Specialists say there are benefits to couples sleeping separately

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Michael Solender and his wife have been together for 42 years. They slept in the same bed for the first 10, taking to separate rooms after that.
Their sleep separation was due to his developing chronic and heavy snoring that eventually led to a diagnosis of sleep apnea and his use of a CPAP machine.

After the machine eliminated his snoring, they continue to sleep apart in their Charlotte, North Carolina, home because of other issues. He's typically warm at night and she's usually cold.

"For us to maintain separate rooms for sleep just makes for a healthier relationship and a better relationship," said Solender, 66. "There's no shame attached to that. There's no stigma."

Snoring, **temperature variations**, cover stealers, and tossing and turning often lead to partners sleeping separately. Other issues are also in play, including illness, different work shifts, and partners who go to bed and get up at different times.

More than one-third of Americans said they occasionally or consistently sleep in another room to accommodate a bed partner, according to an American Academy of Sleep Medicine study last year. Men are the ones who usually hit the sofa or guest room.

And, perhaps surprisingly, it's millennials who do it most, rather than older people.

Dr. Seema Khosla, a pulmonologist and spokesperson for the academy, said achieving **adequate sleep**, which is usually seven to eight hours for adults, is important for healthy relationships.

Studies indicate that people who consistently experience **poor sleep** are more likely to experience conflict with their partners, said Khosla, who is the medical director of the North Dakota Center for Sleep, in Fargo.
"It's really a question of people prioritizing their sleep," Khosla said. "I have had patients who have been married like 60 years and they swear that separate bedrooms is a reason."

Sleeping separately, she said, "is probably more common than we think."

The same goes for sleep apnea, a leading cause of heavy snoring, Khosla said. Solender said he went to a sleep specialist after realizing the impact sleep deprivation had on himself and his wife.

"I would wake her up and would wake myself up," he said. "I never knew I had sleep apnea. I would say close to 20 years ago, I started falling asleep at red lights. I started falling asleep watching TV or sitting up and reading a book. I felt tired constantly. That's when I knew I had an issue."

Key to making separate sleep spaces work is talking about it beforehand, as Solender did with his wife.

"It's not about avoiding intimacy. It's about recognizing that you can have intimacy, you can have that time together, but then you just sleep apart. That's a really important part of the conversation. Both partners need to understand and agree," Khosla said.

She has seen some reluctance among her patients when she suggests sleeping apart.

"Usually it's somebody's spouse who is snoring or someone who has a spouse's alarm that wakes them up at four in the morning or something like that. We'll talk about it. And people will push back right away saying, oh, no, no, that's not gonna work for me," she said.

Some, Khosla said, "will sit with it for a minute and they'll think about it,
and you can tell that they're kind of like, I would love to do this but how do I tell my partner?"

Tracey Daniels and her husband have been sleeping apart for about four years. Initially, there was no big talk. She just headed to the guest room.

"It started because my husband is a horrible snorer. But also I'm a very light sleeper. He could drop a paperclip on a carpeted floor and I would wake up," said Daniels, who lives in Tryon, North Carolina.

Later, she said, she initiated a conversation after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through surgery.

"He comes and tucks me in and gives me a kiss," Daniels said.

They rotate their three dogs at night.

Dr. Phyllis Zee, chief of sleep medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and director of a sleep clinic at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, said sleep separation is common in her practice.

"It would be a great idea to discuss sleep compatibility before you get married. I tend to see it when couples have been married and/or they've been together for some time and have been trying to negotiate this for a while," she said.

Come middle age, Zee said, sleep is less robust.

"In general, you're more prone to getting things like insomnia or sleep apnea. And so that begins to be bothersome," she said.

While there's no shame in sleeping apart, Zee said technology has helped
make sharing a bed easier in some ways. White noise machines, cooling pillows and bedding, mattresses with dual temperature controls and dual control electric blankets can help, Zee said. Some couples have given up sharing blankets, using their own, to make sleep easier.

"There's a whole market out there to mitigate some of these issues," she said.

Sleep separation is more accepted now as people have become more aware of the importance of quality sleep to overall health, Zee said.

"On the other hand, there is research to show there are benefits to sleeping together," she said. "In general, probably the top line is seek professional help before making a decision. Are the issues a sign of a sleep disorder that one can treat?"

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