

SHEEP DON'T COUNT! TIPS & TRICKS FOR BETTER SLEEP

By Jan McGilliard

As the Psalmist says, ***“I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.”*** How awesome it would be if we could simply climb into bed, adjust our pillows, close our eyes, and before we know it, we are off to dreamland in the sure knowledge that God is in charge of the night. Most of us have early childhood memories of the darkness looming large as soon as our parents tucked us in and left us to (hopefully) fall asleep. I imagined snakes under the bed, the bogey-man lurking, ghosts appearing as the moon created shadows on the wall, sounds of the night on a farm...cats fighting, cows mooing, a young rooster crowing, confused about his job description.

Nearly half of Americans report poor or insufficient sleep, affecting their daily activities, their health, well-being, and productivity. Women are more likely diagnosed with insomnia and men with sleep apnea. (National Health Institute) Believe it or not, sleeping a solid eight hours without interruption is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before electricity lit up the world, our ancestors typically retired when it got dark, slept a few hours, then got up for awhile to have a snack, read, complete a task or two, or just enjoy one another. Then it was back to bed and to sleep until daylight. The industrial revolution and the lighting up of the world changed everything. Many in the population worked shifts (and still do), and everyone began making more decisions about when and how much to sleep (less and less). It doesn't take long to throw off our circadian rhythm. Poor sleep habits, traveling through time zones, anxiety, long work hours, a noisy and bright sleep environment, illness, are some of the demons that rob us of needed rest. Some even feel it's a badge of honor to get by on a minimum of sleep, as though it's a colossal waste of time. I'm going to assume you, along with me, want to sleep well and find it a challenge.

Common indicators of insomnia include

- Difficulty falling asleep at night
- Waking up during the night
- Waking up too early
- Not feeling well-rested after a night's sleep
- Daytime tiredness or sleepiness
- Irritability, depression or anxiety
- Difficulty paying attention, focusing, or remembering
- Increased errors or accidents
- Ongoing worries about sleep

Common causes of sleeplessness include

- Stress
- Travel or work schedule
- Poor sleep habits
- Eating too much late in the evening
- Mental health disorders
- Medications

- Medical conditions
- Sleep-related disorders
- Caffeine, nicotine and alcohol

Age Brings Change

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in activity
- Changes in health
- More medications

Preventing Insomnia

- Keep bedtime and wake time consistent from day to day, including weekends.
- Stay active — regular activity helps promote a good night's sleep.
- Check your medications to see if they may contribute to insomnia.
- Avoid or limit naps.
- Avoid or limit caffeine and alcohol, and don't use nicotine.
- Avoid large meals and beverages before bedtime.
- Make your bedroom comfortable for sleep and only use it for sex or sleep.
- Create a relaxing bedtime ritual, such as taking a warm bath, reading or listening to soft music. No screens or reading in bed.

Things to try: I am a firm believer that we need to consider both eastern and western practices when trying to solve the slippery slope that is sleep. Whatever you try, give yourself whole-heartedly to the practice to see if it is helpful. As is always recommended, check in with your doctor to rule out medical reasons for insomnia.

Sleep Specialist: A sleep specialist will help you determine if you need a sleep study. Ruling out sleep apnea is very important, since this is such a health risk. A sleep practitioner will help you with goal-setting, achieving a healthy frame of mind related to your ability to sleep (or not!), and will likely suggest things like developing a mindfulness practice and practicing good sleep habits.

Mindfulness/Meditation: Mindfulness is about paying attention and living in the moment. A meditation practice is an extension of mindfulness, and serves to slow down the central nervous system so the mind/body connection is strengthened. It promotes relaxation, lowers blood pressure, slows heart rate, reduces anxiety, and more. Begin with just five minutes, sitting quietly but attentively, and over time, work up to 20-30 minutes. Use a short mantra. My favorite is “Be still and know that I am God.”

Breathing exercises: Never underestimate the benefit of focusing on your breath. It's a perfect way to begin meditation, and is very useful when you first get into bed ready for sleep. Many people fall asleep by the time they've done a few breathing techniques, like breathing in 4 counts through the nose and breathing out 8 counts (slowly) through the mouth. These go hand-in-hand with meditation.

Yoga Nidra (muscle relaxation): Practice Yoga Nidra by lying down, closing your eyes, and begin focusing on one muscle group at a time, alternately tensing and relaxing each one.

Passage Meditation: This is a very effective practice. Ecknath Easwaran says: “The secret of meditation is simple: you become what you meditate on. When you use an inspirational passage every day in meditation, you are driving the words deep into your consciousness. Eventually they become an integral part of your personality, which means they will find constant expression in what you do, what you say, and what you think.” Choose a passage, scripture, or prayer that is meaningful for you. Memorize it and, while sitting in a relaxed posture, repeat it over and over again, slowly, for 20-30 minutes.

Reiki: Rei means “God’s Wisdom or the Higher Power” and Ki means “life force energy.” So Reiki is spiritually guided life force energy. Find a Reiki Master and give it a try. A treatment feels like a wonderful glowing radiance that flows through and around you, treating the whole person including body, emotions, mind, and spirit. It creates feelings of peace, security, and well-being. It is simple, safe, and natural. For me, Reiki has been one of the most effective ways of slowing down my central nervous system.

Acupuncture: is a complementary medical practice that entails stimulating certain points on the body, most often with a needle penetrating the skin, to alleviate pain or to help treat various health conditions. There is a sleep protocol that may help....but if after a few sessions there is no improvement, it is not likely to help. It definitely helps some people!

Naturopathic medicine: is a distinct primary health care profession emphasizing prevention, treatment, and optimal health through the use of therapeutic methods and substances. It is a slow, subtle process, but can be very beneficial.

To see the complete Power Point presentation, go to www.poamn.org. There are some helpful web resources there. There is much research being done on the benefits of medical marijuana and hemp products (like CBD oil). While I am not equipped to write about these in any professional way, I believe they can be helpful to some people in their quest for sleep.

“He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep...The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”
- Psalm 121:4-6

Jan McGilliard lives in Blacksburg, VA, with husband Mike who is retired from VA Tech. Both are active at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, and Jan spends about half-time preaching in area churches. She is a past president of POAMN and worked many years for the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic in Older Adult Ministries. Jan loves being active, especially cycling long distances, hiking, and camping. Jan and Mike love grand-parenting Connor and Emma Claire.