

Better Sleep

Ellen Vora, MD

- In my holistic psychiatry practice, patients often tell me they have difficulty sleeping. I also work with many people who are hooked on sleep medication. Even for those people who don't perceive themselves as having difficulty sleeping, few among us are actually getting enough sleep.
- As a country, we are sleeping less than we used to:
 - o Average hours of sleep have gone from 7.9 in 1942 to 6.8 in 2013
 - o The percentage of people sleeping less than 6 hrs/night has gone from 11% in 1942 to 40% in 2013
- This is due to a combination of difficulty sleeping and lifestyle
- Our treatments for insomnia are marginally effective and potentially harmful:
 - o Sedatives/hypnotics are associated with what we call increased all cause mortality (i.e., shorter life span), even when someone is prescribed only 18 pills per year
 - o Benzodiazepines are associated with an increased risk of Alzheimers Dementia
 - o I agree with the statement the British Medical Journal made in 2014: "Unwarranted longterm use of these drugs should be considered as a public health concern."
- Let's try a new way to look at sleep:
 - o First, trust the system:
 - Your body wants to sleep and knows how to sleep
 - o Then what's causing all this insomnia?
 - There are 2 categories of what's preventing us from getting enough restful sleep:
 - Something is irritating the system
 - Something is missing from the system
- We can easily achieve better sleep by removing what's irritating the system and adding in what's missing

Step 1: Remove What's Irritating the System

Light

- Light regulates our circadian rhythm (our sleep-wake cycle); be strategic about light exposure for better sleep
- We evolved being outside during the day, and the only light we saw after sunset was moonlight and fire
- Our modern environment sends confusing signals to the brain
 - o E.g., staring at a computer screen at 11pm simulates the effect of sunshine, causing a hormonal cascade that promotes wakefulness
- Get bright light in the morning:
 - o Open your blinds as soon as you wake up
 - o Get outside during the day. Can you walk to work or go outside during lunch? Consider *not* wearing sunglasses.
 - o Consider bright light therapy (sitting by a 10,000-lux light box for 30 minutes in the morning) to better regulate your circadian rhythm
- Experience darkness at night:
 - o Download *f.lux* on your computer. It's a free program that dims your computer screen in the evening.
 - o Dim the lights in your home starting around sunset to avoid melatonin suppression
 - o Consider wearing orange-tinted glasses for 30-60 minutes before bed to block blue spectrum light
 - Recommendation: Uvex Ultra-Spec 2000 Safety Glasses
 - o At night, consider brushing your teeth, taking a bath or shower and reading by candlelight
 - Recommendation: GoodLight non-toxic candles
 - o If your room isn't completely dark when you sleep, wear an eye mask or get blackout shades
 - o If there's light from electronics in the bedroom, cover them (use cloth, duct tape or orange tape), or get the electronics out of the bedroom

- If you're up in the middle of the night, try not to let your eyes "see" any light: try an orange nightlight in the bathroom or go (carefully) in the dark

Caffeine

- We often underestimate the relationship between caffeine and sleep
- Caffeine has a half-life of ~5-7 hours. Think of it this way: if you drink a coffee at 3pm, it's as though you just drank half a coffee at 9pm.
- If you require medication to sleep and you consume *any* caffeine, drop the caffeine (otherwise we're just chasing our tail)
- Don't get me wrong—coffee and tea have benefits, they're not all bad. But if you suffer from insomnia, you owe it to yourself to do a trial of being 100% off caffeine
- Even if you have no trouble falling asleep, caffeine can impair sleep quality
- Reduce overall caffeine consumption and stop caffeine by 12pm
- Note: reduce caffeine gradually to avoid withdrawal symptoms (irritability, fatigue):
 - Coffee -> half-caf -> black tea -> green tea -> herbal tea

Missing the Window, Getting Overtired

- Taking a page from the infant sleep playbook, it's important to get to bed during that elusive window when you're *tired*, but not *overtired*.
- What's overtired? There's a window of time when you're tired in the evening. If you stay awake and miss that window, your body responds by secreting the stress hormone, cortisol. The body is trying to help out. It thinks, "oh, we must be at war, or running from a tiger. Let me help out by secreting cortisol. That way we'll be able to fight or run or stay awake all night."
- You might recognize the feeling of being overtired:
 - Feeling wired or suddenly wide-awake in the evening
 - You might feel warm
 - If you're awake with the lights on, you might feel productive and get involved with "projects" around the house
 - If you're lying in bed, you might experience racing thoughts
- The key is to get to bed while you're still tired. If you let yourself go past that, you'll get a shot of cortisol and you won't be able to fall asleep.

Alcohol

- While alcohol is well known for making it easier to fall asleep, it disrupts sleep architecture, causing restless sleep, especially in the second half of the night
- Monitor your sleep quality when you drink. If you find you toss and turn on the nights when you drink, or wake up tired the next day, reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption, especially closer to bedtime. Perhaps take weeknights off from drinking.

