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Sleep Hygiene: making healthy choices: sleeping better

With sleep problems being so pervasive (and potentially causing or exacerbating physical health or mental health problems), I have begun to teach a series of classes entitled “Live Better/Sleep Better”. Participants report that the class has helped them make lifestyle and relationship changes that have supported them in both living better and sleeping better.

One of the classes is focused solely on sleep hygiene: lifestyle choices that enhance the chances of falling asleep and staying asleep for a full night’s rest.

Below is the class list “26 Tips for Sleeping Better”. As I suggest in the class, along with speaking with your doctor, examine this list and choose 1-3 items to begin to integrate into your daily life. Try them out---give the new changes at least 6 weeks to work.

1. If you’re having sleep problems, don’t fall into the trap of obsessing and worrying about sleep: the more you worry about sleep/not sleeping, and the harder you try to make yourself sleep, you will have a harder time falling asleep! The key is to be willing to make changes, but don’t try too hard. Make the changes, and over time, let it happen. (Paradoxically, do all you can do to enhance sleep, and let go of the results.)
2. Go to bed and wake up at the same time
3. Sleep environment: cool [54’-75’]; quiet [earplugs/white sound]; dark [eyeshades, drapes]; free of interruptions [people, pets, tv, radio].
4. Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillow
5. Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex [not tv, reading, computers, telephone]
6. If you don’t fall asleep within 15-20 minutes, get out of bed and go to another room, and listen to calm music, or do easy reading, or meditate...then go back to bed when you’re sleepy ---while you’re awake, take it easy, don’t be anxious about not sleeping...go with the flow--- when you’re tired go back to sleep.
7. Finish eating 2-3 hours before bedtime...avoid heavy meals, spicy foods.
8. Sometimes decaf tea (Chamomile) helps sleep; some family doctors recommend a small snack---warm milk and cheese and crackers or a small peanut butter sandwich

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9. Exercise daily (but complete exercise 4 hours prior to bedtime)
10. Avoid caffeine 6-8 hours before bedtime (coffee, tea, colas, chocolate)
11. Avoid alcohol use 6 hours prior to bedtime
12. Avoid high sugar foods and drinks
13. Avoid strong emotional upset prior to bedtime: no arguing or discussing “important topics”; avoid tv shows that have too much violence or emotional arousal
14. Begin to relax 1 hour before bedtime: dim lights, warm bath/shower, meditation, relaxing music.
15. Each night practice the “relaxation response”, a slow, thoughtful breathing exercise that promotes physical and mental slow down (for instruction, refer to www.EASEAP.com, newsletters, June 2007, “New Job?”, at the bottom of the page.)
16. Don’t take a nap during the day.
17. Light: get outside during the day for sunlight exposure; dim lights at night, 1 hour prior to bedtime.
18. Does the person you sleep with have sleep problems (snoring, restless leg syndrome, sleep apnea, watching tv, etc.)? Do you need to speak with them about addressing their sleep problems, or making other sleeping arrangements?
19. If your pet wakes you up, have them sleep on the floor or out of the bedroom.
20. Evaluate Stress: What is causing your stress? What can you change? What can you accept? (to develop stress hardiness, go to www.EASEAP.com, newsletters, August 2004, “Stress Hardy Lifestyle”)
21. Sleep Medications: speak with your MD about a sleep medications that might be helpful: prescriptions, over-the-counter, herbal remedies [please don’t experiment with someone else’s sleep medication]
22. Medications: be aware of medications that can make sleep difficult: some high blood pressure medications, medications that contain amphetamines, steroids, respiratory medications, decongestants, non-prescription medications that contain caffeine
***please discuss any medication changes/concerns with your MD
23. If you’re awaking at night, use a dimmed light
24. If chronic pain, arthritis, acid reflux or menstruation problems, or headaches or hot flashes are interfering with your sleep, speak with your MD
25. If you’re having sleep difficulty due to depression, anxiety or mania, speak with your MD or psychotherapist
26. If relationship issues are troubling and keeping you awake, refer to numerous helpful newsletters that address communication, conflict resolution, forgiveness, etc. at www.EASEAP.com.