

Commentary

The Epidemic of Insomnia and the Mystery of Sleep

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As a Nurse Practitioner in a fast-paced clinic, I come across many clients who have sleep issues. Knowing just how important sleep is for healing, I often want to address this concern, but rarely have time to address sleep problems. I found Dr. Eileen Sullivan's online program (RRRsleep.com) not only helped me with my own sleep issues, but has become a helpful holistic resource, one that I can include in my discharge summary. Dr. Sullivan's vast knowledge about the roots of sleep disorders may be an asset in both our personal and professional contexts. I hope this interview expands your knowledge and gives you a practical way to share important information with your clients/patients.

Question. Dr. Sullivan, many of our patients allude to chronic sleep problems, yet we're so busy with their immediate problem, that we can't also offer proper sleep evaluation or education. Do you have a recommendation for the role of nurses in coping with what seems to be a widespread epidemic of sleep disturbances?

Answer. Well, it's wise to address quality of sleep as part of any health concern, be it acute or chronic; at some level sleep disturbance plays a part in all disease, and even in injuries, because of the fact that we only heal when we are sleeping. If an individual is not sleeping well, then healing is slower and will not be as optimal as it is when a person is able to sleep well. And sadly, if refreshing sleep is a rare pleasure, as it is for so many people, then an individual's immune system is likely to be compromised. Furthermore, since our words have more healing power when we "Walk the talk", it's important to handle one's own sleep disturbances to be more effective with others. It just works better that way.

Question. Why is something that has long been a natural source of pleasure and restoration, now somewhat viewed as a luxury? Are chronic sleep disturbances to be accepted as just part of modern life?

Answer. First, no, it is not necessary to accept poor quality of sleep as a given in contemporary life, despite how common place the deprivation has become. However, modern conditions have made life such that many people must now take proactive action to insure the activity of high quality sleep. This is shocking considering that as recent as only thirty years ago refreshing sleep was an unconcerned, unnamed, rhythmic part of life, requiring no special effort.

Up through the middle part of the 20th century, insomnia was seen as a relatively rare condition. To understand why sleep disturbances have become so prevalent in such a short expanse of time, it's helpful to see the problem as an invisible, taunting, many-headed creature the sleepless creature! Let's look at just four of the "Many heads" before discussing remedies and possible options in the therapeutic encounter.

Broadly speaking, some of the unprecedented conditions contributing to the current epidemic are poor diet, insufficient exercise, under exposure to real sunshine with over exposure to electronic light, and especially, a lack of healthful rhythm in daily activities. Let's take a deeper look at each of those four conditions.

Not surprising, poor quality of food and diet comprise one of the "Heads" to this taunting and unhealthful "Creature". Diet (Just like sleep) is centrally associated with all aspects of wellness and disease. Quality of sleep is very much determined in the gut, (Lower digestive system) not in the brain as is so commonly as-

sumed. Melatonin, like other hormones related to quality of sleep, is largely manufactured in the gut. A diet heavy in processed foods will have an over-taxing effect on the liver, (Often signaled by 3 am waking) and an undermining effect upon sufficient hormonal production in the gut. If that is not serious enough, there's another consequence of concern: poor quality foods foster overgrowth of pathogens in the gut micro biome. The over abundant pathogens go scavenging for food at night and may well be the hidden suspects in nighttime waking due to their food-seeking activity. Thus, recovering restorative sleep is greatly enhanced when gut health is included in the turn around.

A second "Head" contributing to the epidemic, again not surprising, is daily exercise. It's a given that proper exercise is beneficial to health and general well-being. But why is strenuous exercise so often neglected in sleep therapy programs? Just like the way children and pets collapse into sleep after a good run around, adult physical bodies give themselves over to sleep much easier when given a good work out. Just make sure that the physical exercising does not back up against the "Wind-down time" in the evening by having all strenuous exercise done four hours in advance of bedtime. Too close to bedtime can be too stimulating for the necessary slowdown to sleep.

Question. What about computer screens? We can't get away from them, and yet we keep hearing that they interfere with sleep?

Answer. You're right on, because the third "Head" of this taunting creature is the effect of light. There are many forms of light; some light is healing, while other types of light are challenging to physical health, and thus contribute to chaotic inner rhythms. Let's start with the healing light first, emanating from our Sun. The Sun brings warmth and the force of goodness. It actually has the effect of lifting up the soul. Just contrast your inner mood with a grey, chalky-sky day with a day in which the sky is clear and radiant blue light shine in. There's collective joy in the air with a clear blue sky! With sunshine people seem to be friendlier and have more positive motivation. That is the human soul responding to the in-streaming elixir of healing light from the Sun.

Yet so many people have busy "Indoor" lives, with too little exposure to direct sunshine. In its place is an abundance of electronically generated blue light, primarily from computer screens. Since technology is here to stay, it's important to be aware of the over-activating impact upon the brain of staring at a screen for hours. It takes discipline and awareness to proactively find ways to balance the electronic impact. There are several helpful computer apps available to gradually decrease the electronic blue light emitted as evening approaches. While the gradual tapering of electronic blue light is helpful, an even better move is to turn off all electronic screens at least 1-2 hours before bedtime.

