

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Sleep Disorders



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There are two types of sleep disorders: hypersomnia (i.e., sleeping more than eight to ten hours a day) and insomnia (i.e., difficulty sleeping – less than four to six hours a day). I will address insomnia.

Insomnia can be difficulty falling asleep, interrupted sleep, or early waking. These disturbances may be caused by many factors. In treating insomnia, we must first rule out any medical problems that may be causing insomnia. People with heart failure, asthma, or difficulty breathing must be treated for their medical problem before being treated for their insomnia. We must also rule out psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, worry, financial problems, family problems, etc. Depression needs to be treated with antidepressants, anxiety with anxiolytics, etc. plus psychotherapy to help resolve the problems.

One of the most common causes of insomnia is sleep apnea, which is found in people who are overweight and those who have a bad snoring habit. They appear to be sleeping well, but they are not getting enough oxygen into their lungs to help them sleep deeply. There is treatment for sleep apnea.

An area that needs to be excluded is drug abuse. People who are addicted to drugs, especially narcotics, need to get very high doses of hypnotic drugs to be able to sleep. The more sleeping medication they take, the more their body builds up a tolerance and they have to use even more sleeping medication to be able to sleep. Otherwise, they will suffer from chronic insomnia. One must avoid becoming dependent on sleeping medication. Most sleeping medications have

chemicals that are very habit forming. The more you use them the more your body will become dependent on them.

The following points are to be considered to develop and maintain healthy sleeping habits:

1. Avoid using stimulants like coffee, caffeine products, and chocolate at least three to four hours before bedtime.
2. Avoid drinking liquids at least three or four hours before bedtime so that you won't have to use the bathroom as often during the night. Use the bathroom immediately before getting into bed.
3. Strive to keep the same sleep schedule every night so your body will become conditioned to feel sleepy at the same time each night.
4. Take a hot shower and drink warm milk before going to bed.
5. If one night you are unable to sleep, do not become anxious and frustrated. Try to think of pleasant things, and believe you will fall asleep sooner or later. Even if you spend one or two nights awake, you will eventually sleep. Don't worry if you are unable to sleep. The more anxious and worried you become, the less likely you will be able to fall sleep.
6. It may be helpful to use sleeping medication occasionally, but avoid using it every night.

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