
Opening Extract from...

What to Do About Everything

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Published by Hardie Grant Books

Published in 2011 by Hardie Grant Books

Hardie Grant Books (Australia)
85 High Street
Prahran, Victoria 3181
www.hardiegrant.com.au

Hardie Grant Books (UK)
Dudley House, North Suite
34–35 Southampton Street
London WC2E 7HF
www.hardiegrant.co.uk

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Toner, Barbara, 1948–
What to do about everything: a manual for domestic life / Barbara Toner.
9781740667111 (pbk.)
Home economics—Miscellanea
Life skills—Handbooks, manuals, etc.
640

Cover design by Vivien Sung
Text design by Vivien Sung
Typesetting by Megan Ellis
Typeset in Hoefler Text 10.75/15.5 pt
Printed in China by 1010 Printing International

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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HOUSE RULES

Compromise doesn't come easily to many people. This is why we have sulking and/or yelling, then, eventually, rules. If you want a successfully managed household, which is to say one that engenders minimal tension and maximum efficiency, you need to agree on essentials, most notably what works best for the good of the whole regardless of the conflicting interests of the whole's constituents.

In most households without children, rules go unspoken, but everyone knows what they are because they are based on a general expectation of order plus fair play. For example, my husband accepts that when I cook, cutlery and dishes and pots and pans will be used and rendered dirty. This causes him pain. He says pretty well every day, 'Did you have to use every pot in the house?' I don't allow this to upset me because I know he is in charge of cleaning up and so entitled. Should he not be around, and should I have to clear up, the mess causes me pain.

The trouble with unspoken rules is that one or some members of the household can pretend, once they've been broken, that they didn't know what they were. Then you have grounds for conflict, with everyone falling over each other's personality types: fast-thinking, verbal analysers annihilating sensitive ponderers, and so on. Therefore, rules are best said out loud in front of all concerned in such a way that the household doesn't turn on the person who appears to be making them. I don't know how you do this without looking like a meeting of the Communist Party's Household Management Committee. My preference would be for casually if a problem hasn't actually arisen, and, if it has, then firmly in the case of children, or over a bottle of wine in the case of adults. Just the one, though. It's during the second bottle that people get argumentative and silly, no question.

In the event of there being no spoken acknowledgement of rules of any sort and everyone relying on everyone else's good will and the good will being in short supply, I've taken advice and prepared some guidelines. They may be useful should arbitration be required.

LIVING ALONE

Contrary to general expectations, most people living on their own are happy and not lonely or prone to feelings of isolation, even though a large percentage of them are aged over sixty-five. In the UK and Australia, elderly women are the largest group of single-person householders, as baby-booming husbands kick the bucket before their wives. Numerically, they're most closely rivalled by middle-aged men whose marriages have failed. Prominent among the rest are the stereotypes as seen on TV: the comparatively affluent young men and women who haven't found love, prefer their own company or are delaying the commitment to a relationship usually required by childbirth.

Despite the vast differences in personal situations, the rules for all occupants of single-person households are the same, which is to say largely nonexistent, but the following ought really to be adhered to:

- Live within your means. It's hard having no one to share your expenses, especially when costs are so rapidly escalating and money is in such short supply, but there it is. Without someone else to watch your spending, you must watch it yourself. It may go right against your spendthrift grain, but uncontrolled debt is terrifying even if you're lucky enough to know a person who, if called upon in an emergency, could relieve you of it.

- Avoid slovenliness. It leads to degeneracy and so no visitors. You need visitors, so wash up more than once a week, dust, clean the bathroom – especially the loo – and put newspapers out to recycle.

- Temper any inclination to fussiness, because it will surely lead to obsessive and/or compulsive behaviour, which you won't notice but others will.

- Eat properly. Snacking isn't a proper diet. Not even nuts.

- Get out of the house or people will assume you're a freak. Soon you'll be suspected of crimes you didn't commit. Also, if people get used to not seeing you, your absence won't be noticed in the event of a fire, fall or flood. Should you hate going out (and I know most of you don't), make a point of phoning at least one person a day to ask this person about themselves. A tendency to self-centredness is unavoidable when you live by yourself.

- Look in the mirror. Check yourself for a dirty face, clothes on inside-out, matted hair at the back of your head and anything else a housemate may notice before allowing you to appear in public.

