



Sleep solutions for couples

Guest: Dr Wendy Troxel

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Hello, welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Sleep Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Wendy Troxel, a senior behavioral scientist at the RAND Corporation, adjunct faculty at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Utah, and author of the book *Sharing the Covers: Every Couple's Guide to Better Sleep*.

She's an internationally recognized sleep expert whose work has regularly been cited by the media. Dr Troxel is also a leading authority on the impact of early school start times on adolescent sleep.

Her TEDx Talk "Why School Should Start Later for Teens", has over 2.2 million views and is at the forefront of national and international conversations concerning this topic.

Dr Troxel's mission is to help people understand the power of sleep to support health, wellbeing, productivity and relationships.

Dr Wendy Troxel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Thanks so much for having me. It's a real pleasure.

Meagen Gibson

So I would love by starting off with you telling us why sleep is so important. Why do we need to be intentional about creating healthy sleep habits?

Dr Wendy Troxel

So, in short, sleep is the best thing we can do on a daily basis to give our minds and bodies a total reset to optimize our health, our functioning and our wellbeing.

Literally, sleep affects every aspect of our being, from our mental health, our physical health, to our hormones, to our relationships, to our productivity and how well we perform at work. So, it's absolutely vital for everything we do.

[00:01:45] Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. All right, so why is it important to prioritize your sleep in your relationship in particular?

Dr Wendy Troxel

Well, this is a neglected area by so many, including scientists, and it's really been the area that I've spent the past twenty years of my life studying, researching, and then also treating couples who present with sleep challenges as a couple.

Now, here's the reality. Sleep science has tended to view sleep as an individual behavior for the past seventy or so years of research, since sleep research was born as a science, and yet most adults do in fact sleep with a partner.

Just because you love a human being doesn't mean that automatically you're going to have a harmonious and happy and perfectly seamless sleep relationship together.

The reality is that challenges can, and do, emerge when couples share the sleep experience, and we also know that the quality of your relationships can directly have an impact on the quality of your sleep and vice versa.

So relationships can affect sleep, and sleep can affect relationships. So, there can either be a vicious cycle or potentially a virtuous one, which is what I talk about a lot in my book.

How do you optimize and try to instigate a virtuous cycle between healthy sleep, begetting healthy relationship functioning and behaviors, and healthy relationships, begetting more sleep and better quality sleep?

The science really does bear this out, that there is this intricate relationship between the quality of our sleep and the quality of our relationships.

Meagen Gibson

It's so unimaginable for people, isn't it, that they would even consider not sharing a bed with their partner or long term relationship partner, and yet a lot of couples I know complain about the fact that they don't sleep well together. Nothing makes me less congenial to my partner than being really tired and irritable.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Absolutely, and again, the research bears this one out. When we're poorly slept, we're more irritable, our moods suffer, we're more prone to conflict, and our frustration tolerance lowers.

There's actually brand new data that just came out showing that under sleep deprived conditions, the social areas of our brain, the parts of the brain that promote helpful behaviors, altruism and being selfless, that those parts of the brain function less well under sleep deprived conditions.

I just wanted to mention, you said it's unimaginable to couples to sleep apart. Well, actually, more and more we are seeing more couples begin to not only imagine the possibility of having a healthy relationship and sleeping apart, but more and more couples are doing it.

[00:04:48]

That's another piece that I cover in my book, addressing this stigma we have against sleeping apart which, by the way, is a socially prescribed stigma and belief that has not been true across history and is certainly also not true across cultures.

And my real message is we need to move away from this idea that there's one way for all couples to spend the night together or apart.

Rather, what couples should be focused on is, are we sleeping well because when we sleep well, we're able to be better partners to each other.

It's less about how you do it, but it's really about putting sleep at the forefront of being one of the cornerstones of a healthy relationship, because it really is.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So, let's get into the details of it.

So, what are some of the specific challenges that couples have when it comes to bed sharing?

Dr Wendy Troxel

So this can really run the gamut. Of course, the one we hear most about, the one I hear most about clinically, is my partner snores like a freight train, and that is disrupting my sleep.

My first strategy when it comes to a partner or a couple who's dealing with snoring is, first you want to see if that is a sign of a significant medical condition.

So if your partner is snoring, that may be more than just a major nuisance to you. It could be a sign of a sleep disorder known as sleep apnea, which comes with a host of other medical consequences.

