

SLEEPING WELL: LIVING WELL

A few years ago my wife Sue and I volunteered for a research study at Walter Reed Army Medical Center concerning the relationship of healthy heart functioning and diet, exercise, and stress management. As part of the rigorous regimen we took the Berlin Test which evaluates the likelihood of having Sleep Apnea. Neither Sue nor I had the slightest suspicion that I had Sleep Apnea. The test indicated that it was highly likely that I had it, so I went in for an overnight sleep study. The results were positive so I've been using a Continuous Positive Air Pressure (CPAP) machine every night ever since.

This experience heightened my interest in sleep in general. I was surprised to learn that science hasn't discovered with certainty the precise purpose of sleep. But common sense tells us that sleep restores us so we feel refreshed and equipped to enjoy each day.

Unfortunately, research studies show that one-quarter to one-third of all adults and 50% of those over 65 regularly suffer from sleep disturbance defined as difficulty going to sleep, staying asleep or early awakening. Most of us know from personal experience that inadequate sleep adversely affects our ability to work, think, and drive our automobiles.

Most of us have read countless articles about appropriate measures that will help us to sleep well. The pivotal question for ourselves is whether we are adhering to what we know to be solid advice. Or do we continue with the habits that may be contributing to our insomnia? I'll list the standard guidelines at the end of this article. They are important, valid, valuable and perhaps too easily ignored.

What follows are the five steps I've identified that have proven effective with innumerable patients I've treated in the past forty years. They aren't listed in any special order.

What's the Real Issue? I repeatedly find that people know the answer to this question but they don't stop and take the time to connect with the answer that is inside of them. There's a pervasive tendency to brush the real issue aside when it comes into awareness and desperately seek a different answer. This is called "second guessing" one's self. With careful self questioning or facilitation from another person, the needed adjustment needed to sleep well will probably surface. It might be something as basic as changing the bedroom temperature, noise, light or more substantive such as forgiving someone who has hurt us.

Racing Mind: Many people suffer from constant planning, worrying and organizing, which seems to intensify when lying in bed. This Racing Mind syndrome takes time and full attention to alleviate. A beginning step to acknowledge is that resting deeply as we do in bed opens the door into our unconscious mind. Our unconscious mind promptly goes to work and floods us with the myriad issues that need facing and resolving in our life. This is why it's wise to do an exhaustive inventory of issues that need facing and resolving prior to retiring for the evening.

I recommend doing the AUDIO system which is a handout available at my website (www.askdrdavidnow.com). Ideally you would write down the issue, decide what you will do to resolve it, and devise a specific plan of resolution. These issues may be minor or mundane such as I need to get an oil change for my car or more weighty such as how to deal with an irritating friend or relative.

The more you relax the more you open the metaphorical door into your unconscious mind. If you try to deny or suppress the issues that surface they will be unrelenting in their returning. The more you face and resolve them the fewer there will be to keep you from sleeping, wake you at night or spark early morning awakening.

Quiet Mind: A longer term partial solution to extinguishing insomnia is to develop a “Quiet Mind”. This is never going to happen 100 percent for those personality types who excel at planning and organizing. But these personality types actually benefit the most from training their minds to be quiet and still. The contemporary term for this is “Mindfulness”; the traditional term is meditation. This is the antithesis of our current societal trend to only engage in intimacy with our cybernetic machines. In mindfulness we take the time to be intimate with ourselves, to connect with ourselves rather than fleeing from ourselves.

Choose whatever type of meditation training resonates with you. It could be Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Moslem, Transcendental, etc. For the most popular form of Christian meditation called Centering Prayer see www.contemplativeoutreach.com. Generally, filling your mind with a repeated word or phrase in conjunction with your breathing will reduce the likelihood of intrusive negative or anxious thoughts, and eventually bring about a Quiet Mind with lots of practice. The only real downside is that daily meditation is required because as human beings, we’re only built for one day at a time!

Self-Description: This could have been our first item. A basic tenet of Cognitive Therapy is “however we describe ourselves, so shall we be”. So what appears at first glance to be a reasonable and innocent self-description, such as “I can’t sleep at night,” actually becomes a self fulfilling prophecy which cements the insomnia in place.

If you simply state the opposite to yourself, it is too extreme to believe. A middle stance will be more believable such as, “I’m sleeping a bit better each night as I take the time each evening to face and resolve issues prior to bedtime. I quiet my mind more readily as I’m more and more at peace with everyone and everything.” Writing the issues down in a journal not only gets them out of our mind but also enables us to reevaluate to determine if the issue is resolved or further work is needed.

Ignore Any Setbacks: What goes on in our lives is variable. We have peaceful days and turbulent ones. What’s going on in our life in general will obviously affect our sleep. Once you are sleeping better, when you have an inevitable setback, please don’t cement it in place by telling yourself, “I’ll never be able to get a good night’s sleep!!” Simply return to a positive description of your ability to sleep, plus take the time to figure out what prompted your sleep difficulty. Trust yourself. Trust the explanation or reason that comes into your mind.

What about sleeping pills? Generally, they aren’t recommended for long term use. Joe Wegman, a registered pharmacist and psychotherapist (www.pharmatherapist.com) does recommend 3 mg of Melatonin at bedtime. He believes that people over 50 stop producing sufficient Melatonin for sleep regulation.

This is important! When you wake at night, do not activate your brain. **Do not look at your clock!** Simply assume you need to urinate. Get up, keep your eyes half closed (but be careful), go to the bathroom, lie back down, repeat a mantra if necessary and go back to sleep. Do not think!

Listed below are the most common factors which influence our sleep.* Even though you probably already know them well, please double check as you may wish to implement one or more. Wishing you “Sweet Dreams”!

- Bedroom should be quiet, cool & comfortable.
- Invest in a comfortable bed.
- If light is a problem, use blackout shades or slumber mask.
- If environmental noise is an issue, use earplugs.
- Only use your bed for sleep, sex or illness!
- Refrain from doing work, watching TV, paying bills, or reading; so your body knows it is time to go to sleep.
- Eat a light snack before bedtime. Don't go to bed too full or too hungry.
- Dairy products and turkey contain Tryptophan, which acts as a natural sleep inducer.
- Avoid or cut down on Caffeine (coffee, tea, soda, cocoa, energy drinks) after 12:00 noon.
- Avoid alcohol: it seems to help you relax & sleep, but when metabolized becomes a cerebral stimulant.
- Set a regular time to go to bed and get up and stay with it seven days a week.
- Drink less liquid after dinner so the need to urinate is less likely to wake you.
- If you nap, keep it to 30 minutes maximum and nap before 3:00 pm. .
- Exercise regularly or do work that tires you. Getting tired out induces sleep.
- If you can't sleep, get out of bed. After 20 minutes get up and do something that induces sleep like a boring book.
- Be aware of how your bed partner's problems affect your sleep. For instance, a bed mate who snores or thrashes around can disrupt your sleep.
- If you're losing sleep because of worry, stress or grief, use my AUDIO System mentioned earlier herein. If this doesn't suffice, consider seeing a mental health professional.

Remember, when we sleep well, we live well! And when we live well, we'll probably sleep much better!

* These items came from a Water Reed National Military Medical Center Sleep Clinic Handout.

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