Question. And the fourth "Head" in your metaphor of the sleepless creature?

Answer. The fourth head is the lost art of rhythm. Like sleep, until recent times, rhythm was just an un-named, unconcerned, integral, and wholesome part of life. There was a dinner time, wake-up time, bed-time, special day for market, laundry, etc. Work schedules had routine and boundaries. One's personal life had a rhythmic balance. The physical body does very well with rhythm, in fact it needs it. Rhythm is the secret sauce of a good life. Yet today it seems as though the majority of people are harried, trying to cope with demands of chaotic work and home lives. For example, children's sports practices are at all hours of the evening and global commerce frequently means that there is no fixed boundary to the work day. Rhythm is especially difficult in the field of nursing in which schedules rotate and nightshift are common. In short, developing as much of a rhythmic life (i.e. steady, predictable routines) as possible, brings an inner sense of sturdiness and along with that, sounder sleep.

Aside from these main four "Heads" mentioned, there are many smaller "Heads", contributing to sleep disturbances such as menopausal conditions, chronic pain, addictions, child waking, pet disturbances, etc. There's too much to go into here, but your readers may learn more about underlying conditions, both physical and spiritual at RRRSleep.com.

Question. Many patients self-medicate with alcohol and or pot to get to sleep. Is that helpful or harmful?

Answer. It's amazing how alcohol and marijuana are increasingly used as DIY sedatives for sleep. Yet as a sleep remedies they are tricky because they initially act as a sedative, but then later in digestion and assimilation, they act as a stimulant. So, they can be problematic. The only real, holistic remedy is to use the pain and frustration of sleep deprivation as a portal to healing one's life. Insomnia, and other sleep disturbances, are signals that life is out of balance. Simply put, the pathway to wholesome sleep is to clean up the gut, limit screens at night, get more exercise, find something that brings joy each day, and build in rhythm. It is simple, but not easy to do. As with much of life, it's more do-able, and a lot more fun, with a buddy.

Question. As wonderful as nursing is, at times it can be very stressful and chaotic, contributing to our own battle with sleep deprivation. For example, I have a colleague who has suffered with insomnia for over ten years and then received a diagnosis of Stage IV cancer. Remarkably, she has bounced back from the cancer, but says the

insomnia has been more difficult than the cancer! Do you have recommendations for changing such long standing patterns?

Answer. Tragically, your friend's story is not all that unusual. To begin the turn-around, start with the fundamental assumptions that you were designed to sleep, it is your birthright, and retraining is very possible, even when it has been so chronic. Throw out self-deficiency labels, and especially the self-diagnoses. There are lots of limiting, chronic sleep deprivation self-diagnoses flying around today! The labels can keep the pattern stuck. Here are a few general tips to augment the comprehensive list in the link contained in the footnote. Break denial about the seriousness of sleep disturbances. At some point, sleep deprivation underlies all chronic health conditions. Don't wait for a health crisis.

1. Plan your evening wind down to sleep. Without advance planning and determination, sleep-stealing events relentlessly encroach upon sleeping time. Choose to vigilantly guard sleep time.
2. Write out a holistic re-training plan covering the "Four heads" discussed above, and then enlist support for follow through in setting new habits. Share the plan with family and friends. Your efforts will inspire and support them. Take leadership in your social sphere to reclaim healthful sleep rhythms.
3. Review and adopt the appropriate standard sleep hygiene protocols. Follow this link below for a fine standard "To-do" list to set up for sound sleep.
4. Drink sufficient water throughout day so that you have the inner resources to manufacture melatonin and several other sleep-related hormones. Dehydration is usually a factor in sleep disturbances.
5. The simple practice of tapping for sleep (See YouTube EFT videos on tapping for sleep) stimulates the memory body for sleep. It's quick and can be very effective.
6. Do something that brings joy every day, this simple act of kindness toward the self, lifts the soul and contributes to easier, more refreshing sleep.
7. Find a way to stargaze as frequently as possible. As far-out as it may sound, peacefully gazing at the stars helps the soul and spirit connect to the wonders of the universe that are accessed through sleep. This intentional reconnection helps to make entering into the Mystery of Sleep more accessible.

In summary, reclaiming refreshing sleep is not a mystery: it is a discipline (And can be a joyful one!) of exchanging sleep-stealing habits for sleep-supporting habits. It takes intention and commitment. Sleep retraining is now an inconvenient necessity for many adults and children. Yet the payoff for the effort is tremendous. The actual activity of sleep itself is a great mystery; it is the baby sibling of death. Those spiritual mysteries can be known and entered into for a richer, more satisfying, and even productive sleep. In the business of nursing and in daily life, making space for inner spiritual development, whatever that means for you, will contribute to healthful sleep. Meditation and prayer strengthen the spirit, which in turn makes letting go into the spiritual activity of sleep easier and more natural.