So it's really important to use that nuisance as a motivator to get your partner in, to potentially have a sleep study and get diagnosed, if that's the underlying cause.

But beyond snoring, there's lots of other issues across the lifespan that couples will face. Maybe it's having young children who like to weasel their way into the bedroom, making 'three's a crowd' in your bed that was originally set for two...

Meagen Gibson

Or four, or five, I've seen.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Exactly, and then you add in some pets into the mix, and it can be really challenging, and suddenly no one's sleeping, and no one's happy.

Then there's the more mundane, run of the mill things like differences in temperature preferences, differences in sleep wake schedules.

[00:07:06]

One of you is a lark who likes to wake up at the crack of dawn, chipper and ready to start the day. The other is more of a night owl.

Couples who are on different sleep wake schedules also face challenges because they're not in sync in terms of when their bodies are primed to sleep, and that can be really challenging.

Other issues, one might be a light sleeper, one tosses and turns, one is a sheet stealer.

All of these issues are really normal, natural responses when you put two people in a confined space for a long period of time.

We spend about a third of our lives asleep, so it stands to reason that there might be some challenges and some needed negotiation to make that work.

The types of negotiations that couples can have can also really run the gamut. It's not only that we sleep together every night, all night, or we're destined to sleep apart for the rest of our lives.

There's lots of strategies that can help couples address whatever given sleep challenge they're facing as a couple.

But it all begins with being able to talk about it. Talking about what's working and what's not working in the bedroom when it comes to sleep is a very neglected topic among couples. We just don't even know how to start the conversation.

So that's another key takeaway of my message in my work as well as in my book, of helping couples to realize it's really understandable that, and should be expected that, at some point in your coupled existence, talking about some challenges that may emerge in the third of our lives that we spend asleep is just a part of being in a relationship. It doesn't have to mean anything negative about the relationship.

Meagen Gibson

I bet it's hard for couples as well, because so many of the things that you named are either situational or seasonal, right?

If you've got young children that like to co-sleep, or my husband has sleep apnea, right, and I moved out of our bedroom for six months. I was like, listen, until you get a sleep study, I'm gone. Let me know when you've got this resolved.

These are all situational things, but at the moment when you're approaching this type of decision or a conversation, you might be worried about your partner feeling rejected or sensitive about the issue that they have going on.

So, how do you recommend that couples and partners approach these conversations?

Dr Wendy Troxel

Great point. What we really need to do societally is to start normalizing these conversations.

[00:09:55]

Just, first of all, think about the life of a couple. In a couple, couples of all types, we have to negotiate all sorts of things that happen during the daytime, and that's normal and expected. It's just what you do as a couple.

But we have developed this societal attitude by neglect of the night, that sleep is just the thing that comes to all couples and it necessarily has to work at all stages of your life. And if not, then that's something to be fearful of or just something to be ashamed about or just to avoid the discussion.

And when that happens, when there's an avoidance of discussion, which is what I see most often among couples is that we don't want to address it because that feels like we're making it an issue, and yet it should be just part of a normal, it's part of the life cycle of a couple, in that 24 hour cycle and add it up across the lifespan.

So, if we just normalize it instead of pushing it away and avoiding it, what happens when couples avoid the topic is then we see these sort of reactive patterns where one partner just marches out of the room in total frustration.

So, what becomes the rule is a lack of dialogue, a lack of conversation, and just reactivity to the situation, as you said, rather than being proactive about it and really acknowledging, perhaps, that this might be short lived, but right now I'm not sleeping well and when I don't sleep well, I can't be the partner to you that I want to be.

So that's really what I try to encourage couples to come to the conversation in that vein because it really is about us, we in a couple, and trying to do everything we can to be the best partner we can be.

And knowing that none of us are at our best when we're sleep deprived is a great way to make the conversation about, it's truly a relationship enhancing goal, not something damning or demeaning to the partner, but really about how important it is for us both to be getting the sleep we need in order to be the best partners we can be.

Meagen Gibson

It almost sounds like, what I hear you saying, is that perhaps it's best to approach these conversations not when you're in that reactive place, right?

So not when you get in a huff and grab your pillow and a blanket and march out to the couch or wherever you have to try to get some rest, or not in the morning when you wake up unrested but the alarm clock is going off and you've got to get your day going. That's not the time for this conversation necessarily.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Timing is everything and this is a lesson for all sorts of hot topics within relationships, right?

