SLEEP REVISITED

An earlier edition of this newsletter featured the value of sleep and the harm related to inadequate sleep. Here we will address the relationship between sleep difficulties and the difficulty in shutting down our bodies and minds. Some tips and exercises are included.

Possible causes:

Life Events: Events in our life may be distracting us and causing us to worry. These events may be causing stress, anxiety or depressed mood.

Thinking Styles: Some of us are worriers—we tend to think about situations a lot and play them out in our mind. We have a difficult time letting go.

Behavioral Explanations: We may have developed poor habits around sleep. Perhaps we don’t have a clear bedtime routine. Perhaps we don’t unplug from our electronics to allow our bodies and minds to prepare for sleep. Perhaps our environment is such that the noise, light, or temperature is bothering us in our quest for sleep.

Physical Issues: Some of us have physical symptoms that cause problems with getting to sleep—pain, muscle twitching or cramping. There may be side effects from medication that we are taking, alcohol that we drink, food that we ate or caffeine that is an ingredient in all of the above. Nicotine close to bedtime can also impair sleep.

Possible Helpers:

Counting sheep tends to be too boring to keep distressful thoughts away but there is something similar, called cognitive refocusing treatment. It involves doing personally engaging yet non-arousing mental tasks (such as reciting lyrics from favorite songs or plots from books) while trying to fall asleep. The personalization seems to be helpful as well as focusing consistently on one mental task, allowing people to associate it with sleep.

Create a bedtime ritual to signal to the body and mind that all activity is done for the day and it is time for rest. Any food, sensory stimulation, or even thoughts taken in must be digested and absorbed before we are free to rest. Finish eating two hours prior to bedtime and turn off the TV or put aside cell phone or laptop at least a half hour before trying to settle in to sleep. Once we have closed down, we can find a specific activity that we can associate with sleep—reading a book, taking a bath, listening to calming music, practicing some relaxation or breathing exercises.

Focus on breathing and creating a stable rhythm. Try to breathe in for three seconds, hold this breath for two seconds, and then breathe out for three seconds. Repeat often.

If medications are bothering sleep, talk to a health care provider about changing medicine or taking it at a different time.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

Rest on back and contract and stretch muscles, selecting those that help your body relax. Flex and extend feet, spread toes, and then curl them under three times. Hold positions for around five seconds.

Spend some time (not when trying to sleep) thinking about things that are causing worry or distress. Determine what can be done to move situations to a resolution. If the situations are things that can’t be controlled—try writing them out in lists earlier in the evening.

Put in ear plugs or wear a sleep mask. Not only will ambient light and sound be minimized, for some of us the rhythm of our own breathing will be soothing.

Be honest about how habits might be interfering with sleep and/or fueling anxiety. Caffeine after 2 or 3 in the afternoon can affect sleep. Remember energy drinks contain a lot of caffeine. How is your alcohol intake? Is exercise a daily activity? Are meals nutritious?

Notice the habits and routines that change sleep. For cognitive memory processing, a power nap is adequate.

The ideal time to nap is generally between the hours of 1 and 4 p.m. Napping later in the day could interfere with nighttime sleep.

Dreaming during a short nap is a sign of being very sleep-deprived.

There are people who don’t benefit from naps and researchers continue to study why. Currently they are looking at potential genetic differences.

Sleeping partially upright may make it easier to wake up from a nap.

On-line Resources

National Sleep Foundation

How Long to Nap

Sleep Education