Module 17 Resources

Identifying Your Sleep Demons

Stimulants/Caffeine: Caffeine can be a major sleep demon. Caffeine works by binding to the adenosine receptors in your brain. Adenosine is the neurochemical that signals to your brain that it's time for sleep by turning down arousal. With a half life of 6 to 8 hours, if you consume caffeine in the afternoon then you still have caffeine in your system at night. If you're having trouble with sleep, keep your caffeine consumption to the morning hours and at the latest 12 to 2 pm.

Alcohol: If you're using alcohol to help put you to sleep regularly, it would be wise to consider a different approach. Although it has an immediate sedating effect, one of the enzymes used to break down alcohol has a stimulating effect. In addition it causes the release of adrenaline, a hormone that causes you to be alert, which is what we don't want. While it feels like a glass of wine in the evening may not be a big deal (and for many it isn't) alcohol impacts your sleep. It also promotes laziness around sleep hygiene. See module 16 resources for other options for replacement ideas.

Bright Light: We live in the age of artificial light, which is both a blessing and a curse. While artificial light allows us to be engaged into the wee hours of the night it is also a large contributor to poor sleep in a majority of people. Why? Because like almost every life form on the planet we use light to regulate our internal rhythm, something called the circadian rhythm. Exposure to artificial light late at night interferes with the production of melatonin, a hormone that signals our body to fall and stay asleep. This is why overexposure to light at night will interfere with your ability to fall asleep. The prescription here is simple: reduce your exposure to light around 2 to 3 hours before bed. Dim or turn off lights in your home. Change the setting on your devices to minimize light exposure, for example many have night or amber settings. Read a book or magazine instead of an ebook or the news on your phone. Keep as many electronics and devices out of your room as you can.

Monkey Mind/Anxiety: Many of my patients struggle to fall asleep because they ruminate on their worries once their head hits the pillow. The advice that I've found to be most meaningful is to keep a journal or notepad next to your bed. This has been a lifesaver for many of my patients that have trouble unwinding before bed because it creates a framework to process anxiety. If you are a worrier and you tend to wait until your head hits the pillow to mentally run through your to-do list, consider keeping a journal at your bedside to process these thoughts. Try an experiment for a week. Every night before bed, write down the most prominent worries in your mind, the most important things you need to accomplish the next day and things you need to worry about. Get these things out of your head and onto paper so

you don't keep running through them over and over again. And you'll start the day with a reminder of what you need to focus on…so you can just let it go and fall asleep.

News/Excitation: The mental process of seeking and searching is incredibly stimulating for the brain. This is why scrolling your newsfeed or watching the news in the moments before bed can be disastrous for sleep. It can excite you, increase the stress hormone cortisol and even get your adrenaline flowing depending on what you see. This is not the recipe for good quality sleep as you want to be intentionally decreasing stimulation. Instead, read a book or journal. Your brain will thank you.

Big Meal: Eating a big meal before bed is another common culprit. When you consume a big meal your body revs up its metabolism in an effort to digest all of those calories. For sleep, you want your body to shift into a state of rest rather than prioritizing digestion. Try to consume your last meal 2 to 3 hours before bed. If you're hungry before bed, try a very light snack such as carrots and hummus, yogurt, or a piece of fruit. Or just try a cup of herbal tea with honey.

Exercise before bed: Vigorous exercise before bed will get your adrenaline flowing, when instead you should be trying to wind down. Schedule your workouts so that you're done at least 90 minutes before bedtime.

Dogs, Kids, & Bladders: Frequent interruptions are bad for sleep. That is not rocket science. And we should be realistic. If you have young kids or a puppy, or you wake up late at night to go to the bathroom, your sleep will be frequently interrupted. I work with patients to minimize interruptions when possible and help find alternative sleeping schedules. When our kids were young, having a regular mid-afternoon nap really helped my productivity and mood. Work to minimize interruptions by limiting light. Instead of checking devices and watching the clock, read a book with minimal light. Get back into bed as soon as possible.

Rule Out Medical Conditions: Sleep disruption is a symptom of many different medical conditions. If poor sleep is an issue for you, make sure to speak with your healthcare provider. Ruling out common medical conditions like Obstructive Sleep Apnea, thyroid illness or mental health concerns is an important first step. Treating an underlying medical condition is a critical first step to addressing any sleep concern. Sleep studies are increasingly common and often can now be completed in the comfort of your own home.

Psychotropic medications: Many common medications, both prescription and over-the-counter, can disrupt the normal sleep cycle. Ask your provider if any medications you're taking can impact sleep. Changing dosing times can help in some situations, for example. You may be

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advised to take a more sedating medication at night instead of during the day. Make sure that any medications you take that can disrupt sleep such as stimulants (Ritalin, Adderall, Vyvanse) or bupropion (Wellbutrin) are taken as advised by your provider, most often this is early in the morning.

Temperature: The temperature of your bedroom impacts the quality of your sleep, especially if your room is too warm. When your body is preparing for sleep, it actually cools down. Turning down the thermostat, using a thinner sheet, and removing some layers can all help keep you cool. The exact temperature is highly individual; however most research points to the optimal temperature being 65 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus a few degrees.

Noise: There isn't much of an explanation needed here but if your sleeping environment is noisy you will have a hard time slipping off into sleep. If noise is a problem for you, one piece of advice that I offer my patients is to invest in a white noise machine to try and drown out the noise. If there are external noises out of your control, say a neighbor's dog that barks or a roommate with a different work schedule, earplugs or noise canceling headphones could also help.