Choose the timing well. There's so many really big blowout conflicts that could be avoided if you just thought about the timing a little bit better, and specifically around sleep.

[00:13:07]

Yeah, don't have this conversation in the middle of the night or when you're both exhausted at the end of the night, or first thing in the morning, because we know that sleep loss and exhaustion will sap the very skills you want to draw upon, like good communication, empathy, emotion regulation.

All of these skills are crucial for having a healthy and open and honest dialogue.

Our best selves come when we're well rested and being mindful of your partner's sleep needs and current state of exhaustion because why have a conversation that you know is going to go rapidly downhill because neither of you have your wits about you, which happens when you're sleep deprived to have such a conversation.

So time it well. And you can use other good skills that we just know from relationship research and therapy, that using things like I statements, talking about the mutual goals that you both have. That's why I always reflect and say, this is about us being good partners, right?

And, again, an I statement like when I am not getting the sleep I need, I know I'm irritable, so this is important for us.

So using those I statements, focusing on the here and now, like you said, this is often a situational experience. It's not forever or lasting, and that's also a really good communication strategy.

No one wants to hear some ultimatum that this is always or never going to happen again, but rather we are in a current situation which is not currently working for us, or at least not working for me. How can we work through this in the here and now?

Not using it as an opportunity to make a blanket statement of how your partner always behaves or how they've always snored and kept you up.

Right now this isn't working in our lives, what can we do in this moment to improve how both of us are feeling and sleeping so that we can optimize the quality of our relationship?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I was thinking as you were talking about how I have a lot of sympathy for people with smaller kids because I know that there was definitely a season of life where my husband would try to talk to me right before bed and I would be like, please don't talk to me about anything serious and he was like, it's the only time we're alone and not being interrupted. I was like, okay.

Then we brought up another point that we need to make some more time where we're alone and not going to be interrupted by a small person.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Absolutely. That sacred time in bed where you might be craving me time, but he's craving we time, and even negotiating that to say this is not about me rejecting that need, honey, it's just that I am spent and maybe we could just hold hands and cuddle at this point, but I can't talk anymore. I just need to unwind and settle.

[00:16:09]

It's so true. And being conscious of what that space and that time in bed actually means for couples is something that I also focus quite a bit on in my book because even for couples who choose to sleep apart, I firmly believe, and from extensive work within couples, see that time in bed before falling asleep is a sacred time and space for couples that I think that we could do a better job of preserving and cherishing.

As many couples these days instead of actually savoring that time together, which is again, particularly for families with young children, the only time you have to be together even if you're not talking, but what are so many people doing?

They're independently now on their own phones or tablets, scrolling through social media and dealing with virtual human beings instead of paying attention to, and being intentionally present with, a real life human being who loves them and who they love, who's sharing the bed with you.

So I think creating some ritual around what's going to help both partners unwind and settle for bed, which is good for sleep, but also using that as a critical opportunity to connect with your partner, even if you choose not to spend the rest of the night together.

That's a strategy that many couples that I worked with have employed successfully.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. So get the same connectivity out of it that you are craving and wanting that's important to your relationship, but there's a different outcome, if you will.

I have a couple of friends who are a couple, if you will, who the woman has been dealing with a chronic illness for about two years and both of their adult children just moved out of the house and they had an extra bedroom and the wife looked at her husband one day and she was like, I think we need to make another arrangement.

He's going to go over here, but they spend every single night before they physically go to sleep together in one bed, and then one of them will exit and sometimes it's him, sometimes it's her.

And it's worked really well for them and she's got her own space and it's got its own vibe, and she's got her own routines in that room that completely support her need and ability to rest, and it's been wonderful for her recovery.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Absolutely. What I love that you mentioned just these different stages and chapters in a couple's lives, all of which are associated with changes in sleep and changes in relationship functioning.

And I think if couples, again, were more intentional and mindful about the role that sleep plays in their relationship, like your friend here that came up with this strategy that really makes sense, she's dealing with a chronic illness, she needs her sleep because sleep is truly essential for recovery, symptom management and simply coping with chronic illness.

And by the way, her partner needs that too. I do a lot of work with caregivers among those with chronic illness, and caregivers also are prone to sleep disturbances.

