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Honey, you're snoring again

Sleep apnea takes a romantic toll on relationships.

DAKARAI "Dee" Anderson planned his Valentine's Day to the last detail. From a dapper outfit to dinner at a swanky restaurant, he was ready for a romantic night on the town.

The next day, his girlfriend told him she had a night to remember, due to his incredible ... snoring.

Anderson is just one of many men and women who have needed to put the brakes on their relationships due to the consequences of untreated snoring and sleep apnea.

"Before my sleep apnea was diagnosed, anyone who slept close to me was going to be kept up at night and not always for a good reason," quipped Anderson, 24, of Shreveport, La. "Snoring just became a part of my relationships."

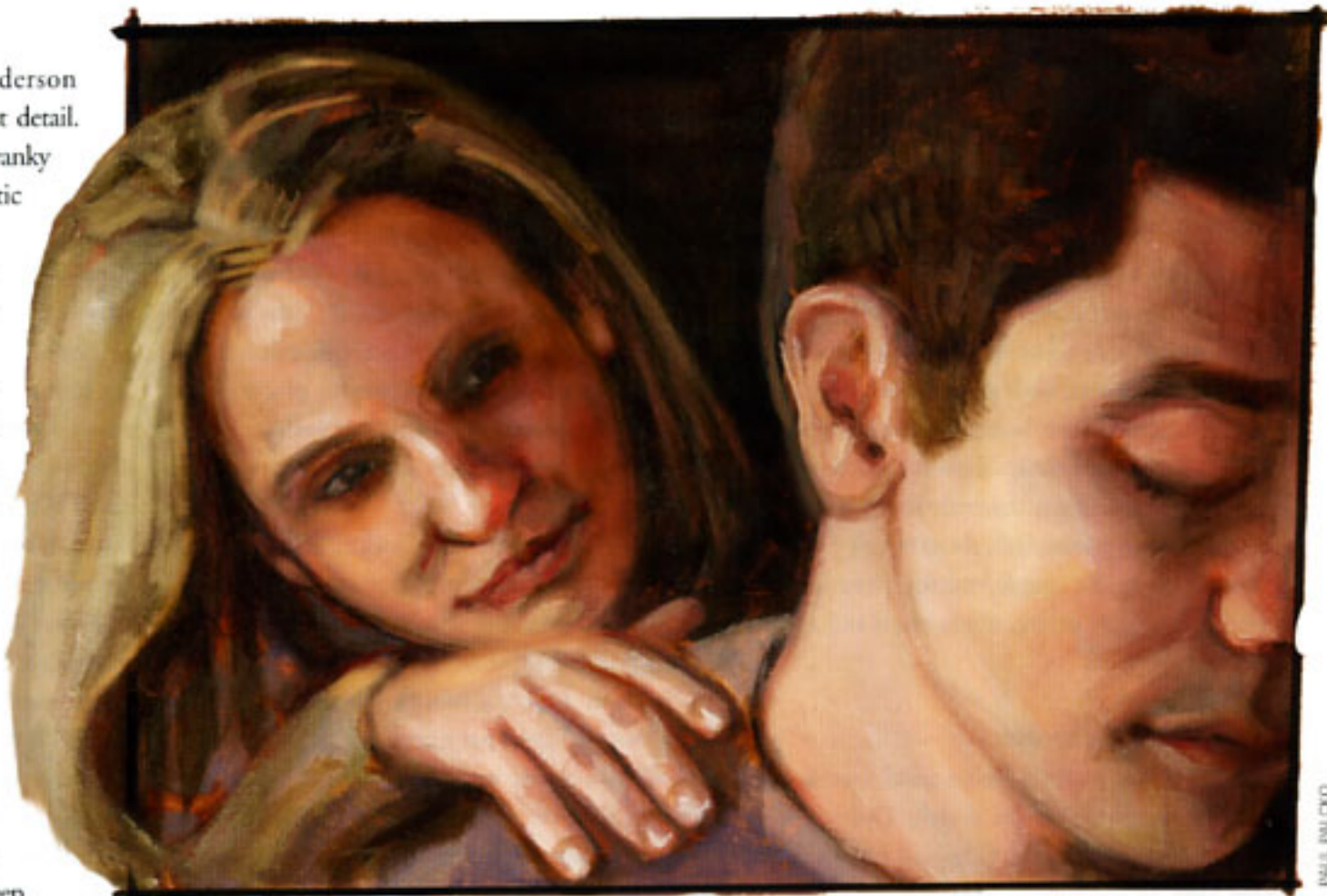
One-third of partnered adults face relationship issues due to a partner's sleep problems, reported the 2005 National Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America Poll. Two-thirds of the same group said that their partner snores, with 57 percent of snorers admitting their snoring bothers others.

Further, three out of 10 partnered adults take measures to prevent their sleep from being disturbed such as sleeping in another room or even on the couch.

"I've found when couples are forced to sleep apart because of one partner's sleep problems, it often has a terrible effect on the relationship," said Meir Kryger, MD, co-chair of the 2005 NSF poll task force. "The partner whose sleep is disturbed feels there is no alternative, but both partners are often devastated by this action."

Separation anxieties

Lack of intimate time together can lead to a romantic void, and missing



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sleep can trigger irritability, anger and anxiety when handling day-to-day problems. Taking the children to soccer practice, cooking dinner and emptying the trash become more than just chores. And when one partner isn't pitching in, trouble often lies ahead.

"I think any number of people arrive at a sleep center en route to divorce court because of problems related to sleep deprivation," said Joyce Walsleben, MD, head of behavioral sleep medicine at the New York University Sleep Disorders Center, New York. "If someone reports that sleeping with you is an issue, you should value that statement and listen rather than just saying, 'Tough.'"

