

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

News & Views

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Some Tips to Help You "Sleep like a Baby"

We have all heard the expression of someone being sound asleep with someone else commenting that they are "sleeping like a baby." Now I realize that many of you who have newborns realize that perhaps this is not the best comparison, as frequently babies do not seem to be sleeping as much as one might like, especially in the middle of the night. Newborn babies are not the only ones that struggle with this, however. Sleep problems are actually quite common for many adults.

For many of the individuals that I see in the office disturbed sleep is a relatively common problem. Sleep problems generally present in one of three ways. Some may have difficulty getting to sleep, known as initial insomnia, some may have frequent waking during the night with some difficulty in getting back to sleep, and then others may find themselves waking much earlier in the morning than they would like. Generally the common result is that people do not feel rested and refreshed when they wake up, which is one of the characteristics of any sleep problem. The causes of problems with getting restful sleep can be many and varied. It may be temporary secondary to stress that is currently going on in one's life. It may also be secondary to depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol or substance abuse, and for some it may be as simple as having an uncomfortable bed or a constantly changing pattern of sleep, such as for those working different shifts. There are also other causes which may affect one's sleep patterns, such as sleep apnea, restless legs, gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD), and other medical conditions. And then some individuals have what would be considered a primary insomnia, frequently chronic, and at times difficult to treat.

The first step in looking at a sleep disorder that has gone on beyond a few weeks is to see your family physician and get a medical evaluation done in order to rule out possible physiological causes. At times, this might result in a referral to either a psychiatrist or perhaps to a sleep lab. To look at the various causes in depth would be beyond a single newsletter, although perhaps we can do some of that in the future. In this newsletter I would like to look at some general suggestions for what is known as good "sleep hygiene" that can be useful for all of us to implement into our daily sleep patterns. Many studies have indicated that most Americans are generally sleep deprived. Those individuals who take pride in saying how they only need four or five hours of sleep a night are probably fooling themselves. Studies have shown that most individuals actually do need 7-8 hours of sleep to function at their best, and many may need more than that. One way to estimate how much sleep you actually need is to determine how long you may sleep when there is no need to wake up in the morning at a given time. If this is on vacation, it may take several days before you "settle in" to the idea of vacation, but then see how many hours you sleep when there is no alarm clock. That is one way to estimate the optimal amount of sleep that you need.

Sleep is actually a rather complex process. One of the first principles of good sleep hygiene is to try to go to bed and wake up at roughly the same time every day, workdays as well as weekends. You also want to try and wake up at a given time each day, even if you have not slept that well during the night. This is important in preventing what is known as "phase shifting" your sleep, in which you may sleep poorly during the night, wake up later than usual, sleep poorly the next night, sleep later the next morning, etc., until eventually you are going to bed later and getting up later and find yourself totally out of sync with the rest of the world. Similarly, if you have not slept well there will be a strong tendency to nap during the day. Again it is a good idea to try and not get in the habit of doing this,

although certainly there have been individuals who function on less sleep at night and take "power naps" during the day; but these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Another important step is to try and think of your bedroom as primarily a place to sleep or for sexual intimacy with your partner. Generally, the habit of reading, watching TV, or eating in bed is not conducive to good sleep patterns. Try to go to bed when you are sleepy, but if you are unable to get to sleep within a reasonable amount of time then get up, go to another room, and engage in some type of relaxing activity, whether it might be reading, listening to music, or watching something rather sedate or boring on TV (no action or scary movies). You definitely want to avoid lying in bed and staring at the ceiling for a prolonged time, as this will only increase your anxiety about going to bed and fear of being unable to sleep the next night.

One also wants to develop some type of routine in the evening with regard to getting ready for bed, much as we do with our children. Avoiding or significantly cutting down on caffeine frequently helps, and not just in the evening. For many, and in my experience it seems that this may become even truer as we get older, the effects of caffeine may last much longer than expected. I would suggest trying to avoid caffeine after approximately noon to early afternoon if you are having sleep problems. Try to engage in some type of calm mental activity an hour or two before going to bed, preferably not something having to do with work, filing your taxes, or other stressful type of mental activities. Exercise on a daily basis is frequently helpful, but for many exercising in the evening may be stimulating and make getting to sleep more difficult. If you're just not a morning person in terms of exercise, try to get it in by late afternoon or early evening. Also establish patterns that tend to be soothing before going to bed. For some, this may entail soaking in a warm bath, listening to music, or reading or possibly watching TV. Relaxation exercises can be helpful for many and can take many forms using breathing techniques, visual imagery, or possibly music for meditation. But remember these are only tools and are effective only with practice.



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One also wants to avoid eating too late at night and generally having dinner at least several hours before going to bed. The exception would be perhaps having a light snack, so that one does not go to bed hungry. Either way, the so-called "hot toddy" or alcohol prior to bedtime is not conducive to restful sleep. It may help you fall asleep, but, as it leaves your body it is almost like a mini-withdrawal, which can cause rather restless sleep.

The environment in which you sleep is also important. It should be dark, quiet, and cool. The darkness can be accomplished by curtains or blinds, and if there are certain noises that cannot be eliminated (such as a partner snoring) then earplugs can be used. A temperature of approximately 65° works well for most, although some prefer much cooler. Your mattress should also be firm with good support, although this is also a matter of personal preference.

These are some things which everyone can build into their lifestyle to help with their ability to obtain more restful sleep. At times, medications may be helpful and needed, and generally are used for restricted periods of time. However, studies have shown that for some with more long-standing sleep difficulties medications may be effective on a more ongoing basis, although this certainly needs to be assessed by a professional and monitored. I will close with a quote from my late father-in-law which has become a favorite in our family: "Have a good night of rest."



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