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So sometimes satisfying that need for closeness and cuddling and intimacy before either partner falls asleep is a great strategy to then allow for the opportunity, if that's what that couple needs, to then go to their separate beds for the actual sleep part of the experience to really preserve and cherish that time spent together before falling asleep.

That's something that all couples can do, whether or not you actually spend a full night together.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And another stage that I'll just completely be vulnerable about is my husband and I we're both on average six feet tall, we are large people.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Oh wow.

Meagen Gibson

There's a lot of body, right?

Dr Wendy Troxel

Yes there is.

Meagen Gibson

And for thirteen years of our relationship we slept in this little queen bed and it wasn't a problem until I went into my mid forties and suddenly it was very warm.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Yes. Women's temperature is very dynamic.

Meagen Gibson

Hormones shift in life and during the day they shift, and something that people don't necessarily even realize about sleep is that for any individual, your hormones are going to shift through the night.

Your temperature, your inner body core temperature is going to change. It's going to rise to wake you up.

I mean, please correct me if anything I'm saying from my...

Dr Wendy Troxel

It falls when you sleep and rises when you wake. You're absolutely right.

[00:20:42] Meagen Gibson

So these things are happening, so it's not abnormal for the presence of your partner's body to make you overheated or wake you before it's time, or all of these rhythms and cycles that happen hormonally outside of your direct control to impact and affect your sleep.

So talking about it and saying, when you're on my side of the bed, I'm not resting very well. That's not because I don't love you, it's because there's stuff going on with me...

Dr Wendy Troxel

I've got a furnace on fire in my body.

I talk to so many women of a certain age now that, again, the dynamic temperature changes that happen, particularly among women when you overlay hormonal changes on top of all the normal fluctuations in temperature that are part and parcel to the physiology of sleep, it has nothing to do with your desire for intimacy or closeness with your partner.

But if you feel like your insides are on fire, the last thing you want is to have another body further stoking that plane.

Meagen Gibson

So well said. I feel so seen.

Dr Wendy Troxel

There's lots of practical strategies, at least with that too, when it comes to sleep. I'm a big fan these days of individual mattress pads that have temperature control to help cool you down, and that your partner can have a different set of controls in case he's not burning up the way you are.

Also having different layers of bedding so that couples can really have their own temperature needs met in a more individualized way, even if they are sharing a bed.

Understanding that aging changes our temperature fluctuations, it changes our sleep and then...

Meagen Gibson

Geography, humidity.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

I live in Florida...

Dr Wendy Troxel

Climate change is not helping.

[00:22:38]

So, recognizing that and then you put two people together who have, we're both human beings but we both bring our own biology, our own experiences, and then there's a matter of physics that you're two people in a somewhat confined space.

There's a lot that can be challenging. But, again, as with anything in a couple, healthy couples find ways to work through these issues. It doesn't have to be a death knell for the relationship.

It's just being okay to say, Oh. This is a challenge we're facing. How are we going to work through it in a way that satisfies both of our needs at multiple levels?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I recently saw that it's very normal in Europe for couples to have completely separate blankets or comforters, king size or queen size bed, but two totally different blankets, totally different sets of sheets. That's fascinating to me.

Dr Wendy Troxel

There's even a name for it called Scandinavian method, and what that is actually, is two twin beds put together, is actually a quick king size bed.

So, for couples who like to have their individual bedding preferences all set on their own but want to still have the appearance of a shared bed, that's a good solution because they each get their own twin size bedding, but there can be one overlay or comforter for the king size bed, but they each get to benefit from their individual bedding. So there's lots of different strategies.

Meagen Gibson

So we mentioned briefly, we passed by it really quickly, different circadian rhythms or people having different sleep cycles. One's a night owl, one's an early bird, or even things like shift work that might impact couples.

So, what are your tips when there's logistical things like that for how they can stay connected, how they can come to an agreement about sharing a bed or not for that matter.

Dr Wendy Troxel

This idea of being in sync or not in sync with your partner is a real issue that comes up quite a bit, and there's actually some interesting research on this.

The first point that I want to make is that, because so few people really understand this, our circadian preferences, or our natural tendencies to be more morning people or more night people or somewhere in between, that is largely genetically determined. About 50% is genetically determined.

And yet we live in a society that tends to treat being a morning person as such a virtue, and we really demean and judge people who are natural night owls, that they are somehow lazy, or just don't have the willpower to get up in the morning.

