



OPINION

By Dr Julie Hannan

Why separate beds could save your relationship

But it has to be negotiated - along with intimacy

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'How many of us spend the whole night in a stress-free environment, especially when our partner is snoring loudly?' (Photo: Getty/E)

The actor **Brian Cox** says the secret to a good marriage is **separate bedrooms**. This lifestyle choice, which has coined the phrase “sleep divorce”, is growing in popularity and has been advocated by celebrities including Cameron Diaz.

In many Western cultures, it is considered the social norm for couples to share a bed, and this is influenced by **romantic ideals**, cultural traditions, and the expectation of physical closeness as a way to strengthen emotional bonds. On that basis, does having separate bedrooms herald the end of your relationship?

Often, when we hear a couple no longer sleep together, it's easy to assume that their relationship and sex life are over, despite the reality that the sex life of many people sleeping in the same bed **was dead and buried years ago**. Perhaps now is the time to normalise sleeping apart.

We need seven to eight hours sleep a night for our cognitive functioning, mental health, mood, and cardiovascular, cerebrovascular and metabolic health. Poor quality, inadequate and disrupted sleep are risk factors for both **depression** and anxiety. When we are well rested, we have more capacity for life, our immune system is stronger, and our concentration and attention span improve.

Studies suggest sleeping with a partner has benefits. It can help people to feel calm, and sexual intimacy triggers the release of the hormone oxytocin, which reduces stress and blood pressure and encourages bonding with our loved one.

But oxytocin only promotes better sleep and helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle under stress-free conditions. How many of us go to bed stress-free or spend the whole night in a stress-free environment, especially when our partner is snoring loudly alongside us? It can be hard to foster goodwill while sharing a bed, or keep frustration and irritation at bay. Almost one in three adults **report** sleep disruption as a result of financial worries and up to **74 per cent** of UK workers report poor sleep quality, so has Brian got it right?

Couples may choose to sleep separately for many reasons, whether that's sleep disorders, regulating body temperature or a need for more personal space and solitude. Sleeping apart isn't an indication of an unhappy relationship, so long as it has been discussed, negotiated and **intimacy doesn't disappear**.

It seems more and more people are sleeping apart, in the same way that so many couples choose to **live apart – also known as the living apart together movement**. Relationships are changing. Committed couples often live apart from each other for extended periods, for example for military deployments, family commitments, job relocation, and remain close to each other.

This happens by making time for intimacy when they are together and keeping in touch whilst apart. It's communication and motivation that keeps couples together, connected and their relationships alive and on track, not just sleeping in the same bed each night. Everyone is personally responsible for getting their own needs met and all good relationships start through self-advocacy, self-expression, and asking for what you need.

Intimacy doesn't only happen in the bedroom – you can be lying six inches away from your partner but feel poles apart. Trust, holding another person in mind and letting them know, sharing aspects of your day and having complementary life goals keeps people connected despite geographical distance or just sleeping in the next room.

Some couples may find joy and comfort in sharing a bed, while others may prioritise individual sleep spaces. Having a choice to sleep with your partner or alone can be incredibly empowering and freeing within a relationship. The key is finding a balance that works for both partners and contributes to the overall wellbeing of the relationship.

A study recently showed that the most important factor for wellness was high-quality sleep. As a couple, prioritising sleep can have a positive effect on a relationship. Well-rested people have more capacity for life and for tackling any adversity which may come their way.

What works for one couple won't necessarily work for another. Over time, people change, their needs change and relationships change, and sleep quality can tend to reduce with age, so perhaps separate bedrooms are something to consider for the future.

I tend to agree with Brian that separate bedrooms could be perfect for so many couples. Perhaps it's finally time to shake up social norms, prioritise wellness and find out what works for you as an individual and as a couple without sacrificing intimacy.

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