Sleep Aids and Other Medications

- Several medications affect sleep
- Sleep aids, while potentially useful in the short-term, can *exacerbate* insomnia in the medium and long-term, most likely due to down-regulation of our receptors for *GABA*, a brain chemical messenger involved with our ability to feel relaxed and sleepy.
- Other medications, such as stimulants, other psych meds, steroids, and supplements, such as rhodiola, vitamin D, B vitamins and multivitamins can be stimulating and should be taken in the morning

Obstructive Sleep Apnea

- Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a very common condition that interferes with our ability to breathe while we sleep
- OSA causes very interrupted sleep. These "apneic" episodes (moments where the body stops breathing) cause subtle awakenings, and whenever the body's oxygen supply is compromised, the brain resists dropping into deep sleep.

Add In What's Missing

Stable Blood Sugar

- The American diet promotes a blood sugar roller coaster
- Blood sugar fluctuations disrupt your sleep, causing middle of the night awakening
- If your blood sugar crashes in the middle of the night, your body responds by secreting adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormones). This is activating, and can make your sleep restless. You might start to toss and turn or wake up in the middle of the night feeling “wired.”
- If you don't have difficulty falling asleep but you have difficulty *staying* asleep, think of this as a blood sugar issue until proven otherwise
- Here's how to maintain stable blood sugar:
 - o Eat more protein and healthy fats (olive oil, coconut oil, grass-fed butter and ghee)
 - o Avoid sugar, refined carbs and alcohol
 - o Take a spoonful of coconut oil upon waking, in the afternoon and right before bed

Magnesium

- Many of us are deficient in magnesium, and this can interfere with restful sleep
- You can replete magnesium in a few ways:
 - o Magnesium supplementation (Recommendation: Pure Encapsulations Magnesium Glycinate ~400mg at bedtime)
 - o Topical magnesium (Recommendation: Designs for Health Magnegel; rub pea-sized portion onto skin)
 - o Epsom salt bath (extra credit if you take a bath by candlelight)

Relaxation

- This should come as no surprise: we are deficient in relaxation
- It's difficult to go from being “on” to dropping into a relaxed state for sleep
- If we don't give our minds a chance to relax during the day, then lying in bed is the first opportunity for your mind to take stock of the day; this can feel like “racing thoughts” while you're trying to fall asleep
- We need a balance of activity *and* relaxation during the day in order to sleep deeply at night
- **Wind down before bed:**
 - o Have a relaxing evening ritual (take a bath, stretch, read by candlelight)
 - o Read a book in bed wearing orange glasses until you feel sleepy
 - o Count back 8.5 hours from wake-up time. That's when you need to get in bed and read a book.
 - o Lie in bed with your hands on your belly; inhale for 4 counts, hold, then exhale for 4 counts
- **Unplug:**
 - o Spend more of your free time unplugged (away from TV and internet)
 - o Don't let yourself be on autopilot, checking the phone compulsively, habituated to going home and opening the computer or turning on the TV. Make these choices *consciously*.
 - o Stop using electronics by 9 or 10pm
 - This means turning off the TV and not checking your phone (I know, it's a tall order these days!)
 - Set your phone on a do-not-disturb schedule, perhaps 11pm-7am
- **Rest:**
 - o As a culture, we value productivity and we don't value rest. This mindset makes it difficult for us to drop into a relaxed state for sleep.
 - o Have a “*willingness to let go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth*” – Brené Brown.
- **Play:**
 - o Spend time playing with animals or children
 - o Be goofy with your significant other or a friend
 - o Play games, make music, create art

- Don't just numb out with TV or internet. Invest your time in activities that truly refuel you: being in fresh air, sunshine, nature, engaging with art and creative pursuits.
- **Breathe**
 - Breathing exercises are a tool to instantly switch the tone of your nervous system from stress to relaxation
 - Lie down, place your hands on your belly, and inhale for 4 counts, hold for 2, and exhale for 4
- **Meditate**
 - Demystify this. It can be very simple. Sit and observe your thoughts. Try to cultivate a patient and compassionate attitude toward yourself and your thoughts.

Suggestions for Daily Relaxation

- Yoga
- Meditation
- Breathing exercises
- HeartMath
- Tai Chi
- Epsom salt bath by candlelight
- Journal
- Be in nature (you can take the train to Cold Spring and hike or just go to the nearest park)
- Get acupuncture or other energy work
- Take a walk
- Prioritize a creative outlet (draw, paint, play with children, play with animals, dance, make music)
- Turn on music, turn off the lights, light a candle, lie down and enjoy

Tech Support for Meditation (kind of a contradiction!)

- HeadSpace: www.getsomeheadspace.com
- HeartMath: www.heartmath.com
- Zencast: www.zencast.org
- Buddhify
- www.calm.com
- Breath2Relax
- Deep Sleep and Relaxation, Guided Meditation and Affirmations (Sleep Learning System) by Joel Thielke
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFwCKKa--18>
- Free guided meditations:
 - <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>
 - <http://www.dharma.org/resources/audio>
 - <http://www.mindfulcompassion.com/cms/?cat=4>
 - <http://www.tarabrach.com/audioarchives-guided-meditations.html>
 - <http://www.audiodharma.org/series/1/talk/1835/>