

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Sleepwalking

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At a reader's request, this article will discuss sleepwalking. In children from 6-16 years of age, **sleepwalking** or **somnambulism** is common. About half of these children experience short-lived episodes of sleepwalking. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994)* published by the American Psychiatric Association, about 80% of sleepwalkers have a family history of this behavior. This suggests a hereditary component. In about 1-7% of people, it may continue to adulthood.

Sleepwalkers may merely sit up, or they may get out of bed and wander. Sleepwalking typically occurs in the first few hours of sleep. The sleepwalker's eyes are open, but they usually have a blank expression on their face and walk with a rather rigid, unsteady gait. Sleepwalkers may walk around the house, eat or go to the bathroom. Some even get dressed and leave the house, but this occurs only rarely.



While sleepwalking, they can avoid obstacles, respond to commands, and perform complex actions like making sandwiches or arranging furniture. The sleepwalking episodes last from a few minutes to about a half hour. Usually they will return to their bed for the night. However, some come to rest in a hallway, another room or someone else's bed. Since they are sleeping during the whole episode, there is usually no memory of what happened when they wake up in the morning.

I have personally witnessed a few sleepwalking episodes. One evening while visiting at a home, our attention was aroused by the distinctive sound of liquid falling on paper. When we all went to investigate, we found their young son urinating into a garbage bag in the kitchen. They stopped that action, led him to the toilet to finish, and put him to bed. I found out that the next morning, when they told him about the episode, he thought they were fooling. He had no memory of it.

Another late evening in a different home, we were talking with friends in their living room. As their child walked through the room, his mother asked him where he was going. He responded, "*To the baffroom*," and proceeded to walk out of the front door. Of course, she quickly guided him to the bathroom and to bed. (Since sleepwalkers can follow requests, it is easy to get them back into bed without waking them.) He also had no memory of what had happened.

Contrary to what some people believe, it is okay to wake a sleepwalker. However, they are typically harder to wake than most sleepers, even when they are not sleepwalking. If someone wakes them during their sleepwalking, they will be surprised and bewildered for a short time. (Wouldn't you be confused, if you went to bed at night and woke up to find yourself somewhere else?) In most cases, it is easier on all persons involved to just lead the sleepwalker back to bed.

Although the exact cause of sleepwalking is unknown, we know it usually occurs in the deepest stages of **non-REM sleep**. REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep is when most dreaming occurs. The eye movements seem to be caused by the person looking around their dream scene. So sleepwalking typically occurs when you are *not* dreaming.

Some experts think that sleepwalking may be related to some type of anxiety or stress. For example, many children learn a particular pattern of behavior related to going to the bathroom at night. Anxious about wetting or soiling their bed, they might almost automatically get up, find their way to the bathroom, and go to bed again. However, if bedrooms are changed or the family moves, that pattern will not lead them to the correct location. (Some parents have woken to find droppings in some very weird places!)

There is much folklore surrounding sleepwalking. Some people believe that the full moon causes sleepwalking. Others think that sleepwalkers can perform fantastic feats like walking tightropes. Still others say that children cannot harm themselves while sleepwalking. All of these statements are *false*!

When sleepwalking, people are in danger, because they are not as aware of their environment. They may cross streets without paying attention to the traffic. They may walk out of a window thinking that it is a door. As an extreme example, an adolescent got out of bed and walked out of the door. Unfortunately, he had been sleeping in a camper shell on a pickup truck traveling at 50 miles an hour. By some miracle, he only suffered cuts and bruises.

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## **Sleepwalking is not considered a disorder, unless it causes serious problems.**

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Even though sleepwalking is relatively common, it is not considered a **sleepwalking disorder**, unless it "*causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning.*" (DSM-IV, page 591) An example of emotional impairment involved a woman who woke up to find her husband standing over her with a shotgun. He was sleepwalking. The threat factor was easily resolved by getting all the guns out of the house. To deal with the sleepwalking problem, the couple put their bed against the wall. With the husband sleeping against the wall, the only way he could get out of bed is past his wife or over the end of the bed. A loud alarm was rigged at the end of the bed. After several nights of sounding the alarm, his sleepwalking stopped.

However, if you have a serious sleepwalking problem that you cannot solve, seek professional help.

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