

Stewardship of Self for Christian Workers: Sleep

God's people from time to time have had difficulty sleeping. Through no fault of his own, **Job** experienced great stress and said, "I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss till dawn" (Job 4:13-14).

Even great political leaders like King **Darius** agonized over poor decisions that endangered his friends, and he found himself unable to eat or sleep (Daniel 6:18).

However Scripture has promises for good sleep, such as "When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet" (Proverbs 3:24). Another promise is, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

After receiving a message from God, the prophet **Jeremiah** awoke, looked around and said that his sleep had been pleasant to him (Jeremiah 31:26). **Our Lord** himself slept during a furious storm, much to the surprise of his disciples (Matthew 8:24).

Peter, early preacher and church leader, was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains with two sentries standing guard the night before he was to be brought to trial (Acts 12:6).

Yet, Christian workers may have difficulty sleeping at times; however, not all such difficulties are necessary. God may enable us to sleep at peace even in the most difficult circumstances.

How do I know if I have a sleep disorder?

Although **many kinds** of sleep disorders exist, the primary sleep disorders are those that involve problems in the amount, quality, or timing of sleep. When people sleep either too much or too little, the sleep they get does not leave them feeling rested. Or if they cannot sleep when they want to but fall asleep when they want to stay awake, they may have a sleep disorder.

With **primary insomnia** for at least a month people have difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or not feeling rested after sleep. They also feel distressed about not being able to sleep, or the lack of sleep impairs their functioning. Some people have the opposite problem, **excessive sleepiness**--the problem of sleeping too much or at the wrong times for at least a month.

In this brochure we are concentrating primarily on helping people with insomnia so that they can get enough restful sleep during the time they want to sleep. Such people often become increasingly frustrated and distressed over their inability to sleep, and this makes them less and less able to get good sleep. Lying in bed for hours during sleepless nights, they find themselves falling asleep during worship services, or while reading, watching television, attending meetings, and even driving.

What can I do if I have a sleep disorder?

Ideally, to ensure that a change will not be detrimental to existing medical conditions or treatments, one ought to consult a medical professional before making any

lifestyle change. If possible, such a professional should examine medical causes or implications of problems.

Remember that one crucial test of whether or not you have a sleep problem is whether or not you fall asleep during the day. The "normal" eight hours of sleep is only an average and changes with your age and circumstances. You may need nine hours, or you may need only six hours. Also remember that waking up briefly or coming close to waking up about every hour and a half is normal. You may find the following suggestions helpful if you really have a disorder.

- Keep a **sleep log** for two weeks. Record
 - When you go to bed
 - How long it takes you to fall asleep
 - How often you wake up and when
 - The amount of time to get back to sleep
 - Time you finally get up to stay
 - How you feel when you get up
 - How sleepy you are during the day
 - When you take any naps and for how long
- Look for **patterns** in your sleep log.
 - Do you have trouble falling asleep initially?
 - Do you have trouble staying asleep?
 - Do you not feel rested and stay awake after a night's sleep?
 - Find a suggestion in the following that will help solve the problem you discover in your log.
- Establish a **sleep routine**. The most important part of that routine is to get up at the same time each morning. The second most important is to do things in the same order and at the same time just before you go to bed each night.
- **Do not lie in bed** more than 15-20 minutes trying to get to sleep. Get up and do something boring and not physically taxing, such as polishing your shoes or even just cutting strips of paper. Then go to bed when you get drowsy. Repeat this as often as necessary.
- Do not use the bed for anything except sleep and sex. Do not read, watch TV, have devotions, etc. If you want to read, do so in a chair next to the bed, and get into bed when you get drowsy. You want your bed to be associated with sleep and rest, not with wakefulness and activity.
- Do not **exercise** vigorously within two hours of bedtime. Do exercise vigorously at some time during the day.
- **Reduce distractions** or annoyances, such as the nightly hassles of noises, light, etc. For example, if noises disturb you, wear earplugs; use a white noise generator (TV with screen covered and on a non-channel will do); or play tapes or CDs of environmental sounds such as waves, wind in the pines, etc.
- Avoid **caffeine** intake for the five hours before going to sleep. Avoid drinking much liquid within two hours of bedtime.
- Have a light snack of foods rich in **L-tryptophan**, such as a glass of milk or a turkey, peanut butter, or tuna sandwich.
- Do not do **serious thinking** at the end of the day just before you go to bed. Do it earlier so that you can relax before bedtime.
- If you are anxious at bedtime, consider **journaling** to get those anxious thoughts out of your head and onto paper.
- Plan for the next day if you are anxious about things coming up, as long as you do not become mentally stimulated.