One of the reasons women get so upset is that their husbands and boyfriends deny the problem or don't take the snoring seriously, said Michael

Gelb, DDS, MS, a clinical professor at New York University's School of Dentistry who specializes in sleep apnea. He frequently counsels patients whose sleep apnea interferes with healthy intimacy.

Many men tell their wives that their snoring complaints are exaggerated or that they're making it up. Some wives have tape-recorded their husbands at night as proof.

"When the man is snoring loudly and the woman is fit to be tied, it can put big strains on their relationship both in and out of the bedroom," Dr. Gelb said.

If physicians can do anything for their apnea patients, it's helping their partners be patient with them and avoid any feelings of hurt or resentment, advised Carol Ash, DO, FCCP, a sleep physician at Somerset Medical Center, Somerville, N.J. She gets spouses involved with the treatment plan so that they understand what's going on.

"I have found meeting a patient and his spouse at the same time for medical appointments paints a better picture of the problems associated with sleep disorders," Dr. Ash said.

When a couple seeks treatment together, the physician can educate both people about what sleep apnea entails and what behavior may be expected from a sleep apnea sufferer. Showing reluctant couples subjectively written materials about the disorder may help ring some bells about what's going on at home. Then, the couple and the physician can team up to outline coping mechanisms and appropriate sleep hygiene.

No sex please, I'm snoring

Unlike many patients whose nasal symphonies drive their partners to the couch, Cydney Allsbrook, 45, of Oklahoma City and her husband never slept in separate rooms. Why? Because he never mentioned that she snored until after she was diagnosed with sleep apnea. Her snoring was literally a secret that kept him up at night through 15 years of marriage.

"I asked why he never woke me up to tell me, and he said he tried. He would have to almost knock me out of bed before I'd wake up," Allsbrook said. "I guess he didn't want to hurt my feelings."

Through all those undiagnosed years of fatigue and restlessness, Allsbrook noticed a loss of libido. In fact, sexual dysfunction is a common side effect of sleep apnea for men and women, and not just

because both partners are tired.

Men with sleep apnea may experience impotence due to a lack of oxygen in their body tissue. "One of the things that happens when a man gets more REM sleep is that he's capable of more erections," Dr. Gelb said.

Patients who spend more time snoring and less time in deep, dream sleep, are less likely to be aroused during the night, he added. Partners may be left unsatisfied in the bedroom, leading to further physical separation and frustration.

But help is available, and not in the form of Viagra. Continuous positive airway pressure therapy may decrease impotence and increase libido by restoring quality sleep.

A study from the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., treated 30 sleep apnea patients with CPAP. Investigators interviewed the patients and asked them to rate aspects of their sex lives including arousal, sexual behavior, orgasm and sexual drive.

At baseline, the patients scored worse than people not affected by sleep apnea in all of these categories. After three months with CPAP, the patients reported improvements in orgasm and sexual drive.

Researchers couldn't determine the physiological causes of improvement, but they agreed that treatment with CPAP reverses some aspects of sexual dysfunction.

"CPAP isn't a very sexy device, and I think it can potentially take something out of intimacy," Dr. Gelb said. "But if you have to replace snoring with CPAP, the CPAP is much better."

Since her diagnosis, Allsbrook has been a faithful CPAP user. It's given her a new lease on life.

"Women always make the excuse that they have a headache or are too tired to be intimate," she said. "But I really was too tired, and I had to make up excuses."

Now, she and her husband encounter fewer problems in the bedroom because she has more energy at the end of the day and in the morning. "CPAP is not a big deal at all, and I don't let it affect my sex life," Allsbrook said. "My husband and I joke that it's my Darth Vader mask."

Making a date

Physicians can encourage bed partners to promote CPAP compliance for their loved one. "If you stress relationships will improve with good sleep, that's a big motivating factor for spouses to get patients to

comply with CPAP," Dr. Ash said. "It makes a huge difference to the spouse once the patient gets controlled."

However, some patients' partners find CPAP to be just as disruptive as snoring, citing noise as an issue. Others say the apparatus intrudes on nighttime snuggling.

In these cases, Peter Kanaris, PhD, a clinical psychologist and sex therapist practicing in Smithtown, N.Y., prescribes "thoughtful contact time," or making a date. This is a solution for couples whose sex lives may be lacking because of physical separation at night or CPAP anxiety.

"When you lie in bed together, touch happens naturally," Dr. Kanaris said. "You have seven or eight hours a night where there's ample opportunity to be together. But if you sleep in different rooms and lose that time, you'd better make other occasions to be able to connect through touch."

Couples can ask each other out and plan a romantic evening to boost their intimacy levels, and then fall asleep as they do regularly, separate rooms or not.

"Some people have the mistaken notion that for sex to be good it has to be spontaneous, but like many other challenges, sleep apnea proves it's not always realistic to rely on spontaneity," Dr. Kanaris said. "If it occurs, that's nice, but couples need to think and plan to protect their intimate time from the problems sleep apnea presents."

When Anderson spends the night at his girlfriend's abode for the first time, he packs his CPAP and prepares for a discussion.

"The first thing I ask before going to bed is where the closest plug is. I explain I have sleep apnea and need a machine to help me breathe at night. Then I let her know that I can either use my CPAP or snore in her car all night. She always takes option A," Anderson said, laughing.

So far, none of his girlfriends has complained about his CPAP use, and his newfound energy has definitely improved his love life.

"By diagnosing sleep apnea, we're doing an incredible thing for these people and changing their lives," Dr. Ash said. "We're changing couples' ability to really live, instead of just existing together." ■

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