Care providers should work with spouses and their families**
- **Future planners should consider couples' needs**

Future Directions

- What are the experiences associated with spousal caregiving in AL? How is it perceived by spouses, family members and care providers?
- How do couples' experiences compare to those without spouses?
- How do gender, class, race and ethnicity influence couples' experiences and options in later life?