LIVING WITH YOUR PARENTS

This is infinitely more appealing than it used to be, because baby-boomer parents make very accommodating housemates and moving out is ridiculously expensive. The drawback is that your parents will want to know far more about your personal life than you may like, and their expectations of you won't be those of a flatmate. You will remain a child in their eyes even though you are forty-two and responsible for a classroom of children or the company payroll. You will have no real say in the kitchen and you will suffer a protracted adolescence: parents laying down the law bring out the worst in everyone. Fair play counts, of course it does, but it will always be skewed, however affectionately, because the roof you are under is owned by your elders and betters, and you will want to rebel. So:

- Pay board. This confirms your adult status in the household. The amount (not to be confused with market-value rent) should cover at least a little more than your expenses. You may be out for most meals and use electricity only for light and hot water and to charge your phone and computer, but think of your saving. Board won't necessarily buy you an equal say, but contributing to the best of your ability will indicate respect and, believe me, parents are very big on respect from adult children.

- Notify parents should you be coming home early, late, or not at all or you will be accused of treating the place like a hotel. Parents are creatures of habit and like to eat at the same time every night and know how many people will be at the meal table. Also, they will start calling hospitals, the police and your mobile phone ten minutes after your anticipated arrival.

- If you can't keep your room tidy, at least close the door. Make an effort to confine your mess to your room, as your parents will have reached that point in their lives where another adult's mess is unacceptable, especially if it includes cables and shoes.

- Always return used items to the place your parents keep them or they'll be phoning you at work and making you come home to find them.

- Try not to talk to your parents as if they are morons. It's true that they look moronic, but this is because they haven't heard what you said or were so lost in thought when you spoke that they are taking time to digest the meaning and import of your remark. You may know a great deal more than they do

about some things, but by and large they know a great deal more than you about everything else.

- Keep the noise down. You will almost certainly be observing different hours, so respect theirs before expecting them to respect yours (unless you are a firefighter, doctor or other emergency worker).

- Talk to them. Not all the time or about stuff you consider none of their business, but at least about the bits of your life that are amusing, interesting and if necessary alarming, so they have something to discuss when you're not home.

- Reach an agreement about having sex with others in your bedroom, which will never be far enough away from your parents for comfort. Under no circumstances should they be made aware that you are having it.

LIVING WITH HOUSEMATES

Housemates may or may not be friends or even people known to each other before living together. They are individuals who, while residing under one roof, have sole responsibility for themselves but equal responsibility for the running of the house. The running may be a little or a lot, and it's as well you appreciate just how much before you move in. Before committing yourself, take a good hard look at the cleanliness of the communal areas, the size of your bedroom, the available hanging space, the laundry facilities, the condition of the fridge, the locks on doors – internal and well as external – traffic through the bathroom/s, attitudes to sharing food, plus arrangements for rent- and bill-paying. All are indicators of the household's living standards and the degree to which they might coincide with your own. Walk around the place and sniff. Smells need to be congenial. Be alert to the smell of damp, old clothes, mouldy food, cigarettes, people and takeaways.

You don't actually have to like your housemates, because you don't need to see them if you can lock your door and arrange your comings and goings to avoid theirs. Indeed, liking may be a luxury you can't afford if there's nothing else on offer. On the other hand, there are some people that you simply can't and shouldn't have to live with. Should you have vague feelings of foreboding, listen to them. Ask yourself pertinent questions. Not only 'Is this person a psychopath?' but also 'Why does the house feel peculiar and how come when her mouth smiles her eyes don't?' Logical

thinkers need to touch base with their instinct. You need to be comfortable, both physically and mentally. Once you've decided to move in:

- Agree on an out clause. Whether it's to kick someone out or to take off yourself, insist on a period of grace during which you see how well the arrangement is working.
- Get everything in writing: most significantly, what the rent is, when it's due, who pays the utility bills and how they are paid. Pay rent by direct debit. Rent comes before dining out in a hard-pressed monthly budget, and arguing over money is cheap. We hate cheap.
- Agree on chores: who cleans communal areas and when.
- Be nice. Overly assertive isn't attractive in a newcomer or towards newcomers. Once you've moved in, try to get the measure of your housemates before you judge them. They will certainly be weird in one way or another, because their parents aren't your parents and their habits won't always be yours, but they'll think you are weird as well.
- If something bugs you, like people taking without asking food you have bought or cooked, people wandering uninvited into your bedroom, non-resident boyfriends or girlfriends of housemates overstaying their welcome, or people using all the hot water or your clothes, say so.
- If saying so gets you nowhere, take stock. Is the cause of the conflict based on different attitudes to order and fair play or to different methods of communication? How bad is it really? If the answer is very, attempt to negotiate, but if there is no possible compromise, weigh giving in against checking out. If you give in, don't sulk. Sulking makes you miserable. Store the incident as information.
- Have sex with a housemate only if you appreciate that it can lead to regret so enormous that one of you has to move out.

