

## Optimising Sleep

As we and our family, friends, work-mates and community members respond and adapt to the distressing events of January 2011, it is timely to talk about the topic of sleep. Recently, I was asked by a person involved in the Charlton flood recovery community why he and so many of his friends and acquaintances were waking up regularly at 4am in the morning. Very interesting I thought but not so comforting for those affected.

Sleep is a very powerful marker of a person's physical and mental health, so if an individual is not sleeping well, it is usually indicative of health issues. Poor sleep includes late onset (struggling to get to sleep) or waking and staying awake for extended periods during the night. Sleeping too much is also not healthy and may be symptomatic of chronic conditions such as depression, stress or other illnesses. So if you or a family member is not sleeping well now, then it may be time to seek some assistance, or change some of your own behaviour to assist your sleep. Health practitioners refer to the process of optimising sleep as sleep hygiene and there are many practical ways to improve this 'hygiene'.

Humans are diurnal (as opposed to nocturnal) beings which means we are designed to sleep at night and be active when the sun is up. That is the natural way for us to exist and so there are various body chemicals (eg. melatonin) released into our system at certain times of the day and night to encourage our sleep. So the first and most fundamental aspect of sleep hygiene is to avoid staying up late at night, and get up soon after the sun rises each day (within reason). In this way, we allow our body and its natural cycles to regulate our sleep patterns and by observing this as a regular routine, we are more likely to sleep well. Nevertheless, routine may be possible under normal circumstances, but not so during and after natural disasters, when recovery efforts often lead to significant levels of distress, anxiety, worry, anger and so on.

During times of stress, our natural rhythms of sleep will be disrupted for a range of reasons. An excess of body chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline will accompany heightened levels of stress, and may explain difficulties getting to sleep. A 'busy mind', in tandem with exhaustion and fatigue, may not prevent us getting to sleep but can in part explain the '4am wake-ups'. Some people may be affected by one, the other, or both. Either way, the person is over-aroused physiologically (related to untimely release of certain chemicals) or cognitively (overwhelmed with things to do or problems to solve) and so sleep is disrupted. In consideration of this, many psychologists and health practitioners will assist people with sleep problems using both cognitive and behavioural therapy techniques. In effect, a person struggling with sleep needs to change both their thinking and behaviour if they wish to sleep better.

In terms of behaviour change, sleep is assisted if we avoid vigorous exercise, caffeine, excessive alcohol, heavy meals and highly stimulating activities like some TV programs or computer games within several hours of sleep-time. It may also be helpful to avoid drinking fluids later in the evening. Further, sleeping pills are not advisable for long term sleep hygiene as they act like alcohol, allowing sleep in the first place but tend to prevent deep sleep occurring. Effectively, to encourage quality sleep we need to reduce our arousal levels (and so reduce levels of cortisol and adrenaline in our body) each evening and so need to avoid activities or substances that otherwise arouse us (sexual activity is one exception) or disrupt our capacity to relax.

At the cognitive (thinking) level, sleep is assisted by finding ways to calm our busy mind each evening. Importantly, we need to put a 'gap' between our busy day and sleep time by inserting some relaxation

activities into this gap. Relaxation activities might include having a laugh or watching a funny show, enjoying a warm bath or massage, meditation or listening to calming music, reading a book (for some), and so on. Effectively, we want to switch off from the busyness (aka business) of our day so we can shut down, lower arousal and enjoy a peaceful night's sleep. Another method to consider for some people is to use a note-book each evening to write down all your troubling thoughts or feelings, or the tasks you need to complete in the next days. As appropriate, write down actions against each item, and maybe even prioritise. Having done this, ask yourself, "So, is there anything else I can do about these things tonight?". If there is and it is practical, do it, else make a note and a commitment to following up the next day. Then go and do something relaxing, telling yourself meanwhile that all those tasks can wait till tomorrow and related details are safely stored in your note-book, not in your head. Now enjoy your sleep, and soon your life (again). 😊

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