



Are You Getting Enough Sleep?

by MARIE WALL

If you have trouble getting to sleep or fall asleep easily only to awake in the middle of the night unable to fall back to sleep, you may not be getting what you need to feel fully rested the next day. If this describes you, you are not alone. I have listened to many teachers who have said that a good night's sleep is infrequent. How much sleep is required, the ill effects and what can be done to help are all individual concerns that need to be personally addressed. Better sleep routines, improved sleeping environments and relaxation techniques may help you get enough sleep.

Being blurry eyed is only the beginning of the common signs of sleep deprivation which can negatively affect focus, concentration and memory. It can change one's behaviour and tolerance to external events. And some research suggests that the long-term impact can compromise your immune system. Lack of sleep can also prod you to drink more caffeine and to eat more just to keep you going, which can cause weight gain. There are different schools of thought on how many hours of sleep are required but one thing to remember is that sleep is an individual concern and how much a person needs can range from five hours to ten hours. The key is to get enough sleep to be able to function well on a daily basis.

There are many things that can affect how much sleep you get. Knowing what these things are is a starting point in changing how you manage the situation. The lifestyle activities range from physical routines to medical problems and include diet, exercise, stress, anxiety, and even your attitude.

Parents often pay more attention to their children's bedtime routines than their own. Getting to sleep for adults is no different and having good pre-sleep rituals can really help. If you have problems falling to sleep a few suggestions include:

- Make regular bedtime schedules for both going to sleep and waking up. This eliminates the need to make a decision about whether you should go to bed and it is important to maintain that schedule seven days a

week. This allows your body to know what to expect.

- Develop a bedtime ritual that involves slowing down and relaxing. This reminds your body that it is time to unwind; anything that needs to be done will have to wait until the next day. Part of the routine can be drinking a cup of tea, taking a bath or listening to relaxing music.

- Let go of tasks and concerns – write them on a note pad. Often when people have unfinished tasks and concerns, they make a mental list that plays over in their head like a broken record. There is no need to carry them to bed with you; by writing them down you can reassure yourself you will not forget them and you can pick them up the next day.

Waking part way through the night can be a real nightmare. I have often heard from teachers who say they just can't get back to sleep. After a little exploration it is clear the reason is because mental alertness keeps them awake. If when you wake you start thinking about things that need to be done, conversations that have taken place or other concerns which have no place in the night, it will surely take you out of the restful mode. The key to returning to sleep is relaxation.

We have all heard that counting sheep will put you to sleep; some of you may have even tried it. While this may not have worked for you, a mental exercise to lull you to sleep may be just what is needed.

Visualization can help. Get yourself on a dream-like path. Imagine something that is soothing such as walking a trail on a warm day – just taking one step at a time and breathing to each step. Let your mind focus on your breathing as you continue on, allowing yourself to drift off as you take each step.

Body relaxation can allow you to focus and relax. Starting at your toes, imagine the muscles in your toes and feet relaxing, just let go. Then notice your legs, your calves and shins and consciously allow the muscles to loosen. And slowly move up through your whole body. The relaxation will be good for you and dozing off to sleep will be easier.

Deep breathing can also be a helpful relaxation tool. Lie in a comfortable position and slowly inhale through your nose, say for the count of four. As you breathe in, imagine filling your whole body, your chest, your belly and your arms and legs. Then while breathing out again slowly imagine all the air releasing taking with it all tension or tightness. Continue to breathe in and out, allowing yourself to drift into deeper and deeper relaxation.

Notice all of the above suggestions have to do with relaxing, not engaging your mind. Watching TV or reading an absorbing book can be stimulating and keep you awake.

Self care in every area of your life is essential to healthy balanced living. While bedtime rituals and relaxation are tools you can use, what you do daily for your health sets the foundation for a good night's sleep. There are a number of habits that influence your daily sleep patterns. Daily exercise is recommended; and remember avoid exercise up to four hours before bedtime; the adrenaline can keep you awake. Alcohol is a depressant and can negatively affect one's sleep; apparently this worsens as we age, so limit alcohol consumption. Smoking is a stimulant, so if you cannot quit smoking, avoid late night or mid night cigarettes.

If your inability to get a good night's sleep continues there are supports you can search out. Your Employee Assistance Program can make a referral to a counsellor who could help deal with concerns that may be interfering with your sleep or teach you relaxation techniques. You can discuss the sleeping problems with your doctor. There is now a sleep clinic in Newfoundland and Labrador that may be a resource for you. They deal with medical interventions for disorders such as sleep apnea, teeth grinding or other things that are getting in the way of a good night's sleep. A good night's sleep goes a long way in recharging your batteries and helping you cope with all that life brings your way.

Marie Wall is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Marie Wall (ext. 265) or Claudette Coombs (ext. 242).