

# For Better Sex, Try a Sleep Divorce

Therapists and couples say that sometimes sleeping separately can revive a relationship.



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When Natalie and Shane Plummer moved into separate bedrooms 12 years ago, they really just wanted more sleep.

The couple, who have been married for 24 years and live in Meridian, Idaho, hoped Ms. Plummer would get a respite from her husband's snoring. (She did.) They also thought Mr. Plummer, 47 — the tidier partner — might enjoy having his own space. (He did.)

They didn't foresee how much the change would improve their sex life.

“Our frequency has definitely increased,” said Ms. Plummer, 47, and “the quality of our sex has *definitely* increased. When we're together in a bed, there's a purpose for it. We're talking. Or we're cuddling. Or we're having sex.”

The decision to sleep separately, sometimes called a “sleep divorce,” is both taboo and fairly common. In a 2023 American Academy of Sleep Medicine survey, more than one-third of respondents said they regularly or occasionally slept in another room to accommodate their partner. Though this is sometimes seen as a sign a couple is at odds, many sleep divorcées and sex therapists say it can actually help reignite a spark.

“I’m a huge advocate for this practice,” said Cyndi Darnell, a sex and relationships therapist in New York City and the author of “Sex When You Don’t Feel Like It: The Truth about Mismatched Libido and Rediscovering Desire.”

In her experience, couples often share a bed because they think they should, but lying next to someone does not necessarily foster intimacy — particularly if doing so leaves both partners too tired to function and feel, well, sexy.

“For some people, sleeping together provides a sense of connection and safety,” Ms. Darnell said. But when your partner’s snoring or late-night screen time stands in the way of good sleep, she continued, “you can start to associate the bed or bedroom with tension.”

## Rediscovering desire

Like the Plummers, Rea Frey, 43, and her husband Alex Holguin, 44, had been together for more than a decade when they decided to start sleeping apart.

Knee-deep in parenting, they had fallen into a “sexual rut,” Ms. Frey said, and they were determined to find a way out. The pair, who are wellness entrepreneurs in Nashville, explored celibacy for several months to alleviate pressure to have sex.

Ms. Frey also suggested they try sleeping in different rooms. She thought it might give them the opportunity to enjoy some restorative solitude at the end of each day and get deep, peaceful sleep.

The separation gave their sex life a much-needed jolt.

“The moment we separated our bedrooms, it was fun!” Ms. Frey said. “It was like, ‘Do you want to come over to my room tonight?’ or ‘Can I come over to your room tonight?’”

Now, they spend most evenings unwinding with their daughter before retreating to their rooms to read and relax. Some nights, they cuddle first. Other nights, they have sex. More often, they find themselves having sex at other times — like in the morning or on the weekend, when their daughter is visiting her grandparents.

Unlike when they were sharing a bed, “there’s zero pressure around any of it,” Mr. Holguin said.

Sleeping apart can reintroduce a bit of excitement and desire, said Kate Balestrieri, a psychologist and sex therapist and the author of “What Happened to My Sex Life?” And when couples are no longer sleeping in the same bed night after night, they may be less likely to take each other for granted, she said.

It also requires couples to be more intentional about sex, rather than simply falling into bed and crossing their fingers. “They have to think about it and make sex a priority,” Dr. Balestrieri said, “and talk with each other more about when they’re going to be sexual — and how.”

But the connection between sleep divorces and better sex might be simpler than all that: Exhaustion is not an aphrodisiac, said Shelby Harris, a sleep psychologist in New York City and the author of “The Women’s Guide to Overcoming Insomnia.”

When one partner is consistently keeping the other awake, “there’s resentment that builds,” she said. “That really does tear down a lot of intimacy.”

## How to sleep apart and stay connected

Dr. Harris recommends that anyone who is struggling with snoring or restlessness get a sleep evaluation to look for any underlying issues that can be treated.

There are also creative ways to “hack” the bedroom, experts said. Earplugs, white noise or separate mattresses and blankets can help, said Dr. Phyllis Zee, a sleep medicine specialist with Northwestern Medicine. Those options may be particularly useful for couples who aren’t able to sleep in separate rooms.

For couples considering sleeping apart, Dr. Harris stressed the importance of making a plan for how you will prioritize intimacy.

Mr. and Ms. Plummer, the couple from Idaho, say they’ve always been good at talking to each other about most things, even sex. That became even more important once they were sleeping apart.

If you're thinking about broaching the topic with your partner, do it when you are both calm and focused, rather than lashing out after a bad night's sleep, Dr. Harris said.

Ms. Darnell suggested asking your partner — and yourself — about when you feel most amorous: “Is on-night on a Wednesday work after a long day? Or are you more inclined to feel sexy on a Saturday afternoon?”

The Plummers know sleeping separately has its critics. They have a podcast, and one of their most popular (and most contentious) episodes discussed the topic. And they admit that early on in their relationship — when things were new and fresh, and neither of them snored — they would have scoffed at the idea.

But they can't imagine going back to sleeping in the same bed. Frankly, they aren't sure their sex life would recover.

Whenever the couple spends time together in bed nowadays, Ms. Plummer said, “he feels more like my boyfriend than my roommate.”

**Catherine Pearson** is a Times reporter who writes about families and relationships.