

Partner's disturbed sleep keeping you up at night? Letting go of unattainable dreams may keep you both happy in bed

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We all know that getting a good night's sleep is vital for physical and mental health. Yet many people share a bed with a partner who can't help disturbing their sleep, for example through their insomnia, frequently going to the bathroom, snoring, or a tendency to toss and turn in bed. Unsurprisingly, research has shown that poor sleep can lead to increased anger and decreased satisfaction with the relationship. But can we avoid falling in this trap, short of sleeping in separate bedrooms?

Yes, if we are naturally good—or learn to be so—at goal disengagement, the mental flexibility to jettison goals once they prove unachievable, suggests a [new study](#) in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

"Here we show that someone's general capacity to let go of unattainable goals seems to prevent worsening [satisfaction](#) with their relationship, if their spouse experiences sleep problems," said lead author Dr. Meaghan Barlow, an assistant professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada.

"This ability might allow such people to put more time and effort into their relationship and protect their spouse from blaming themselves."

Replacing unattainable goals

Goal adjustment theory posits that people differ in their capacity to deal with goals in life that are temporarily or permanently unattainable through goal disengagement. This is the readiness to abandon such goals, and through goal reengagement, the tendency to look for easier goals to replace them. For example, someone who is unemployed might let go of the goal of finding their dream job in the immediate future, and then replace this with the goal of learning new skills to improve their attractiveness to employers.

Studies have shown that people who are better at doing this tend to report better subjective well-being. In contrast, being highly prone to

goal reengagement can either lower or increase well-being, depending on whether the newly found goals are likely to overcome the problem at hand, without stretching personal resources too thin.

Sleeping couples

Barlow and colleagues investigated how such differences between individuals in their capacity for goal adjustment affects their ability to manage their partner's sleep problems and stay satisfied with their relationship. They followed 113 cohabitating couples from the Montreal area over a period of one year.

They asked each spouse to answer questionnaires to measure relationship satisfaction, sleep efficiency, relationship-specific coping strategies, and goal adjustment capacity. The latter was measured with a tried-and-tested [research tool](#), the 10-item goal adjustment ability survey, where respondents rate their agreement with statements like "It's easy for me to reduce my effort towards the goal" or "I start working on other new goals." Each questionnaire was administered twice, at the beginning and end of the study.

The results were statistically controlled for differences in age, education level, and family income. Gender was found not to affect the responses.

As expected, a greater general ability for coping with problems was associated with better relationship satisfaction, while couples where at least one partner reported feeling significant self-blame tended to experience less satisfaction with their relationship.

Vicious (sleep) cycle

Importantly, the results showed that the negative impact of poor partner

sleep on relationship satisfaction was stronger for people with a low capacity for goal disengagement than for those with a high capacity.

"[These results suggest] that couples could enter a downward spiral, in which effects of poor sleep on relationship satisfaction result in a continued deterioration of quality of life ... It may be possible for clinicians to prevent [this] by identifying couples with [poor sleep](#) and low levels of goal disengagement capacities ... and working with them to redirect resources to the management of spousal stressors. Such interventions may foster effective coping with spousal stressors and contribute to well-being in romantic relationships," wrote the authors.

For example, if your spouse experiences sleep problems, learning to become better at goal disengagement in general could help you to let go of less important goals, and reallocate those resources (such as time and energy) towards protecting, maintaining, or even improving your relationship.

However, being highly prone to reengage with different goals may backfire, as has previously been shown for other contexts; the present results showed that the negative impact of poor partner sleep increased with greater goal reengagement capacity.

"Someone's general capacity to find new goals when faced with an unattainable goal might put them at risk for worsening relationship satisfaction when they experience sleep problems, in part because it may cause them to put less time and effort into their relationship," said Barlow.

"Future research should aim to first replicate these findings, and then seek to identify potential scalable intervention targets. I will be taking some of the lessons learned with me as I seek to develop scalable community interventions for the aging population in my local

community," concluded Barlow.

More information: The interpersonal benefits of goal adjustment capacities: the sample case of coping with poor sleep in couples, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1287470](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1287470). www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1287470/full

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