- Sleep in comfortable conditions. **Temperature** is very important, and most people sleep best when the temperature is about 64-66 degrees, but you may be different—and being too warm is worse than being too cool. If spouses like different temperatures, get a dual control electric blanket or cut your blankets in half and sew them together with one light side and one heavy side. If all else fails, sleep in separate beds near each other.
- Get a good **pillow**, one that is comfortable for you, whether it is made of feathers, foam, or barley husks.
- Get a wool or **fleece** mattress pad which aids sleep for many.
- **Pray** at night to turn everything over to God. Ask him for sleep.
- **Ask other people** to pray for your sleep problem.
- Make **confession** a part of your nightly prayers if you keep thinking about your shortcomings. Pray for **protection** during the night if you have fears about that.
- Attend a **healing service**.
- Take a warm (not hot) **bath** 10-15 minutes before going to bed.
- **Herbal supplements** such as Valerian (root), Kava Kava, or herbal teas may help.
- **Over-the-counter** antihistamines such as Benadryl may help, though Benadryl may have a ‘hangover’ effect.
- Remember that ‘weird’ **dreams** are normal. Most people have dreams that just do not make any sense, and they wonder where the dreams came from.
- If **nightmares** are a problem, write them down and add a happy, redemptive, resolving ending. Ask Christ to come into that dream and deal with it.
- Get a **massage** to relax if you have a partner who does it well and if it does not always lead to sex. Massaging your own scalp may be relaxing.
- Use relaxation techniques of stretching, breathing, and imagining one of your favorite places as described in our anxiety brochure.
- Check your medications to see if they have **side effects** that interfere with sleep. Your physician or pharmacist can give you that information, or you may have noticed that your sleep problem started when you began a new medication.
- Paint your bedroom a **soothing pastel** such as dusty rose or powder blue since bright colors tend to agitate.
- Use your imagination to create relaxing scenes.
- Read **books** about getting a good sleep such as *67 Ways to Good Sleep* written by Charles Inlander and Cynthia Moran.
- Find information about sleep disorders on the **Internet** at sites such as the one maintained by the National Library of Medicine at www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sleepdisorders.html or the one maintained by the National Sleep Foundation at www.websciences.org/nsf. These web sites have numerous links to reliable information about sleep disorders. (Remember that the domains .gov and .edu tend to be the most reliable.)
- If you want to listen to **music**, use soothing instrumental music rather than vocal music.
- Turn your **clock** around so that you cannot see the time during the night if you are a ‘clock watcher.’
- Avoid **naps** unless they are helpful. See if you can go for a week without napping. If you are sleeping better, stop napping permanently. If not, resume naps, but keep them to 20 minutes or less.
- Find a **comfortable position** in which to sleep. Many people find lying on their side with a pillow between their knees keeps their body in best alignment.
- Limit prescription **sleeping pills**. They can be helpful in times of particular difficulty, but regular use may be addictive and actually increase your sleep problems.
- Be sure you get enough vitamin B, calcium, magnesium, iron and copper.
- Avoid cheeses, yogurt, sour cream, processed meat, eggplant, potatoes, spinach, and tomatoes before sleep. They contain **tyrosine**, which can interfere with sleep.
- Avoid spicy, sugary, and/or high protein (except for those rich in L-tryptophan) foods several hours before bedtime.
- Do not use the bedroom as a study or **battleground** where you have emotionally or intellectually stimulating discussions.
- **Decorate the bedroom** with images associated with sleep or relaxation, such a sunset over the ocean, a cabin in the woods, a stream, or a sunny beach.
- If your problem is a **snoring** person nearby, try sewing a tennis ball on the back of his or her nightshirt making lying on the back impossible. People tend to snore less if they sleep on their sides.

You may not be able to do all of these things, and none of them work for everyone. However, all of them have helped some people, and one or more of them may be just what you need to get a good night’s sleep.

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