

What's Behind the 'Middle-Aged Groan'?

Experts weigh in on the sounds we make when we bend over, stand up and sit down.



By Jancee Dunn

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When my daughter was a toddler, she often imitated the long groan I made when I bent down. It was both funny and mortifying. Judging by the large number of videos of toddlers doing this on the internet, I was not alone.

Like many other people, I have a playlist of activity-specific grunts and gasps: When I'm heaving myself out of a chair, I sound like Rafael Nadal returning a volley; when I'm reaching for something, I release a wheezy "ooof."

Why does this happen? Is it a sign of getting older? I couldn't find any research on what I've termed "the middle-aged groan," but every expert I consulted knew, instantly, what I was talking about.

Meryl Alappattu, a research assistant professor of physical therapy at the University of Florida and faculty member in the Pain Research and Intervention Center of Excellence, told me that when she bends over to pick things up, "I will sort of grunt and say 'Oh, my mother' in my parents' native language, which is Malayalam, an Indian dialect."

As people get older, Dr. Alappattu explained, "just bending over to pick things off the floor might require a bit more exertion, and we tend to brace ourselves." And exhaling, she said, "could be contributing to that grunt or whatever sound you make."

The experts weren't aware of any studies on bending- and standing-related groans, but there is some research on grunting in athletic situations: One small study of college tennis players found that their serves were more powerful when they were allowed to grunt. Another, among gymgoers, suggested that grunting might be a learned behavior. And there has been research on grunting as a sports tactic used to distract opponents or garner attention.

The symphony of sounds we make might have a variety of causes. "I think there is a physical component, a mental component, a voluntary component and an involuntary component," said Tracy E.K. Davis, an associate professor specializing in health promotion and aging at Rutgers University.

The pain and stiffness that often come with age, for example, can prompt huffing noises, Dr. Davis said. And prolonged sitting may contribute to the sounds, said Lindsay DiStefano, head of the department of kinesiology at the University of Connecticut. When you sit for long periods, the muscles in your hips tighten, which makes standing a little more difficult, she said.

David Matsumoto, a professor of psychology at San Francisco State University, said these tiny cries for help could be a way "of telling others we are having a tough time for such movements."

But it's also possible that "the groan" isn't about pain or exertion at all, Dr. Davis said. "I was in bed and turning over, and I was like, 'Uhhh,'" she recalled. She asked herself why she'd made that sound and realized it was "out of frustration, because I couldn't sleep."

Where does that leave those of us who "ugh," "hrrg" and "ooof" our way through midlife? If the sounds don't bother you, pay them no mind, Dr. Alappattu said. But if they make you self-conscious, she said, try being more aware of your movements. "As you brace yourself, make sure you do so in a slow, controlled manner and practice slowing your breath, as opposed to letting it all out at once," she suggested.

And take comfort: If you sound like a weight lifter when you bend down, you're not alone. This week, I asked almost every middle-aged person I know if they ever do the "middle-aged groan." No one asked me to explain myself.

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