

- Bedtime

Why does silence feel so loud at night?

In the absence of external distractions, the brain becomes hyper-alert, scanning for anything that could be a threat

Gulf News · 14 Feb 2025 · 10 · BY LAKSHANA N. PALAT Assistant Features Editor

Hello darkness, my old friend ... I've come to talk to you again ... If only we could embrace silence and darkness as melodiously as Simon and Garfunkel once did. Yet, research shows that after turning off the lights and settling into bed, people are unable to sleep. Every creak in the house is amplified. The truth is, the more you focus on the silence, the more it seems to press in on you. Why does the absence of sound — something we often crave — suddenly become so unsettling at night?

BY LAKSHANA N. PALAT
Assistant Features Editor

Hello darkness, my old friend ... I've come to talk to you again ... If only we could embrace silence and darkness as melodiously as Simon and Garfunkel once did. Yet, research shows that after turning off the lights and settling into bed, people are unable to sleep. Every creak in the house is amplified. The truth is, the more you focus on the silence, the more it seems to press in on you. Why does the absence of sound — something we often crave — suddenly become so unsettling at night?

The silence, instead of being calming, can make us feel vulnerable, as though something is lurking just beyond our perception.

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS

Recent research commissioned by Anosovsk and conducted by Baker Research highlights how much sleep habits have evolved across generations. Though primarily focused on the US, the findings reflect a broader global shift in mindset. While past generations were encouraged to embrace silence at bedtime, today's young adults actively seek noise to help them sleep.

The numbers highlight this shift. Nearly half (49 per cent) of Gen Z — those in their early to mid-20s — say they need white noise or background sound to fall asleep. Silence, for them, is more disruptive than soothing. Millennials and Gen X aren't far behind, with 41 per cent and 40 per cent respectively using sound to sleep. Meanwhile, the older generations still favour traditional silence, with only 32 per cent using white noise.

What's driving this change? Sleep expert Chelsea Perry, owner of Sleep

Solutions and a diplomat at the American Board of Dental Sleep Medicine, points to our digital lifestyles. She explains that younger generations, constantly surrounded by phone notifications and digital noise, may struggle with complete silence at night. White noise acts as a comforting background, helping to mask sudden sounds that might wake them up.

This shift in sleep preferences isn't just a personal choice — it's changing how we think about healthy sleep habits. Just as people have different natural sleep patterns, some now rest better with background noise. Com-

Nearly half of Gen Z say they need white noise or background sound to fall asleep. Silence, for them, is more disruptive than soothing.

panies may respond by designing more advanced white noise machines or personalised sleep sound apps.

Understanding these generational differences can also ease family tensions. If you're wondering why your Gen Z child sleeps with a fan running, or a younger person confused by your parents' love of silence, this research sheds light on the choice.

While older generations may stick to their silent nights, younger ones are redefining what it means to get a good night's sleep. As experts take note, we may need to rethink traditional sleep advice — sometimes, a little background noise might be just what's needed.

Paula Stearns, a sleep specialist based in Dubai, delves deeper into the

paradox of silence in relation to sleep, pointing out that even in the quietest environments, true silence is almost impossible to achieve. "Our ears are constantly picking up subtle sounds — whether it's the faint hum of household appliances, the distant whir of traffic, or even the rhythmic sound of our own breathing," she explains. "When external noise is minimal, our brains tend to become more attuned to these quieter noises. This heightened sensitivity can actually make us more restless, as we zero in on the smallest stimuli, which can disrupt our sleep."

BRAIN NEVER TRULY RESTS

This seemingly paradoxical effect occurs because the brain never truly rests. "Even when we are asleep, our brains are never entirely inactive. In the absence of obvious external distractions, the brain starts to focus on detecting any potential danger. It becomes hyper-alert, scanning for anything that could be a threat," says Stearns. "Instead of feeling calm, silence may inadvertently create a feeling of vulnerability, as if something is lurking just beyond our perception."

With nothing else to focus on, the mind tends to wander, often leading to late-night ruminations. "It's during these quiet moments when the brain finally has space to process the day's events. This is when overthinking takes centre stage, and worries that might have been pushed aside earlier in the day come to the forefront," she adds. "While introspection can be helpful during the day, studies show that silence can amplify this tendency at night, making it overwhelming and interfering with our ability to fall asleep."

Elaborating further on this aspect of cognitive ruminations, Suresh Chandran, a Dubai-based neuropsychiatrist, says that the brain goes through vari-

WHY DOES SILENCE FEEL SO LOUD AT NIGHT?

In the absence of external distractions, the brain becomes hyper-alert, scanning for anything that could be a threat



The silence, instead of being calming, can make us feel vulnerable, as though something is lurking just beyond our perception

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS

Recent research commissioned by Newsweek and conducted by Talker Research highlights how much sleep habits have evolved across generations. Though primarily focused on the US, the findings reflect a broader global shift in mindset. While past generations were encouraged to embrace silence at bedtime, today's young adults actively seek noise to help them sleep.