· LIVING WITH BOYFRIENDS/GIRLFRIENDS ·

Moving in with your boyfriend or girlfriend is somewhere between sleeping with your housemate and marriage. It's much more complicated than anyone ever wants it to be, because there's always the unresolved issue of the timeframe. Before moving so

much as a decent coffee maker out of your own place and into another's, ask yourself how long the shelf life is of this particular arrangement and whether you're agreed on that. Don't hope for a gorgeous outcome. Gorgeous outcomes take hard work.

I agree that not all marriages, either formal or de facto, last a lifetime – the average first marriage in the UK is reckoned to last eleven years – but a wedding does entail a commitment to stay together until it becomes intolerable. Moving in with someone you're sleeping with entails a commitment to stay together as long as it's convenient. This clearly is infinitely more casual than a marriage, but ending it can feel just as awful as a divorce for at least one of you, and the ground rules are vague. If you have moved in simply to save time travelling between each other's places, you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- **Whose home are you living in? If one of you is moving into a place the other already owns or rents, does it remain fundamentally their place? Whose pictures go on the walls? Whose books go on the shelves? Who's holding the reins here, and is this acceptable in terms of home-making?**
- **If one of you has a mortgage on the house or flat, should the other be charged rent and thereby become a lodger? Then, are you mainly a lodger or mainly a boyfriend/girlfriend?**
- **If one of you earns a vast amount more than the other, should the household expenses be shared equally?**
- **How much independence is acceptable in this arrangement? Are your expectations of what it's offering the same?**

LIVING IN A RELATIONSHIP TILL DEATH PARTS YOU

A married relationship, with or without the vows, with or without children, with or without pets, has in its favour an intention of long-term stability. This is a big plus, but it doesn't guarantee untrammelled happiness. Even the most successful marriages turn out to be a fine balance between levels of misery and satisfaction simply because the two people in them are different. This important ratio, as estimated by me, ought never to be less than 55 per cent satisfaction to 45 per cent misery over a sustained period, though there will be rare days when 100 per cent misery or 100 per cent contentment can occur.

Far be it from me to tell you how to have a happy relationship, but you might like to know that research has identified characteristics of a healthy marriage as reported by people who are in them. They include: a mutual long-term view of the relationship; perseverance in times of trouble; acknowledgement of couple and individual needs; shared values and history; respectful methods of communication; humour; the ability to compromise; fighting fair; enjoyment of each other's company; physical and psychological intimacy strengthened through overcoming difficulties; feelings of friendship; and regular expressions of affection.

Conversely, research shows that unhappiness in marriages is caused by: lack of time together; lack of understanding; differing as opposed to different values; different goals and expectations; lack of communication; working full-time; housework; and lack of financial security. Your household may suffer from none or all of these. The point is that a beady eye must be kept on one's own wellbeing compared with the wellbeing of one's partner, always bearing in mind that the partner's method of expressing anything in the way of satisfaction or misery may not be yours, or may not exist at all. Common sense is required as well as empathy. If you are miserable, and your partner is equally miserable, are you looking at arrangement failure or total failure? Maybe all that's required are more realistic expectations. In which case:

- **Respect each other's differences, especially if you see them as weaknesses. If, under pressure, one of you is short-tempered and the other sulks, or one of you always shouts and the other always stalks out, there's not much point in hoping it will be otherwise. Have therapy if you like but in my experience people revert to type so anticipate. Stay calm. Avoid pressure. No, seriously. When you can, avoid it.**

- **Respect each other's strengths. If one is better at money/cooking/car maintenance/speaking sensitively to the children or any other thing, then give the job to them. If neither of you is much good at it, or both of you are good at it, or both of you enjoy it, or both of you hate it, then share.**

- **Don't compete over who's more exhausted. Neither of you deserves more rest than the other, the exception being pregnant women and new mothers. If one of you is genuinely more tired, then you are either spending more than your fair share of time at work, on the tiles or on domestic matters, so take a look at your time management (see Chapter 4). This must be properly addressed in the interests of fair play.**

- **Don't compete full stop.**

- **Don't argue over money – preferably not over sex, religion or politics either – but especially not over money. How you organise your finances (see Chapter 13) will be a matter for you, but reach an agreement from the outset in the full understanding that what comes into the household should serve the household needs first and individuals' needs second. There's nothing worse than the sense of injustice caused by a tightwad about the place.**

LIVING WITH CHILDREN

People with children may be couples who have had children together; couples who have had children with other people with whom these children now live, or with whom they share custody; or couples who have had children with each other as well as with other people, all or some of whom live under the one roof. Sole parents may have all their children living with them all the time, or they may share custody. Each of these households will have specific requirements related to time and emotion management. But the relationship and ratio of parents to children in any household ought not to affect the basic rules. In households containing children they should be very basic, and there should be as few as possible:

