

The dream team

Co-sleeping is something that, for many of us, comes hand-in-hand with long-term relationships. But what if it's not working for you? With help from a relationship counsellor, we learn how to make sleeping in the same bed as your partner as easy as a dream, and explore the option of going your separate ways

Writing | **Kathryn Wheeler**



Sleeping apart has brought Clio Wood and her husband closer

Sharing a bed can often feel like a relationship rite of passage. But co-sleeping isn't always easy. From temperature preferences, pillow stacks, tossing and turning, to noise complaints, when it comes to finding the balance we need in order to get a good night's sleep, we've got a lot to contend with.

And putting sleep first is vital for our relationships, as counsellor and psychotherapist Katerina Georgiou explains. "Poor sleep might make us grumpy, irritable, or accident-prone. If left to get worse, we can make poor judgements, mistakes, and easily snap at others. So it's no surprise that those around us will end up bearing the brunt of that, leaving our relationships affected."

Of course, we need sleep to function – whether we're in a relationship or not – but Katerina points out that when we're sleep-deprived, we may find ourselves getting upset about things that wouldn't normally faze us, or having arguments with our partners, and saying things that we don't really mean.

So how can we find equilibrium when co-sleeping with a partner? For Katerina, it's about coming at it from two angles. "You will both require sleep to function. Therefore, how can you help each other get the sleep you both need? What can you negotiate together? Will it require sleeping in separate rooms on certain days, or a few simple tweaks – like having separate duvets?" she says. "And is it just sleep you need, or a break in general? Consider other tasks in the home that can be shared and delegated to help you feel less exhausted in the first place."

You could also try finding a bedtime that works for both of you – ideally when both will fall asleep within 30 minutes – and, if possible, have as big a bed as your room will allow.

There are many ways that you can try to remedy co-sleeping problems, but if you do decide to break with tradition and go your separate ways, you'll be in good company. A new survey from the National Bed Federation has found that nearly one in six (15%) of UK couples are now choosing to sleep separately, with 89% of those people moving into their own bedrooms.

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Clio Wood, women's health advocate and founder of family wellbeing company &Breathe, has been with her husband for 12 years, and in autumn last year they decided to move into separate bedrooms.

"We'd not been sleeping well for a number of years, so it was a build-up of stress and exhaustion," she explains. "In autumn 2019 we began initiating separate beds from the beginning of the night – rather than just giving up in the small hours and moving beds then – and since the beginning of 2020 we've done it more consistently."

It's a tricky conversation to have, particularly when balancing fear about a lack of intimacy, and the idea that married and long-term partners should sleep in

the same bed together. For Clio, it was her husband who initiated the conversation.

"And actually, I was a bit miffed!" she says. "We've been schooled on the societal assumption that we sleep in the same bed if we're married. When we were doing it non-consistently, you can ignore it – but doing it regularly, I took it as a rejection, when really all he was doing was suggesting a sensible way forward for us."

As with all aspects of relationships, communication is key, and when we learn how to calmly and compassionately express how we're feeling, we're all the more likely to be able to address our needs in a constructive and deliberate way.

Since making the move, and reflecting on the way that it has affected her sleep, Clio muses that it's not perfect, but it's better.

"For both of us, it's been a long journey, and there are lots of factors at play," she explains. "But having the pressure removed of the other person lying next to you, trying not to disturb each other, is a complete gamechanger."

Oh, and being able to starfish and arrange the covers and pillows perfectly is a huge bonus, she says.

But whether you decide to change things up or stick it out, one thing's for sure: it's about time we started prioritising what we need between the sheets. When we get a good night's sleep, we're better partners. And when we're happy in our relationships, everything else in our lives runs a little more smoothly. So, whether that's separate beds, or just separate duvets of different togs, don't settle for tossing and turning. Open the conversation, and kiss bedroom disputes goodnight. ■