[00:25:30]

So I always like to remind people that no, this is actually a biological predisposition, largely genetically determined, so it's not just that they're lazy or they just don't want to wake up in the morning. Their brains, just like you experience when you have jet lag and you're just out of sync with the world, that's what many extreme night owls feel on a daily basis.

And you also mentioned shift work, which is, again, another form of misalignment between an individual's intrinsic clock and their shifts where most human beings are designed to sleep at night and be awake during the day.

But with shift work, particularly night shift work, that causes misalignment which has a lot of consequences.

So whether it be for natural intrinsic differences in sleep wake preferences, or if there's an actual job schedule for instance that's interfering, this can create challenges for couples.

Especially because, again, when there's so much emphasis on, we have to sleep together. Healthy couples always sleep together. They go to bed and they wake up at the same time. For some couples that's just not possible because of differences in work schedules.

But when it comes to the lark and owl situation, what often happens is one partner feels that, well we should always be going to bed and waking up at the same time, so they feel obligated to just go along with the schedule of their partner, wishing or willing themselves to override their own biology to be able to fall asleep and wake up at a time that might be inconsistent with their intrinsic rhythm.

And there's where problems can ensue because, for instance, a night owl, someone who is an extreme version of a night owl may not actually be sleepy until, let's say, 1:00 A.M.

But, let's say, their partner is either in the middle in terms of the circadian preference, or more of a morning person, they're comfortably and ready to go to sleep at 10:00 P.M., and they also are perhaps comfortably ready to wake up at 06:00 A.M.

That's a nice eight hour window for a morning tendency person. Well if that night owl goes to bed with their partner at 10:00 P.M. just because they feel like that's what you do in a relationship, guess what happens when they get in bed?

They lie there awake staring at the ceiling feeling frustrated, why can't I fall asleep?

And for some, that can actually instigate insomnia because they end up lying in bed awake and feeling frustrated and that does no service to the relationship.

So what I say to these couples is, first of all, it's important to know your sleep-wake preferences. And in my book I have a nice little quiz to walk couples through to understand each of their individual circadian preferences, or sleep wake preferences, and then they can have a discussion about how well they match up or don't match up.

Now what the research says is that there may be some consequences for relationship quality for those who are in mismatched pairs. However, this is not for mismatched pairs to run off in despair.

[00:28:44]

Actually, if couples have good problem solving skills, even if they're mismatched in terms of their sleep wake preferences, they don't show any decrements in their relationship qualities. So it's really about how you manage that difference.

And what I see in couples where one's lark, one's an owl, and who manage this effectively, they just engage in effective problem solving.

They will spend that cuddle time in bed together before the early bird falls asleep and then the night owl will quietly get out of bed, go have some me time in another room, and quietly return to bed at their later, more natural bedtime, and the reverse happens in the morning.

When it comes to shift work, that's also where healthy, effective problem solving is absolutely crucial because say somebody's working night shift, the biggest problem for them is helping them to actually get some decent, good quality sleep because it's so challenging to do so when sleeping during the daytime.

So it really becomes a family level problem and a family focused solution of how do we create the space during the day to allow for quiet, for dark and the space needed for that person to sleep, and then how do we find time when both partners are awake and can actually also have some sacred relationship time.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I'm assuming in addition to problem solving skills come communication, right?

I've definitely had this happen where that mismatch isn't communicated or isn't named, it's just this thing that starts happening, or it's just a trend that starts to occur.

And you don't really notice it until you're either the one getting up really early and taking care of everything that happens in the morning alone, and the other one is sleeping in or taking care of their own needs, but it doesn't feel like that if it's not communicated.

Dr Wendy Troxel

It doesn't feel like that, and if you don't have the conversation then it can feel and, again, especially given that so many people just don't understand that we do in fact have these natural intrinsic rhythms that guide when we feel most awake and when we feel most asleep, and there are individual differences in this.

Some people are naturally inclined to be awake and alert in the morning and some people just aren't. Now, sometimes this could be intentional, maybe the partner is just...

Meagen Gibson

Maybe it is avoidance. Exactly, right?

[00:31:16] Dr Wendy Troxel

All the more reason why you need to have a conversation about it because otherwise the assumption is, and where resentment starts to build up, is the assumption, he's just doing this because he's avoiding. Somebody's got to wake up to be with the kids and he just thinks it should be me.