- **Always enforce the rules you have made, even if it's in the middle of the night and you haven't slept for three months.**

- **Those worth enforcing include no lying, no stealing, no being where you're not supposed to be, no physical violence, and a little bit of respect if you don't mind, please.**

These are probably enough. I can't speak for your household. Just don't make a rod for your back. Tidying any mess they make in areas of the house used by others should start the minute they can walk. A civil tongue in their heads should start the minute they can talk. But an untidy room isn't a capital offence. Nor is arguing a fair case, provided it doesn't come with insults. And nor, at least not in my book, and no matter how ill advised, is leaving the house in funny clothes or getting body parts pierced or tattooed.

Acceptable behaviour changes according to the age and needs of the child, so adapt rules sensibly. Not eating between meals may be a good rule one year for one

child but may not necessarily be a good rule all the time or for all children. They change from one week to the next, so it's wise not to write them off too early as psychopaths or pint-sized. Give them a chance to grow out of it.

LIVING WITH ADULT CHILDREN

Adult children may want to return to live with their parents, or they may never leave their parents' household in the first place. This can happen for a variety of reasons, the most obvious of which is lack of money caused by low income, debt or job loss. Other reasons may be illness, pregnancy or studying. These all count as enforced dependency, which is different from not leaving home because you don't want to or you can't be fagged, and it embraces a completely different set of temperaments. How happy either arrangement is will depend not just on how well everyone gets on, but on the blend of expectations and values, and this can be lumpy across different generations under the one roof.

There is huge pleasure to be had by parents from the company of their adult children, but accommodating them also requires difficult compromises. Adult children can test their parents' tolerance to such a limit that the ensuing conflict may act as a prompt to them ultimately leaving. This phenomenon has been identified as fouling the nest. Even adult children who would die rather than foul their nest need to assert themselves from time to time to demonstrate the status to which they feel their years entitle them. For parents, children of any age asserting themselves can be taxing beyond belief.

The success of this household will depend on the good will of everyone involved, on children appreciating the benevolence of their parents and on parents not rubbing their children's noses in it. Rules will depend primarily on mutual respect but also on how everyone is occupied during the day and how this affects the child–parent dynamic. Does the working mother of working children insist on doing all the shopping, cooking and cleaning? Does the working father with a working wife and working children maintain responsibility for the car, the bills and neighbourhood watch? Sorry to resort to stereotypes, but curiously most households do. Rules for parents as opposed to rules for their adult children are as follows:

- **Trust your children. Unless you have a very good reason not to, assume they can make their own decisions and that they won't be placing themselves in risky or ill-advised situations just for the hell of it. Even if they do, trust**

them to get themselves out of it. You raised them so you should have properly equipped them.

- Don't overstep the mark when it comes to interest in their work (calling their boss), friends (inviting yourself on their outings) or love life (flirting or arguing with their dates).
- You aren't their best friend; you are their parent. There is a difference, and, although it's an increasingly narrow one, it's there for life.
- Try not to nag. Agree on the rules and if they aren't respected negotiate a settlement which involves them leaving home so they can please themselves.
- Having agreed they may live at home, either set a time limit or decide this is a great arrangement all round and enjoy it.

LIVING WITH ELDERLY PARENTS

However cosy the idea may seem of a grandparent living in the bosom of the family and imparting infinite wisdom to small children who grow up to write a book about them, the reality is, well, less cosy. Because it's not the norm, there's far too much obligation and far too much guilt. Elderly parents mostly move in with their adult children in a crisis, when they have become ill or had a fall and are unable to stay in their own home. It isn't usually planned and it becomes long-term or permanent only when it's acknowledged that the parent is too frail to live on their own again and the idea of a nursing home is untenable.

It's a cruel fact that sometimes 'untenable' is a luxury. The two prime requirements of any household wanting to accommodate a frail, elderly parent are space and the support of the other household members. Money, to a certain extent, is also an issue. Almost no one has a granny flat. Adult children whose own adult children have left home may have a spare room, but ideally there needs to be enough space for everyone to enjoy some privacy without feeling unacceptably crowded.

There's no denying the disruption to the household. The adult child and their partner may overnight be thrust into the role of carers, which can entail 24-hour alertness and anxiety. For this, good will large enough to fill several spare rooms must be available from the partner whose elderly relative this isn't. Most elderly parents are only too aware of their situation. Not only are they giving up their own home, but they will also be in some degree of discomfort owing to the crisis and torn between

relief that they are now in safe and loving hands and guilt for the trouble they believe they are causing.

