

Sleep Disorders Health Center

Are You and Your Partner Sleep Compatible?

Sleep disorders and incompatible nighttime habits can drive couples apart at night. But solutions do exist.

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WebMD Feature

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Are you and your partner compatible in bed -- when it's time to [sleep](#), we mean? You like to turn in early, snuggled under a pile of blankets in the pitch dark. He's a night owl, watching TV or reading into the wee hours of the night. When he finally does doze off -- oftentimes with the light still glaring -- he hardly falls into a restful slumber. Tossing and turning, he balls up the sheets and sometimes kicks them off the bed entirely. Then comes the chain-saw like [snoring](#) and sputtering, interspersed with sudden jerky leg movements. As daylight creeps through the blinds, you're cursing it -- and your partner. Sounds like maybe there's a little sleep incompatibility in your house.

Sleep Incompatibility: Scores of Couples Suffer

If the restless sleep described above sounds familiar, you're not alone. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) says that three out of every four adults wake frequently during the night, or they snore. In an NSF survey of women ages 18 to 64, more than half said they sleep poorly more than a few nights a week. And restless sleepers feel it the next day. Forty three percent of those less-than-stellar sleepers blamed poor sleep for interfering with their next day's activities.

The culprit? In many cases it's a snoring or otherwise incompatible sleeping partner.

Sleep experts agree that snoring, which can indicate the serious health problem [sleep apnea](#), presents the biggest conflict for couples at bedtime. But a host of other compatibility hurdles exist. They range from the physiological -- like differences in body temperature -- to plain old differences in personal preferences. Personal preferences, which include everything from how firm a mattress should be to preferred bedtimes to whether the windows should be open or closed, can be just as damaging to a good night's sleep as snoring. That's especially true once couples get past the initial starry-eyed stages of courtship.

Sleep Incompatibility: It Increases With Age

"If you're young and madly in love, it's a little easier to put up with things," says Helene A. Emsellem, MD. Emsellem is director of the Center for Sleep & Wake Disorders in Washington, D.C.

According to Paul Rosenblatt, PhD, a professor of family social studies at the University of Minnesota, sleep incompatibility naturally increases with age. "With older couples, sex is often in the past, snoring is a problem, plus they're going to the bathroom multiple times a night," he says. Lots of older couples end up not wanting to share a bed."

Other experts agree. "We get more complicated as we get older," Emsellem tells WebMD. "For example, there's the development of [hot flashes](#) in women, and snoring."

Sleep Incompatibility: Insomnia

Even in the absence of sleep disorders, getting a good night's rest remains elusive for many couples. "We often take sleep for granted," says Kevin Martinolich, MD, of the East Tennessee Center for Sleep Medicine. Martinolich says it's not uncommon to see patients who have suffered from [insomnia](#) for several years before seeking treatment.

If you suffer from insomnia, you may need to look no further than the pillow next to yours to discover what's keeping you awake. "You have to take a step back and ask yourself, 'Is it marital problems that begot sleep problems, or vice versa?'" Martinolich says.

Not sure? The answer may lie in what you and your partner are willing to do to overcome sleep incompatibility. "It poses the questions: 'How strong is the relationship? How flexible are the players?'" Emsellem says.

Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep: Sleeping Apart

An increasing number of couples, old and young, resolve sleep incompatibility by parting ways at night. A recent NSF survey reported that an estimated 23% of American couples sleep apart. British couples report similar habits. A survey by Britain's Sleep Council found one out of every four couples surveyed regularly sleep separately. The trend has become so firmly entrenched that architects now regularly design new homes with two master bedrooms. The National Association of Home Builders predicts that by 2015, more than half of all custom houses will have dual master bedrooms.

But many couples remain committed to cuddling at night. Rosenblatt, who interviewed 42 bed-sharing couples for his book *Two in a Bed: The Social System of Couple Bed Sharing*, reported that, snoring and other annoyances aside, the desire for [intimacy](#) and sheer closeness persuaded many couples to stay under the same set of sheets.

Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep: Conquering Sleep Apnea

Snoring may seem like a superficial annoyance. But oftentimes it's linked to the potentially serious disorder called sleep apnea. [Sleep apnea causes](#) the sufferer to stop breathing momentarily, sometimes several times a night. Over time, sleep apnea can increase one's risk for [high blood pressure](#), stroke, and [heart attack](#).

Overcoming sleep apnea doesn't happen overnight. "Most doctors just put patients on a CPAP [continuous positive airway pressure device]," says Rosalind Cartwright, PhD, founder of the Sleep Disorders Center at Rush University Medical Center. "But follow-up is so important."

Just getting apnea sufferers to wear the CPAP contraption can be a feat in itself. The unsightly device worn at night includes mask, tubes, and fan. Though it may resemble an elaborate Halloween mask, it starts the process of getting a sounder slumber. The fans apply air pressure, pushing the wearer's tongue forward and opening the throat to allow adequate air passage. That, in turn, reduces snoring and apnea disturbances. "It's ugly and unromantic," Cartwright tells WebMD. "So compliance drops down to 50% after one year."

Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep: Conquering Sleep Apnea continued...

That's where spousal support becomes important. Cartwright says, "Getting the spouse to hang in there and stay in bed with the partner so he keeps wearing it is key." In a pilot study that explored the effects of bed sharing on adherence to CPAP treatment, Cartwright found that men prescribed CPAP therapy were far more likely to maintain it when their wives stayed in bed with them. Study results were published in a 2008 issue of *The Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*.

Most severe cases of sleep apnea require spousal support outside the bedroom, too. [Weight loss](#), a huge component to eliminating sleep apnea, comes much easier when your spouse plays an active role. "You have to cook differently, take a walk with him," Cartwright suggests.

Even a 20-pound [weight](#) loss can mean a big difference. This slight weight reduction can change full-blown sleep apnea to positional apnea, whereby the problem exists only when the person sleeps on his or her back. "You have less respiratory distress on your side," Cartwright says. "Your mouth automatically opens." To train back sleepers to switch to their sides, Cartwright gives patients T-shirts with a pocket in the back that holds three tennis balls. If they attempt to roll over, they're quickly reminded not to.

"The whole procedure may take a year or two," Cartwright tells WebMD. "If they can get into better physical shape, patients don't need to wear anything."