

Sleeping Single in a Double Bed

If snoring or disruptive sleep is the problem, sleeping apart could save your marriage.

By [Jeanie Lerche Davis](#)

WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

Ah, if sleeping together was as romantic as in our dreams. But he's a night owl -- not sleepy until 2 a.m. and snores like a bear when he *does* hit the bed. She's a fidgety sleeper, up and down all night. These habits drive their mates to distraction. Most nights, someone has migrated into the next room, just to [sleep](#) in peace. Is this a bad move? Does sleeping apart hurt or help a relationship?

The idyllic image of a couple sleeping like spoons, night after night, is a thing of myth, says George H. Williams, PhD, an Atlanta psychologist and marital therapist. "That rarely happens. Sleep patterns differ widely for almost every couple I've ever seen. Even when they're devoted to each other ... they may need to sleep apart."

Turns out, lots of couples are sleeping apart. A 2005 National Sleep Foundation survey found that 31% of couples are changing their sleep habits because of a mate's sleep problems:

- 23% sleep in separate beds, bedrooms, or with someone on the couch.
- 8% alter their sleep schedules.
- 7% wear earplugs or a sleep mask to ensure that they get a good night's sleep.

Also, 38% said that their partner's sleep disorder has caused problems in their relationship; 27% reported that their intimate relationship has been affected by sleepiness. Another interesting tidbit: 34% of women said they required eight hours or more of sleep, compared with 18% of men.

The Sleep Myth

"There's nothing at all wrong with sleeping apart," Williams says. "But it goes against everyone's myth that we should all sleep cuddled up together -- that's our ideal [vision](#). And most people want to get back to that ideal."

"Sleep is about sleeping," says Louanne Cole Weston, PhD, a sex therapist and author of WebMD's Sex Matters message board. "If you're not getting sleep next to your mate, you're not going to be happy, pleasant, or easy to get along with. And if there's resentment because someone isn't getting enough sleep, there's not likely to be [sexual intimacy](#)."

Whatever the problem -- [snoring](#), the night owl, or the restless sleeper -- it's better to acknowledge it, then do something about it, Weston tells WebMD. "If they're close to getting the amount of sex that each wants -- and they need to sleep in separate rooms -- then they're OK. After all, a lot of couples don't just roll over and initiate sex. They're a lot more conscious about their negotiations on sex. And if someone is sleeping down the hall, it's not a big thing to say, 'Let's fool around before we sleep.'"

Sleeping apart can be good for a relationship, she says. "It does not signal the end of a relationship at all. In fact, it can be the beginning. If one person has been sleep-deprived, they begin to feel more interested in sex. If you've ever slept next to a person who snores, you have to cope with waking up several times during the night. It *does not* create good will in a relationship."

Staying Close While You're Apart

All couples sleep apart sometimes, says Michele Weiner-Davis, MSW, a marriage and family therapist in Illinois. "People may be embarrassed to talk about it, but it's rampant."

The impact on their relationship, she explains, is determined by the meaning they give it -- and how they do it. "If they're sleeping apart all the time, it can create problems. If one person thinks that isn't how marriage should be, it's a problem," says Weiner-Davis, author of *The Sex-Starved Marriage*.

"As long as couples continue to connect physically, sleeping apart can be OK," she tells WebMD. "But when people stop touching each other regularly -- when they stop being physically intimate, stop cuddling, stop laughing at each other's jokes, stop spending time together -- that puts them at risk for [infidelity](#) and divorce. Many couples say they feel like brother and sister, like roommates. That's a big danger sign."

Sleeping apart requires a conscious effort to keep the fires burning. "If you're sleeping in separate beds, there has to be an effort to maintain emotional and physical intimacy," says Weiner-Davis, whose private practice is called The Divorce Busting Center. "If one person is withholding or playing games, that won't happen. If one person interprets sleeping apart as abandonment, the ultimate rejection -- yet the other person grew up in a family where his parents slept apart, and doesn't see it as a problem -- there will be problems."

Compromise is critical, she explains. "Healthy marriages are built on mutual caretaking. Sometimes the night owl needs to go to bed with the early bird -- watch TV, be romantic. If she falls asleep and he still needs to get up, that's OK. As long as intimacy is addressed, their relationship can be OK."

If snoring is the issue, the mid-night move is usually the answer. "They may start out in the same bed, but during the course of the evening, someone moves to the guest bedroom," Weiner-Davis suggests. "There's a lot of social acceptance about that. People joke about it socially, that it's like sleeping beside a bear -- you've got to move into the other room. It doesn't have to be a problem, as long as they make a conscious effort to keep their connection."

Masking Marital Problems?

At times, however, a problem like snoring is a convenient excuse to bail out of the bedroom. "It's not always as simple as a deviated septum or differences in circadian patterns," says David Schnarch, MD, a Colorado psychologist, certified sex therapist for over 30 years, and author of *Passionate Marriage: Sex, Love, and Intimacy in Committed Relationships*.

"The issue is, is the couple paying attention to what's happening in the relationship," Schnarch tells WebMD. "The truth is, for a lot of people, having a good reason to sleep separately -- like snoring -- allows them to ignore what they don't want to pay attention to. It's not a loss for them to sleep separately. The sex may be so mediocre that sleeping apart is not a loss. It may not be a sexual issue *per se* -- but the couple has become so emotionally alienated that snoring is the ticket out."

Too often, Schnarch tells WebMD, "people misunderstand the normal, healthy -- but difficult -- processes of emotionally committed relationships."

One common issue: At some point in any relationship, one or both partners will experience a need to establish their individuality -- their separateness from couplehood, he explains. "Each person will feel this need at a different point. It could happen at three weeks, three years, or 15 years into their relationship. It's the inevitable path of a normal healthy marriage. But it's during those times that sex and intimacy are not at an all-time high. That's when couples start thinking about sleeping separately. It's not that anything has really gone wrong. But the couple very often doesn't understand what's happening."

If two partners are honest with each other -- and with their own feelings -- moving apart can be a constructive move, he adds. "I know a number of women who have moved into the other room. From that position, they are able to work on issues in the relationship. It's not a separation. It's taking a new position in the relationship. Those couples very often work to get back into one bedroom. It's not always the beginning of the end -- if you're honest about what you're doing."

The Truth About Snoring

It's true -- when a couple moves apart, when they decide it's time to see a therapist, it's a signal of trouble in the relationship, says Pepper Schwartz, PhD, a professor of sociology, psychiatry, and behavioral medicine at the University of Washington in Seattle. She is also on the Health Advisory Board at WebMD.

"It's either that one is exercising a kind of power or it's an expression of anger they haven't acknowledged -- or it's about issues of sexuality they are dealing with," she tells WebMD. "When a troubled couple is moving apart, it is both symbolic and real evidence of issues that need to be dealt with."

But when it comes to snoring, that's a different matter, Schwartz says. "If you've ever met someone with serious sleep apnea who is literally rattling the windows -- or someone who is a light sleeper and is up and down all night -- that is extremely disruptive to the other person's sleep. I once interviewed a lot of couples with snoring problems, and those are very real disruptive problems."

The crux of the issue: "Let's look at the real motor here, what's causing the problem, whether it's a medical or sleep-style problem or something more," she advises. "Let's also look at the relationship -- are you cuddling, are you making love, do you have a happy relationship? If you are, if you do, then the sleeping and snoring issue is just that. If sleeping apart reflects other issues in the relationship, then we need to look at the whole picture."