

To Bed Perchance to Sleep

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“*Waking at 4 to soundless dark, I stare*” (Philip Larkin, “Aubade”)

How much sleep do you get a night? How easy is it for you to fall – or stay – asleep? Statistics (and the prevalence of sleep medications) show that most Americans have difficulty sleeping, often waking up several times during the night, or at the crack of dawn, unable to return to sleep. Recently writers have devoted newspaper and magazine articles to the subject, and pharmaceutical companies make billions of dollars a year off the prevalence of insomnia, real or perceived. Sometimes there are medical, psychological, or situational factors that inhibit people’s ability to sleep. But sometimes, sleep becomes disparaged in the pressure to live life at the 21st century pace, and the factors necessary for it become ignored, until people seem to lose the ability to do what ought to come naturally.

Despite the Red Bull, hyper-caffeinated, over-stimulated, have-it-all, workaholic-friendly message subliminally pounded into most Americans’ brains, the reality is: *humans need sleep*. Not only do humans need sleep, but they also need time to transition into sleep, time to dream, and time to experience some semblance of natural rhythms (time away from artificial light, experience of darkness and natural light, becoming tired, resting, and sleeping). And unless I’m mistaken about my audience, you are human, which means these are some of your *basic daily needs*. You need to sleep.

Contrary to popular opinion, not only do humans need sleep, but we need an adequate amount of sleep. And, no, four hours does not count as adequate. As one sleep expert says, “The percentage of the population who need less than five hours of sleep per night, rounded to a whole number, is zero” (quoted in Mary Sykes Wylie, “Sleepless in America”). Sleep deprivation causes profound mental and physical suffering – it has been used as a form of torture in most countries – yet many view sleep as a luxury or a weakness. How many times have you heard someone brag about how little sleep she (or he) got the night before (as if staying awake is an admirable endurance feat, or sign of moral strength)?

Life in the 24/7, wired world is part of the problem for many who are sleepless in the United States. There are few recreational, work, shopping, or communication activities that can’t happen as easily at 11 PM as 11 AM, leading many people to extend their waking hours beyond reason for play or productivity. Struggling to sleep on the other side of relentless activity, people increasingly use alcohol or sleep medications. While these can seem to solve the problem, they do not provide natural sleep; they interfere with the body’s natural rhythms; they can interfere with dreaming; they can lead to rebound insomnia upon discontinuation; and they ignore the role of lifestyle in sleep disturbances.

Regular, restful sleep with time to dream is vital to mental and physical health, and is a crucial component of basic self-care – an underlying theme of this and subsequent columns. Below are some tips for getting the sleep – and dream – time you need when you hit the hay each night:

- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon/evening
- Avoid excessive amounts of alcohol and food late at night
- DO participate in regular heart-pounding cardiovascular exercise*
- DON'T exercise within three hours of bedtime
- Limit the bed to sleeping and sex: avoid doing work or watching TV there
- Make your bedroom conducive to sleep: dark, cool, quiet, and safe
- Give yourself quiet time every night to transition toward sleep – time when you are not running errands, doing chores, working, or working out, but when you are reading, journaling, writing letters, taking a bath, or generally relaxing
- Prepare an atmosphere that lends itself to sleep in the evening: dim the lights and avoid the glare of the TV or computer right before bed
- Include relaxation, breathing, meditation, prayer, staring into space, or other quiet/restful practices as a regular part of your daily routine
- Think about taking brief (20-minute) naps each day
- Don't start difficult conversations late in the evening

These suggestions should not take the place of professional intervention if the insomnia is pervasive: It is important to rule out medical and mental conditions that can cause or contribute to insomnia.

* Appropriate to your own level of fitness and your doctor's approval.

References:

- Rubin Naiman, "Nightmind: Making Darkness Our Friend Again"
- Mary Sykes Wylie, "Sleepless in America: Making It through the Night in a Wired World"
- Margaret Wehrenberg and Laurel Coppersmith, "Technotrap: When Work Becomes Your Second Home" in *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April 2008 (*A Nation of Insomniacs: Reclaiming the Lost Art of Sleep*)