

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman in bed. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a white top. The man has a beard and is also wearing a white top. The background is softly blurred, showing white bedding.

be
in the zone

SHARING YOUR BED IS AN ASSUMED TENET OF MOST ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS, BUT SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BLANKET TUG-OF-WAR AND THE EARMUFF-WORTHY SNORING YOU TEND TO LOSE YOUR REQUIRED EIGHT HOURS – WITH DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUR HEALTH. WE SHOW YOU HOW TO SWAP STRESSFUL NIGHTS FOR SLEEP-FILLED ONES.

WORDS: KATELYN SWALLOW

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SNOOZE *for two*

PHOTOGRAPHY: THINKSTOCK

SLEEP SCIENCE

There's a reason health professionals are bangin' on about getting enough quality time between the sheets. Research has shown that the restorative practice of sleep plays a key role in managing mood, mental clarity and metabolism; and with lack of sleep associated with depression, irritability and reduced immunity, along with an increased risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes – just to name a few.

An example can be found in research from the Tel Aviv University, which discovered the specific neurological mechanism responsible for disturbed emotion regulation and increased anxiety due to lack of sleep. In essence, sleep debt causes the brain to lose its ability to discern between what is and what isn't important – bad news for your significant other in the midst of an argument about toilet seat etiquette.

It's little wonder a consistent barrier to sleep night after night – such as sharing a bed – can wreak havoc on your mental and physical health.

“Sleep is a biological necessity and good sleep is essential for our physical, mental and emotional health. In fact, it's actually more important than good diet and exercise in that regard,” says sleep expert Dr Neil Stanley (thesleepconsultancy.com).

“Regularly getting poor or inadequate sleep can have serious consequences to overall health and wellbeing.”

And it doesn't take weeks of restless nights and interruptions to cause an issue. Losing just one hour of your habitual sleeping length can cause you to feel drowsy during the day, and after just one night of reduced shut-eye, the hormones responsible for appetite regulation are altered. This is backed by Bristol University research, which found that people who habitually slept for five hours had 15 per cent more

ghrelin, the hormone that increases feelings of hunger, and 15 per cent less leptin, the hormone that suppresses appetite, than those who slept for eight hours.

“Poor sleep has been shown to cause 24 per cent higher hunger ratings and 23 per cent increase in overall appetite. The types of food we crave are also affected, with a 33 per cent increased desire for high-fat and high-carbohydrate foods,” says Dr Stanley.

Logically, poor sleep's impact on your mental health has a run-on effect in terms of your relationships, with less shut-eye associated with increased negative feelings between partners. Even when one partner is sleeping well, both tend to report irritability.

“Couples exhibit less empathy towards each other and are less skilled at reading each other's emotions when one, or both, partners sleep poorly. Poor sleep also makes conflict resolution more difficult,” says Dr Stanley.

So how much sleep do you actually need to ensure your body is functioning at optimal? As we age, we start to lose the deep, refreshing and restorative stages of sleep – leaving us less satisfied and more easily woken during the night. In other words, it's not that we necessarily need vastly less sleep as we age – we just have less.

Ultimately, Dr Stanley says sleep needs vary greatly from individual to individual.

“When we become adults, our nightly sleep need becomes fixed, for life. Sleep need is like height: it is genetically determined and thus individual. Just as there are short people and tall people, so there are short sleepers and long sleepers,” says Dr Stanley.

“Anywhere from about four to 11 hours can be considered 'normal'. What's important is to get the right amount of sleep for you: that amount that allows you to feel awake and refreshed during the day.”

SLEEP EASY, BABE

So why do so many couples suffer from sleeping issues?

Jennifer Adams, expert researcher of couple sleep and author of *Sleeping Apart Not Falling Apart* (sleepingapartnotfallingapart.com), conducted interviews with a range of couples in varying sleep situations to find out. From those who decided to sleep apart to those who were dedicated to sleeping together, and those who felt their past relationships had failed because their sleep needs were not met, bed-sharing complaints were fairly consistent across the board.

PROBLEM: SOUND SNORING

Snoring is essentially the sound omitted by

vibrations in the partially closed airway of the nose and throat. The causes of snoring are varied, but come down to the neck relaxing to the point that air cannot easily make its way in and out of the lungs.

“Snoring topped the list of sleep disturbances, with my own research indicating that 60 per cent of couples were heading towards separate rooms because of a partner's snoring,” says Adams.

“One lady interviewed resorted to industrial-strength ear defenders when she had to share a bed with her husband – although how she wore them in bed remains a mystery to me.”

True story.

While the research into couple sleep situations, issues and solutions is scarce in Australia, the National Sleep Foundation of America and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine agree that while both genders present with the complaint (it's estimated 50 per cent of us snore at some point in our life), males and those who are overweight tend to experience it more frequently. Having an enlarged tongue or tonsils, or some other natural structural feature of the nose or jaw, can also cause airways to be obstructed and snoring to result.