And, again, that's worth talking about, but it really may be, if you're in a couple where one person is just an extreme night owl, well, guess what, here's a new solution. The morning person might be the best person to be awake and alert and deal with the kids in the morning.

But by the same token, that's a great opportunity for him to take on nighttime caregiving opportunities, or to put the kids to bed if you're absolutely exhausted in the evening, if you're an extreme night person.

So here are ways where healthy couples really can just by knowing their differences, and that this is really in large part sort of biologically driven, you can maximize your differences to be very strategic in terms of family needs.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Once spoken and talked about and conversations are had, it can actually be to your advantage.

It's not that the other person is shirking their duties, it's that they're taking care of their own needs, and you get to do that later. You get some solo time later.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Exactly. If that's what's going on and, again, the first step is having the conversation, not assuming that it's just that I'm shirking and if it is, well, we need to talk about that too, because that's not going to work.

But it really may be that if you're dealing with somebody who's just intrinsically not designed to be that functional first thing in the morning, perhaps there are strategies that can maximize both of your intrinsic sleep wake preferences.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Or they might be suffering through something that needs support that's different and separate from sleep, like depression or something contextual like that, and you might never know until you actually have this conversation.

That requires a different conversation about what kind of support in addition to those unique sleep needs that they might need.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Absolutely.

[00:33:28] Meagen Gibson

So, I want to talk about your general sleep tips for both obviously individuals, because we're all individually sleeping, and then also couples.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Sure. Yeah. So my first strategy that I give to everyone, because this is just really the crux of so many things, it seems simple, but it matters so much, is to have a consistent wake up time.

How you start the day really dictates so much of not only how you feel during the day, but how well you're going to sleep, not just the subsequent night, but nights thereafter.

Regularity is absolutely crucial when it comes to setting our circadian rhythms which in turn govern our sleep wake cycles.

I hear often people are like, Oh. I go to bed at the same time of night every night. I'm really good at that. Well, actually, I don't care so much about bedtime. It's really wake up time that matters the most.

I mean, yes, it is good to be consistent in both, but it's most important that you really lock that wake up time in, because wake up time sends a very powerful cue to our internal circadian clock to say that this is the time to be awake and alert.

And also getting sunlight exposure first thing in the morning is another excellent thing you can do to set yourself up for sleep success that night.

You set a consistent wake up time seven days a week, day in, day out, unfortunately on the weekends too, you will find that that one step does wonders for enhancing not just how much sleep you're getting, but the depth and quality of your sleep. So, absolutely crucial.

And you basically can determine when your bedtime should be by just walking back, what is your regular wake up time, and then allowing, for most adults, we need somewhere around seven to nine hours.

That should determine your bedtime, but bedtimes can fluctuate a little bit, let's say you have a social event. Wake up time should really be locked in.

The next crucial strategy that I recommend both to individuals and to couples is to have a wind down routine. Something that allows your mind and your body to settle, to relax, to know that sleep is coming and to give the brain a cue that the world is safe and secure, and it's okay to fall into that deep, restful sleep.

Too often what we do in our busy lives is we're racing about, finishing up a few emails, throwing in a load of laundry, kissing the kids good night, doing one thing or another, and then jumping into bed as if bedtime is the start of a race, instead of the slow descent into this very physiologically vulnerable state of sleep where, again, we need to send that signal to the brain that the world is safe and secure, the body is relaxed, the mind can relax and you can fall into sleep.

So, it's really important to spend, ideally, about an hour. If you don't have that, try a half an hour, before you get into bed, really relaxing, unwinding. Maybe it's doing some stretches, meditation, reading, yoga, listening to music.

[00:36:33]

Or, as a couple, one of the strategies I recommend is a technique called 'the high low compliment'. It's really simple.

It goes like this. Each partner takes turns. You can do this in bed, or out of bed. Each partner takes turns first, sharing just one good thing that happened in their day. Maybe something you feel proud about, maybe something good that happened to you, something funny that happened to you.

Then, you share something not so good that happened to you. Maybe a disappointment, something that didn't go so well, that you felt frustrated about.

And, then, you pay your partner a compliment, say something that they did really well, or that you appreciated on them as human being and you take turns. Each partner takes that role.

