Sleep talking — What am I saying? [1]

Dear Alice.

For the past two weeks, my roommate has been noticing that I talk in my sleep. It's not that it bothers him, because he's usually up at night anyway, but it bothers me. I wonder what I say while I am unaware (he never seems to remember) and I wonder why I just started doing this. Things were quiet around here first semester. Is this kind of thing stress-related? (I've got plenty of that recently...) Is it random? Am I losing my mind?

Mumbles.

Answer

Dear Mumbles,

Whether you’re singing opera, rambling about the weather, or speaking a mystery tongue, the exact causes of sleep talking can be difficult to pinpoint. Somniloquy, a technical term for sleep talking, is considered a parasomnia. This is a classification for abnormal behaviors folks do or experience in their sleep (excluding sleep apnea). Certain factors such as stress, lack of sleep, daytime drowsiness, depression, alcohol, and fever are thought to be common catalysts for sleep talking episodes. For many, this condition is often short-lived. Next steps may involve talking with your roommate and adjusting a few lifestyle behaviors in your day-to-day to reduce your nighttime noisemaking.

From clear monologues to jibber-jabber and from whispers to shouts, a sleep talker’s speech may be completely unrelated to anything in their life and is generally considered to be harmless. However, this type of late night chitchat can also be a symptom of an underlying issue or occur at the same time as another condition, such as:

- Sleepwalking
- Sleep terrors [2]
- Substance abuse
- Certain mental health conditions
- Sleep apnea
- REM sleep behavior disorder [3]
Nocturnal seizures

List adapted from the National Sleep Foundation [4].

As far as what you say in your sleep, if your roommate can’t remember it, your midnight musings might not make sense or perhaps you’re not making any substantive speeches (“Four score and seven naps ago…”). The clarity of what is said in your sleep may be reflective of the stage of sleep you’re in while sleep talking. Doing so in earlier stages may result in more clear speech, while sleep talking in later stages may be less clear and include more murmurs and moaning. In any case, keeping the lines of communication open — when you’re wide awake — may help improve your shared sleeping situation. If it bothers you that your roommate can hear you talking in your sleep, you might chat with him about using a white noise machine, a fan, or earplugs (for him) at night to drown out any sleep soliloquies and in turn, reduce the likelihood that you'll be heard.

Mumbles, you mention that talking in your sleep is a relatively new phenomenon for you. It's possible that it may resolve on its own and with it, your worry. However, if your sleep talking becomes severe (meaning it occurs frequently and disturbs your roommate) or it persists, it may be a good idea to speak with your health care provider to further investigate the issue. They may be able to pin down the cause of your sleep talking and help you manage it. Whether or not you slumber without a sound, here’s to sleeping tight and not letting the bedbugs bite!

Alice!

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