SOLUTIONS: Uncover the underlying cause of the snoring before overloading on prescription pills, potions or gadgets –

because there are many. Changing position to facilitate the opening of the airways can often help, so look into ridged or shaped pillows that offer plenty of neck support to help keep airways open. Invest in a pair of good-quality ear buds for the non-snoring partner and keep spares handy in your bedside draw. Having a source of white noise to drown out the snoring can sometimes help, so consider a fan or have the air conditioner turned on low.

PROBLEM: MANIC MOVER

Movement by one partner while asleep or in order to get comfortable in bed was another common sleep disturbance uncovered during Adams' research.

"We all change sleeping position around 20 times a night but, again, men over-represent in this disruptive behaviour," says Adams.

Motion detectors attached to research participants at the Loughborough University's Sleep Research Centre revealed that males tend to move twice as much as women during sleep. Medical issues such as periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD) or restless legs syndrome (RLS) can be causes that require medical assessment and treatment. For others, movement is simply habitual.

"Movement as a disruption also includes getting in and out of bed; for example, going to the toilet during the night. Individuals report that for some their partner is mindful and quiet, but others report loud and dramatic bathroom behaviours that can be rather disruptive," says Adams.

"Other disruptions such as insomnia or sleep walking can also create disturbances that should trigger a visit to a medical professional."

SOLUTIONS: Choosing the correct mattress can help mitigate the damage. Opt for a larger mattress, preferably with memory foam capabilities or chambers that help to isolate movement. Invest in some extra-firm pillows to help offer the body support and restrict movement to your side of the bed.

PROBLEM: CONFUSED CONDITIONS

From textures of bed coverings to air temps, your sleeping environment plays a key role in your quality of shut-eye. The problem arises when your partner has a differing idea of the 'perfect' conditions for sleep.



"For people suffering from insomnia, this issue of bedroom conditions can be a very serious one. Having a specific room set-up can be the only way they're able to ensure quality sleep each night," says Adams.

"I talk in my book about the difference between sacrifice, compromise and consensus. Sleeping conditions certainly became more of an issue as couples age and become less willing to compromise, and not even entertain sacrificing, any aspect of comfort when it comes to sleep."

Nightly habits can be the first point of contention – whether you are a night owl or early bird is usually a personal predisposition. While one partner may want to sit up, lights on and read before bed as part of their pre-nap routine, another may be desperately needing lights out. Preferences such as the firmness of your mattress, texture and size of your pillow, level of light in the room and whether

windows should be open or shut also come into play.

"You have to be quite fortunate to find a partner with aligned sleep patterns – if I had my way, it would become a core feature of early dating conversations," says Adams.

"Socially, we are hard-wired to just accept that when you co-habitat with another, you will automatically share a bed, because that's what everyone does. Every TV show, movie, book and website says so. We mainly only hear about separate sleepers as a curiosity."

SOLUTIONS: Sometimes, separate is best. Pillows generally come in packs of two, but it might be worth investing in different sets to receive your preferred size, firmness and texture. Same deal for blankets – sometimes sharing is not caring. Swap the lamps for bed lights and invest in a night-mask. Above all, have a real, honest conversation with your partner in terms of what you need to sleep well, advises Adams.

RELATIONSHIP RENO

For Adams, finding a sleeping situation that works for both of you begins with a relationship renovation, before you attempt a rebuild of your sleeping zone.

1 MAKE SLEEP A PRIORITY: good-quality sleep is as important as your diet or exercise habits, and is essential for your physical, mental and emotional health – it's deserving of attention and prioritisation. If you are consistently tired, you cannot be the best version of yourself, which impacts on all facets of your life – especially personal relationships.

2 BE HONEST: with your partner about your sleep needs, including how much, when, and under what conditions. Don't expect that you and

your partner will automatically be able to sleep together without issues. As with other parts of your relationship, it may take some negotiating.

3 SPEAK UP: don't be afraid to let your partner know they are disturbing you. Talk to them about the impact their nocturnal behaviours are having on your health and discuss how these might be addressed.

4 THINK ABOUT OTHER SLEEPING OPTIONS: view sleeping separately as a viable choice and not a failure as a couple. Don't get caught up in social expectations or the judgement of others when deciding how you and your partner manage sleep. It can be a 'sometimes' solution and does not have to be permanent. ■

Create uni-sex bedroom design with pretty yet masculine (who would have thought?) brass accessories. Endless Candles create new styles regularly, so you will never get bored, \$44.50, endlesscandles.com.au



Sphere metallic sidetable, \$374, satara.com.au

Bon Air Cushion, \$59.95, zanui.com.au

YOU SNOOZE, YOU LOSE.

OUR FAV BEDROOM FINDS FOR SLEEPING COMFORT AND DESIGN

Seperate throws mean your toes will never get cold. Grey tones and a soft touch offer a throwback to winter, but are always in fashion. Alpaca Arctic Throw Rug, \$249.95, zanui.com.au

Dissipate some of the nighttime movement, creaks and disturbances by considering a sleeping situation closer to the floor – it's easier to tiptoe to the loo. On a side note, we love these pastel bedroom tones courtesy of Norsu, norsu.com.au