

Sleep.....when counting sheep is not enough.

by Benson Schaeffer, Ph.D.

Sleep is a hope, not a habit over which the individual has conscious control. Falling asleep quickly, remaining asleep throughout the night, and awakening to the alarm in the morning, not earlier, are hopes realized, not products of the exercise of will. Extreme stress can easily destroy the hope of sleep. For these reasons, many who lose a loved one through homicide have sleep problems. The stress of violent death throws their central nervous systems into a state of disequilibrium and disorganizes both restful sleep at night and alert wakefulness during the day.

Below are outlined methods for overcoming stress-related sleep problems, methods collectively termed sleep hygiene. These include: Regularly awakening to an alarm, for re-establishing firm sleep patterns; not lying in bed awake at night, to prevent the accumulation of confusing information about sleep by the central nervous system; and bedtime rituals, to prepare the mind and body for sleep.

Awakening To An Alarm

The only aspect of sleep under our deliberate control is awakening; a loud enough alarm will awaken any hearing person. This fact provides the individual who has a stress-induced sleep problem with a powerful tool for re-establishing firm sleep patterns, namely, setting an alarm to ring at the same time every weekday morning (sleeping in on weekends is a permitted luxury). The requirement to awaken to an alarm at the same time every weekday helps re-establish firm sleep patterns by regularizing the cyclic movements from shallow to deep and dreaming sleep that occurs throughout the night when sleep is not disturbed.

Some believe mistakenly that by forcing themselves to go to bed earlier than they normally would, people can regain lost sleep and build the habit of sleeping longer. This is most emphatically not the case. The individual with a sleep problem cannot will him/herself to fall asleep earlier than he/she normally would; as will be seen below, trying to do so is only likely to aggravate sleep problems.

Not Lying In Bed Awake

The central nervous system learns about sleep and sleeplessness automatically from what we do. For this reason, when an individual lies in bed for a long period of time (over 20 minutes) trying to go to sleep, he/she actually works against sleep. The only thing the central nervous system learns is that it is permissible to be in bed, supine, in the dark, during the night, and not sleep, most unfortunate information.

The best strategy, therefore, when an individual finds him/herself still awake 20 minutes after going to bed, or 20 minutes after awakening in bed in the middle of the night, is to get up and keep him/herself fully awake for half an hour before returning to bed. He/she can do anything during the half-hour that guarantees he/she will remain awake: Wash floors or dishes, sew, make repairs, etc. The point is to make certain that the central nervous system does not get the mistaken idea that lying in bed awake at night is permissible.

Also to prevent the central nervous system from accumulating mistaken information about sleep and sleeplessness, the individual would do best not to try to go to bed earlier than he/she normally does, and not take naps during the day. Going to bed early is unlikely to be productive, since the individual is extremely unlikely to fall asleep, he/she will probably be only providing the central nervous system with mistaken information, namely, that it is permissible to lie awake in bed. Taking naps during the day is unlikely to be productive because daytime naps teach the central nervous system it is permissible to sleep during the day, when it is still light outside.

Bedtime Rituals

Bedtime rituals are helpful because they organize and regularize pre-sleep behavior (which is often disorganized and irregular for the individual with a sleep problem); because they reduce the individual's tendency to worry about whether or not he/she will fall and remain asleep; and because they can foster the drowsiness and composure that precedes a night of normal cycling from shallow to deep and dreaming sleep, and back again. Different people find different elements useful in constructing a bedtime ritual; A glass of milk and a cookie, a warm bath, relaxing music, reading, etc.

In summary, then, to help him/herself overcome sleep problems, the individual would do well to try to follow these guidelines: To awaken to an alarm at the same time each weekday (sleeping in on weekends is an allowable luxury); when still awake 20 minutes after going to bed, or 20 minutes after awakening in the middle of the night, to get up and keep him/herself fully awake for half an hour before returning to bed; not to try to force him/herself to go to bed earlier than he/she normally would; to avoid daytime naps; and to develop a comfortable bedtime ritual.

In following these guidelines it is important for the individual to keep in mind that what he/she is basically doing is very gradually resetting his/her biological sleep clocks, very gradually re-teaching the central nervous system, which learns only from what he/she does, a more functional set of sleep habits. The key word is gradually. Following the guidelines for good sleep hygiene will yield a long-term solution, not a short-term fix. The individual will gradually begin sleeping better, but not necessarily tomorrow.

Benson Schaffer, Ph.D. is the father of actress Rebecca Schaffer, murdered July 19, 1989.