



Better Sleep: A Key to Better Mental Health

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

When is the last time you had a good night's sleep? Chances are, it's been a while.

According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), 6 out of 10 people have some kind of sleep problem. Insomnia or sleep disorders cause about 40 million Americans to have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or they wake up too early and find they can't get back to sleep.

Sleep researchers also estimate that nearly half of all Americans mismanage their sleep; we stay up too late and get up too early. This affects our health and safety. It is even more amazing that we can be chronically sleep deprived, and be completely unaware that lack of sleep is the cause of our overwhelming fatigue, irritability, fuzzy thinking, and difficulty staying alert. Children who are sleep deprived can show symptoms that mimic attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

What happens to us when we get less sleep than we really need? Research shows that there are many symptoms. One of the first things to go is our alertness, especially sustained alertness. Motivation and creativity also suffer, since they require perseverance and when we are tired we tend to give up faster. Productivity drops off, and we make more mistakes when we are sleep deprived. One research study reported that the amount of sleep you get is the single best predictor of general psychological adjustment. Insufficient sleep also causes physical symptoms such as fatigue, dizziness, headaches, and impaired immune function (which makes it harder to fight off disease). We may experience reduced enjoyment of relationships and sex. Finally, there is an increased tendency toward accidents, including automobile accidents. Based on NSF research, 100,000 traffic accidents each year are caused by fatigue.

By improving our sleep habits, we can change our lives for the better. Now is a good time to take a good look at our sleep since May is National Better Sleep Month.

What factors lead to poor sleep? There are many causes. It can be as simple as having poor sleep habits, like eating a heavy meal just before bedtime. Sleep problems can occur more frequently during periods of stress or depression, or during bouts with anxiety. These conditions usually are temporary, but may be ongoing. Problems with sleep may have a physical cause, such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, pain, hormone fluctuations (especially in women), or hypoglycemia.

How to Improve Sleep

Watch your diet – Reducing caffeine or alcohol consumption may improve sleep. Caffeine acts as a stimulant and may be keeping you awake. Try cutting out caffeine in the afternoons and evenings and see if this makes a difference. You might think alcohol would help you to sleep, since it is a sedative. But research shows that while alcohol may help you fall asleep, it interferes with your ability to stay asleep. Try cutting out or cutting back on alcohol.

Avoid heavy meals close to bedtime – After eating a meal, digestion begins. This process competes with sleep. Refrain from eating a large amount for about three hours before bedtime, though if hungry a light snack is okay.

Establish a regular schedule for sleep – Research shows that it helps to have a regular schedule for going to bed and for waking, and to follow this even on the weekends. Our bodies do better when trained to follow a routine

Use bedtime relaxation techniques – A calming activity before bedtime can do wonders for improving sleep. There are dozens of relaxation strategies: take a warm bath, do stretching exercises, meditate, pray, listen to gentle music, do yoga, pet a dog or cat, or read a non-stressful book. Doing this every night allows us to establish the habit of relaxing, become drowsy, and then falling asleep.

A great book to read about sleep is *The Promise of Sleep*, by Dr. William Dement. If sleep still eludes you, talk to your doctor, or seek help from a specialty program like the Sleep Disorder Center at Union Hospital in Elkton.

Whenever I start seeing a new client in psychotherapy, one of the first things I ask is "How's your sleep?" Sleep is often an indicator of the level of pain in someone's life, it is a great indicator of general adjustment, it can hint at other underlying issues, and sometimes a few changes in sleep habits can produce remarkable improvement in a short period of time.

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