Now, why this is so effective as a couple level wind down routine, is it really immediately creates the shared space and connectivity for the couple as a unit.

It's also helping each partner to self-disclose, disclose some emotions, which research shows is good for sleep. It's expressing gratitude, which research shows is good for sleep, and it also enhances feelings of calm and positive emotion which we know are good for sleep.

And all of these characteristics also happen to be good for relationships. So you get a bang for your buck, both enhancing your relational bond and setting yourself up for a good, relaxing night of sleep.

And the final tip that I like to give people, which is also very often neglected, is just as important as it is to have a wind down routine. Many of us really need a wind up routine.

It starts like this. Have a consistent wake up time, as I recommended, and make it as abrupt as possible. Avoid hitting the snooze button. That just prolongs the agony of that groggy state of what we call sleep inertia that happens first thing upon awakening.

So when the alarm goes off, get out of bed and start moving as quickly as possible. I actually even suggest some small physical activity. Maybe it's doing a few jumping jacks or a couple of squats, or holding a plank.

Doing something that will quickly get the blood pumping is also a great way to reduce that sleep inertia. Or simply just walking quickly to the bathroom where you can then splash your face with cold water, or if you're really ambitious, you could try taking a cold shower. A cold exposure is another very alerting thing.

Finally, a critical part of a rise up routine, as it's called, is to expose yourself to sunlight. Get some morning sunlight. Ideally about 10 minutes outdoors is preferred, but if you can't get that sunlight outdoors, use artificial light to your advantage in the morning, which means bright lights.

Use your electronic devices which also have a lot of light exposure in the morning but, by the same token, try to avoid them in the evening hours.

[00:39:38] Meagen Gibson

Those were all great tips. The thing that I liked the most about the high low as well, was that by creating the routine and the intention and you know you're going to do it, it's not how was your day?, and then your partner unloads on you in bed. This is what I'm sharing, yeah, I'm sharing a high, I'm sharing a low, and a compliment. That's it.

Dr Wendy Troxel

That's a really good point that I don't think I had fully processed either. It's so true, because I think so often it's easy to feel like I know I should spend this time connecting with my partner, but it feels like a heavy lift when you're exhausted.

But this puts some confines around it and it's actually really good, venting sometimes feels good, but it's actually not frequently, particularly at bedtime, all that effective or healthy. The last thing we want is to really churn up a lot of negative emotions right before bed.

So this actually puts some nice boundaries around the type of sharing you're going to do, and it allows the opportunity for it to be reciprocal.

Because maybe you're in a relationship where you tend to be the sharer, and your partner tends to be predominantly the listener, or is more reticent to share, so it gives some parameters and boundaries, and an opportunity for each partner to share something, but there's also limits around it so it's not going on and on and on in the evening.

Meagen Gibson

So I would be not doing my job effectively if I did not ask you very briefly about teenagers, because I learned something from you that I didn't know and I think a lot of people might not know, the sleep cycle of teenagers and how it changes at that age and what their needs are, and how much of their habits and behaviors are behavioral choices, and actual sleep needs.

Dr Wendy Troxel

Well, we talked about intrinsic circadian sleep wake preferences just among couples and how that can create challenges.

Well, adolescence is a really interesting and critical period of development and it's very unique when it comes to sleep, because during adolescent developmental period, we see a shift in circadian rhythms, such that adolescents, uniquely as a population, show a tendency towards being more night owls specifically during the adolescent period.

So, biologically they're predisposed to stay up later and sleep in later. So we often malign teenagers thinking they're lazy, depressed, and some are, which is concerning...

Meagen Gibson

Not making good choices.

[00:42:21] Dr Wendy Troxel

Poor judgment, irritable, but what we don't recognize is teenagers are among the most high risk groups for being sleep deprived.

And a primary reason why teenagers, particularly in the U.S., are chronically sleep deprived, is due to the fact that we're sending them to school far too early.

The Centers for Disease Control and several other major medical organizations all recommend, because of that very solid science on this topic, that teenagers, middle and high school, should not start school before 08:30 A.M.

Yet most schools across the U.S. Start at 08:00 A.M. or far earlier, my children's school starts at 07:35 A.M. And what this means is that this policy of early school start times is the number one culprit which is leading to an epidemic of sleep deprivation among teenagers.

They simply cannot get the sleep they need because we restrict their opportunity by waking them up so early. Some will say, oh, well, why can't you just put your teenagers to bed earlier?