Should you be in a position to care for an elderly parent (that is, you have the space and the support of other household members), then you may as well know that you will be tested, no matter how much you love your parents or in-laws, and they will be tested as well. To survive the test:

- **Once the crisis has passed, discuss the options with your elderly parent. They may not want to live with you for the rest of their life. They might want all avenues for everyone's future contentment to be explored.**
- **Don't presume.**
- **Don't patronise.**
- **Don't ignore.**
- **Get help in the event of an elderly parent's extreme dependence.**
- **Take time out.**

LIVING WITH IN-LAWS

The fact of the matter is that in-laws are aliens. Sometimes they are loving, at other times they are strange but acceptable and at other times still they are the enemy. Usually they are capable of being all three sooner or later. You can be lucky. You may find you have so much in common with the family you marry into or that marries into you that living comfortably under the one roof is the only way to live. But mostly, tolerance and holding your tongue are required for any such arrangement to succeed.

The catch with in-laws isn't just that you have been raised differently and so have come to expect different things of normal behaviour; there is also the exquisite tension that exists between those of you who think you have first claim on the person common to you. You have to be very grown-up about it. Should you be a parent-in-law, you must step back and acknowledge that your child has created a unit of their own into which you must be invited, and that you have no automatic rights once you are inside it. Should you be a child-in-law, you need to know that your partner's parents don't actually wish you ill; they just want the best for their offspring and it's very hard for them to accept that you are it. Remember the following:

- Different doesn't automatically mean barking.
- Asking the person common to you to choose between you is criminal, no matter how disguised the request.
- Under no circumstances should you gang up against an in-law.
- The person common to both should allow the parties on either side to form their own relationship without intervention, as the intervention will almost certainly end in tears.

LIVING WITH PETS

Two in five UK and two in three Australian households include at least one animal. Therefore, a great many of you will know that a wise household doesn't take on the responsibility lightly. Not only will a pet require accommodating, for instance in a human bed, but someone will be called upon to feed, love, exercise, groom and care for this pet – in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer – as well as clean up after it. The willingness of this person to make the sacrifice should be established well in advance. The commitment may be for ten or more years for a dog, and for twelve or more years for a cat.

Actually, there's no point in getting a pet, goldfish aside, unless everyone in the house wants it and not just the person who says they'll do all the work. This may even apply to goldfish. Goldfish live for many years even after they have thrown themselves repeatedly from the tank in order to seek a better life elsewhere; they require a tank, sometimes a pump for the tank, water to be changed and fish food to be remembered. They're not so easy. Not everyone wants a goldfish, and if you haven't bought it, why should you be the one to scrape it from the wall? Children can't be expected to look after a pet on any occasion other than the one that suits them. So, if you don't have a pet but are thinking of getting one, ask yourself who really wants it and why.

Consider the following. They aren't rules, just a series of questions you should ask yourself before you even think of going to the pound or pet shop.

- Who wants this pet? Is it you, your boyfriend, your wife, your children, your flatmate? Is it everyone but you, or everyone but your husband? Tell the truth here, because if someone you live with doesn't want an animal about

the place, forget it. If everyone wants it, then why? For company, for fun, to replace a baby? Is a pet really the answer?

- What kind of pet? Let's just consider cats and dogs. A cat, for instance, might do okay in a twelfth-floor flat, but a labrador in a twelfth-floor flat is a stupid idea. There are working dogs, lap dogs, dogs for children, guard dogs and cats. There are pedigrees, pretty ones, abandoned ones and ugly ones. Don't buy for looks. Buy for suitability. Dogs need exercise – the larger the dog, the greater the need. Cats can exercise themselves. A dog needs access to the outside world, if only to relieve itself, but a cat can manage without. Some cats don't mind being left all day; most dogs hate it.

- How much mess, smell, hair and noise can you stand? Kitty litter in my experience spreads all over the kitchen. Its smell can travel into every corner of a largish house. Ditto the smell of a damp dog. Dogs and cats that shed hair shed it everywhere, and always into their owners' food. Factor in to your purchase the household tolerance for smells and hair.

- Do you have time to see to a pet's needs? Not just buying it food, exercising it, dealing with its bad behaviour and getting it vaccinated, but also grooming it, loving it, finding someone to care for it when you're away and looking for it when it does a runner.

- Can you afford it? While a goldfish isn't a big expense, dogs and cats require proper and regular diets as well as proper and regular health care, and vets aren't cheap.

If you must have a pet, do your research and don't decide after a year or two that you're over it and maybe your mother would like it, because she wouldn't.