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Is 'Momsomnia' Keeping You Up at Night?

There is help for parental sleep problems.



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Every night the same thing happens in my household. My husband falls asleep effortlessly, sometimes while we're watching TV in bed and usually while he is still wearing his glasses. Meanwhile, I need an elaborate winding-down ritual that involves rereading beloved, calming books and cranking up the white noise. And even after that, it can take me hours to drop off.

Even though it's not his fault that he's a good sleeper, it makes me absolutely furious. How dare he snore softly and contentedly while I am rustling around under the sheets like a dog trying to find her comfy spot! My daughters, who share a room with each other, have an identical dynamic: The older one struggles to fall asleep, and it drives her mad that the younger one passes out right away.

One of the great joys of my role as a columnist is that when I have a family problem like this, I can call up an expert and ask them for advice; that advice can apply to other moms and dads, too, because I hear constantly from readers that sleep is an issue for them. So I got in touch with Shelby Harris, an assistant professor of neurology and psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, who specializes in behavioral sleep medicine, about common sleep issues for parents and how to fix them. (Dr. Harris also has an extremely helpful Instagram, @sleepdocshelby.)

In this condensed and edited conversation, we also touch on revenge bedtime procrastination, and whether sleep issues are heritable.

Jessica Grose: Why are parents typically coming to see you?

Shelby Harris: A lot of the parents that I work with will say to me, “Even though my baby started sleeping through the night, I stopped sleeping.” A lot of moms — some dads, but mostly moms — almost become hard-wired to listening for what I call “sleep threats.” For example, if their kid is going to cry or come and get them. Even after the threat is gone, they continue to have trouble with sleep because they’re so conditioned to listening.

J.G.: How do you start to recondition that response, which honestly feels sort of primal?

S.H.: With these patients we’ll do cognitive behavioral therapy (C.B.T.) for insomnia: Part of that therapy involves challenging thoughts like, “Well, if I do go to sleep, something could happen,” and looking at the actual evidence of what does happen when you’re asleep. How often are bad things happening?

It’s really about using C.B.T. to train your body to get deeper sleep, and to not have long awakenings in the middle of the night. A lot of people wake up in the middle of the night and then they’re just on their phone.

J.G.: I’m definitely guilty of falling into TikTok at 2 a.m. Instead of looking at their phones, what can parents do that might help keep them in sleep mode?

S.H.: I’m a big fan of practicing meditation during the day. Even if you do it for two minutes, you get better at it, and it can help you in the middle of the night. You can learn to recognize when your brain is getting puppy-dog active, and be able to focus in the moment.

J.G.: Something that comes up a lot in my household is how to get better sleep when you share your bed. My husband falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow, then starts snoring, and it drives me bananas.

S.H.: If you're someone who is a little sensitive to sleeping, and then you have someone snoring next to you, all you do is focus on it because that's a potential disrupter to your sleep — it's one of those sleep threats I was talking about.

Having an honest conversation with your significant other is the first step. If the significant other is really snoring to the point where it's problematic, that's a discussion of: Maybe you should get evaluated. Maybe you need to see if there's something going on, because sleep apnea is super common; for men, especially.

Sometimes I recommend people sleep separately until the snoring gets fixed. Start in the bed together, have sex, do whatever you want. But then when it's actually bedtime, sleeping separately can be freeing.

We have to let go of the idea that if you sleep in the bed together, you have a healthy marriage. Sometimes it's actually healthier to say: "You know what? We both have very different sleep styles." If you have a partner who is unwilling to do anything about it, then it's more of a *relationship* issue that has to get addressed.

If the snoring is not very loud, noise-canceling earbuds or a white noise machine can be enough for some people.

J.G.: My little pro tip is that I put a white noise machine on my iPad and I put it in bed between us.

S.H.: That's one thing you can definitely do. But if the snoring is loud enough that you're still hearing it through headphones, that person probably needs to get evaluated.

J.G.: Are sleep issues heritable? I see my older daughter having the same sort of difficulty getting to sleep that I have always had.

SH: There is a heritable component to it. For some people, it could be more of an anxiety issue that's being passed down. For some families, it may just be that you have more of a night-owl gene.

Then it's also, what are you talking about around your kids? A lot of parents who have insomnia, they put a great focus on sleep because they're talking about it a lot, and sometimes their kids internalize it a lot too.

J.G.: If you had one key to better sleep, what would it be?

S.H.: Consistency. That's all. Just trying to be consistent with a bedtime and a wake time as often as you can. Adding onto that, I always say consistently try to allow yourself at least a half-hour to wind your brain down. Because a lot of parents are just running, running, running. If you don't have time to actually decompress and relax for a half-hour, good luck getting to sleep fast and getting good-quality sleep at night.

J.G.: I'm sure you've heard of revenge bedtime procrastination? Last night I spent a solid hour looking at throw pillows on the internet when I should have been sleeping.

S.H.: I wrote about revenge bedtime procrastination in my book a few years ago, but I called it "momsomnia." A lot of the parents I work with, they just want a few hours to themselves to do whatever they want, and I get it. I do that myself.

But if you can get to sleep at a routine time, you're going to be more effective at the things you do in your day. Make time to watch TV, look at throw pillows, do whatever you want, but try not to sacrifice sleep on a regular basis because you're going to end up having more problems in the long run.

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