

ARTICLE: “The Trouble with Sleep Texting”

1

http://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2013/08/02/the-trouble-with-sleep-texting_print.html

Wake up to a text you don't remember sending? It's called sleep texting, and it's not uncommon

By Angela Haupt

US News and World Report, August 2, 2013

The premed student sleeps with mittens on each night.

Mittens, to protect herself from her phone. To render her fingers unable to send those unconscious messages that are as embarrassing as they are senseless.

Yup: She's a sleep texter.

“It's a phenomenon occurring with the younger generation,” says Elizabeth Dowdell, a nursing professor at Villanova University who shared the anecdote about the mitten-wearing student. “And it's reflective of the significance of our smartphones—of these very powerful machines. *Why would we turn them off?*”

Indeed, young adults are so attached to their phones that many respond to texts while they're sleeping. When the phone beeps they answer, either in words or, often, gibberish. And the next morning, they have no memory of their activity—until they check their message history. Sleep texters commonly recount their behavior using hashtags like #sleeptexting on Twitter and Instagram.

Dowdell initially learned about sleep texting when one of her students described her nighttime activities. After growing more intrigued, she surveyed 300 students, and learned that 25 to 35 percent had sent text messages while they were snoozing. And more than 50 percent admitted that their phone or other technology interfered with their sleep in some way.

That's what's worrisome, experts say. Sleep texting tends to occur during naps or about 90 minutes to two hours into the snoozing process, prior to entering a deep sleep. “Sleep is a very important restorative process,” says Josh Werber, a snoring specialist at EOS Sleep Centers in Long Island, N.Y. “And when we're not fully engaged in it, and not getting the amount we need, we're not having the same restorative effect on our brains. And that affects our cognitive ability the next day.”

Indeed, experts estimate we need between 7 and 8 hours of sleep each night. When we don't get enough, we're more likely to experience trouble succeeding at school and work. Sleep deprivation also hikes the odds of obesity, high blood pressure, depression, behavioral problems and drug abuse. And research suggests that sleep problems during adolescence don't simply disappear with age—they can continue to affect health long into adulthood.

Still, it's perhaps unsurprising that we remain attached to our smartphones even during sleep. Many of us are glued to these devices all day, every day—triggering new buzzwords like “cell phone dependence.” Research from the Pew Internet & American

Life Project suggests that teens spend about an hour and a half texting each day, and 1 in 3 sends more than 100 text messages a day. At least 4 in 5 teens sleep with their phone on or near the bed, seemingly inviting sleep texting.

For the most part, it's harmless, Dowdell says—aside from the long-term effect on our sleep health. Most often, these texts are innocent in nature; those sent by young men, for example, often revolve around food: "I'm starving. Let's get a pizza! Let's go work out." One young woman Dowdell studied, however, had a tendency to wax romantic when she texted as she slept. "A classmate texted her something about anatomy class, and her reply back was, 'I just love it. I love you! You're the light of my life,'" Dowdell recalls. "Then there was an old boyfriend who texted her, and she sent responses like, 'I adore you, please come over,' while she was asleep. She was mortified when she realized."

The romantic texter now makes sure her iPhone is out of reach when she snoozes. And that's exactly the kind of adaptive behavior that's necessary, experts say. If you're worried about texting while you're snoozing, take steps to establish the bedroom as a sanctuary. "It shouldn't be a workplace," Werber says. "It shouldn't be a place where we're multitasking. We feel strongly that people need to prepare for sleep, and now that these devices are so small and transportable, they're easy to bring into the bedroom. But that's unfortunately creating an issue in terms of sleep habits."

Try setting your phone out of reach when you go to bed, whether it's at your feet or on top of your dresser. Turn it off, or at least silence it. Set boundaries for yourself: Schedule a time to step away from your electronics each night, and realize that you don't have to reply instantaneously. It's OK to disconnect.

"It's learning to turn it off," Dowdell says. "Technology is very seductive. At the end of the day, you need to give yourself permission to really get your sleep. Maybe we don't need to be connected 24–7—maybe it's better to be connected 18–7."

And if all else fails? We hear mittens come in plenty of cute designs these days.