The numbers highlight this shift. Nearly half (49 per cent) of Gen Z — those in their early to mid-20s — say they need white noise or background sound to fall asleep. Silence, for them, is more disruptive than soothing. Millennials and Gen X aren't far behind, with 41 per cent and 40 per cent respectively using sound to sleep. Meanwhile, the older generations still favour traditional silence, with only 32 per cent using white noise.

What's driving this change? Sleep expert Chelsea Perry, owner of Sleep Solutions and a diplomat of the American Board of Dental Sleep Medicine, points to our digital lifestyles. She explains that younger generations, constantly surrounded by phone notifications and digital noise, may struggle with complete silence at night. White noise acts as a comforting background, helping to mask sudden sounds that might wake them up.

This shift in sleep preferences isn't just a personal choice — it's changing how we think about healthy sleep habits. Just as people have different natural sleep patterns, some now rest better with background noise. Companies

Nearly half of Gen Z say they need white noise or background sound to fall asleep. Silence, for them, is more disruptive than soothing.

may respond by designing more advanced white noise machines or personalised sleep sound apps.

Understanding these generational differences can also ease family tensions. If you're wondering why your Gen Z child sleeps with a fan running, or a younger person confused by your parents' love of silence, this research sheds light on the divide.

While older generations may stick to their silent nights, younger ones are redefining what it means to get a good night's sleep. As experts take note, we may need to rethink traditional sleep advice — sometimes, a little background noise might be just what's needed.

Paula Reems, a sleep specialist based in Dubai, delves deeper into the paradox of silence in relation to sleep, pointing out that even in the quietest environments, true silence is almost impossible to achieve. "Our ears are constantly picking up subtle sounds — whether it's the faint hum of household appliances, the distant whir of traffic, or even the rhythmic sound of our own breathing," she explains. "When external noise is minimal, our brains tend to become more attuned to these quieter noises. This heightened sensitivity can actually make us more restless, as we zero in on the smallest stimuli, which can disrupt our sleep."

BRAIN NEVER TRULY RESTS

This seemingly paradoxical effect occurs because the brain never truly rests. "Even when we are asleep, our brains are never entirely inactive. In the absence of obvious external distractions, the brain starts to focus on detecting any potential danger. It becomes hyper-alert, scanning for anything that could be a threat," says Reems. "Instead of feeling calm, silence may inadvertently create a feeling of vulnerability, as if something is lurking just beyond our perception."

With nothing else to focus on, the mind tends to wander, often leading to late-night ruminations. “It’s during these quiet moments when the brain finally has space to process the day’s events. This is when overthinking takes centre stage, and worries that might have been pushed aside earlier in the day come to the forefront,” she adds. “While introspection can be helpful during the day, studies show that silence can amplify this tendency at night, making it overwhelming and interfering with our ability to fall asleep.”

Elaborating further on this aspect of cognitive ruminations, Satish Chandran, a Dubai-based neuropsychiatrist says that the brain goes through vari

While silence at night may seem like the ideal sleep environment, it can trigger heightened alertness, overthinking, and increased neural activity, all of which disrupt the brain’s natural rhythm for falling asleep.

ous stages of sleep, each essential for physical and mental restoration. “These stages include light sleep, deep sleep, and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, where dreams occur. However, the quiet of the night can interfere with these stages. In the absence of external sounds, the brain may start creating its own stimuli, often manifesting in racing thoughts, memories, or anxieties that were suppressed during the day.” This leads to cognitive rumination, a process that activates the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, areas of the brain associated with decision-making, emotional regulation, and fear processing. When these regions are overly active, it becomes more difficult to transition into restorative sleep.

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

From a neurological standpoint, silence at night, rather than being a peaceful break, can sometimes be a double-edged sword, adds Chandran. While it may seem like the ideal sleep environment, it can trigger heightened alertness, overthinking, and increased neural activity, all of which disrupt the brain’s natural rhythm for falling asleep. “Understanding this delicate balance helps explain why some people may struggle with sleep in very quiet environments. So, by acknowledging how silence can affect the brain’s activity, we can better appreciate the complexities of sleep and explore ways to create a more conducive environment — such as using white noise or calming sounds — to help the brain transition more easily into rest.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Introduce soft background noise: Try white noise machines, calming music, or even nature sounds to create a steady, soothing environment.
- Practise mindfulness techniques: Deep breathing, meditation, or guided sleep exercises can help calm the mind.
- Reframe silence as peaceful: Instead of fearing the quiet, try associating it with relaxation and safety. In the absence of external distractions, the mind becomes more attuned to our internal world. Silence can then be reframed as a chance for emotional release, healing, and self-compassion.
- Stick to a bedtime routine: A consistent routine signals to your brain that it’s time to rest, making it easier to embrace the silence.

Silence doesn’t have to be your enemy at night. By understanding why it unsettles us and finding ways to make it work in our favour, we can transform it from an eerie void into a sanctuary for sleep.