Well, a teenager has to wake up at 06:00 A.M., would have to go to bed, and not just go to bed, but fall asleep at 09:00 P.M., in order to get the minimum. Teenagers need somewhere around eight to ten hours of sleep per night for them to function optimally. They would need to be asleep by 09:00 P.M. to get that adequate opportunity for sleep.

Now, we know from hard scientific evidence that asking a teenager to fall asleep at 09:00 P.M. is akin to trying to force yourself when you're experiencing jet lag to fall asleep hours before your natural biological clock tells you you're ready.

Because, again, their biological clocks are delayed by about two to three hours relative to adults or younger children.

So, simply saying, oh, they should just go to bed earlier to allow opportunity for sleep is just really putting them at odds with their own biology. And it's an unwinnable proposition.

As a result, most teens are chronically sleep deprived and we see the consequences, and they're quite dire. Not only are sleepy teens less able to learn or perform well academically, which is, by the way, the primary job of schooling, but they're also more vulnerable to both mental and physical health consequences.

We see strong links between sleep loss among teenagers and increased risk of depression, anxiety, even suicide. We also see sleep loss associated with increased risk of obesity and athletic injuries, for instance.

So when we think about all the domains of functioning that can be affected by sleep loss in a teenager's life, which is such a critical stage of development, it's really sort of unconscionable that we continue to, throughout most of the U.S., adhere to this policy that is the primary reason why they cannot get the sleep they need.

Meagen Gibson

So what are the recommendations that you make? I know that this is something that you've dealt with yourself, having a teenager.

[00:45:37]

So what do we do with the system that we haven't been able to as yet change in teenagers who are subject to the schedules they haven't made?

Dr Wendy Troxel

Well, the good news is there is promising news out there. For instance, the state of California recently implemented a law that mandates for most middle and high schools throughout the state, that they start at 08:00 A.M. for middle schools and 08:30 A.M. for high schools.

So there is actual legislative action happening at a statewide level that's in the process today, which is really exciting. That's a clear sign of policy really following the science and really using evidence backed policy in education, which is wonderful to see.

So I do hope the other states consider similar types of legislation. But even at the school district level where these changes most often occur, change is also occurring there. I wish it would occur faster so that more generations of teenagers could more quickly benefit from getting the sleep that they need.

I think as parents, it's absolutely critical that you advocate for healthy school start times in your school district, that you know the science, that when you hear the myths about we need to toughen our teenagers up by sleep depriving them, that people come armed with the actual science and evidence to counter that absolutely ludicrous statement.

Why would we sacrifice our teenager's fundamental biological need for sleep to toughen them up? It makes no sense. We wouldn't starve them to toughen them up.

So we really need to move away from these not science backed arguments and concerns about the logistics of changing school start times. And they exist. They are real, I don't deny that.

But these logistical challenges, like issues with changing busing or after school activities or childcare, these are all logistical problems to be solved, but they pale in comparison to the absolutely dire public health need of protecting and preserving the sleep health of our teenagers, who today are a very vulnerable population, and I feel quite passionate about this.

So there's a lot we can do, and, of course, in our own homes, yes, we practice and we can encourage good sleep health behaviors among our teens, that includes having a consistent bedtime and wake up time, removing technology from the bedroom, and also encouraging your teen to have some sort of wind down routine prior to bed that doesn't involve technology.

Those are family level practices. But the real action is going to occur when we remove that primary constraint to them getting the sleep they need.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Dr Troxel.

How can people find out more about you and your work, and helping couples get better sleep?

[00:48:41] Dr Wendy Troxel

Well, thanks so much for having me on this lovely interview.

Yes, well, first of all, certainly you can check out my book, *Sharing the Covers*. It's available at all major online retailers and perhaps in your local bookstore.

I also have a website, wendytroxel.com.

On Twitter, on [Wendy Troxel](#). On Instagram, it's [Sharing the Covers](#), where I provide some sleep tips and give other links to various media and talks that I'm giving.

And of course, you can check out my two Ted talks, one we just discussed on [adolescent sleep and school start times](#). And I also have a talk on couples and sleep called [Sleep As If Your Relationship Depends On It](#), because it often does.

Meagen Gibson

I love it. Again, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Wendy Troxel

It's been a pleasure. Thanks so much.