

How To Get the Sleep You Need

By Curt Hagedorn

According to the National Sleep Foundation, about 70 million Americans have some sort of sleep problem, and about 40 million of those have a chronic sleep disorder like insomnia. So chances are, if you're reading this, you've had some sort of trouble getting to sleep. First, sleep disorders are no joke and not to be taken lightly, that snoring your partner complains about, for example, could be indicative of more serious problems like "sleep apnea," a disorder where the patient actually ceases to breathe for a moment and can cause chronic wakefulness (if your partner snores, is overweight or smokes, they're a good candidate for sleep apnea.) So if you have consistent trouble sleeping, the first thing you want to do is run, do not walk, to your doctor and give her the details. She may prescribe a sleeping pill or there may be other remedies available for your particular problem.

If you only have occasional problems getting to sleep and you're sure it's not time to call in the big guns, there are a number of things you can do to help overcome occasional sleep problems.

- Guess what? Diet and exercise. Like just about every other problem known to man, we all just need to get used to the fact that a good many of them could be solved or at least alleviated by losing a few pounds and walking a few steps every day. Though we've all seen the National guidelines that consider Shaquille O'Neal obese, you can still have a considerable effect on many health problems including occasional sleeplessness by losing 10 percent of your body weight – if you weigh 200 pounds that's just twenty pounds – and getting at least 20 minutes of exercise a day. There are many diet and exercise programs out there – one of the most popular exercise tricks is the 10,000 steps plan which requires a pedometer and basically asks you to walk at least 10,000 steps every day – so if you're ready to get serious get to your doctor for his advice and seal of approval, to the bookstore for the latest and greatest from Atkins, South Beach, Oprah or whatever your pleasure, to the electronics store for a pedometer and to the gym for a membership. You might even want to stop off at Weight Watchers. If after you've done all that, if you don't find yourself taking a nice, long, refreshing nap, I'll be very surprised.
- Deal with stress: Everyone has a stressful life (okay, if you have quintuplets all aged 2 you win the prize) but there are things you can do to reduce the stress in your average day (see diet and exercise, above.) Remember what they used to call "transcendental meditation?" Well, people tend to call it simply meditation these days and it still works – take a class or buy a book. Or better yet, pamper yourself with a massage – even a chair

massage or foot massage (available at most spas) can do wonders to calm your nerves. Take a yoga class – in general learn before you go to bed to clear your mind of the day's troubles and take yourself to a state of relaxation.

- Control your environment. Often people with sleep problems do exactly the opposite thing the need to do to get to sleep, or have a really good night sleep. If you're one of the countless Americans who finds themselves falling asleep every night in front of the television, you're just who I'm talking to: make going to bed a ritual – make sure your mattress is comfortable, you have enough pillows, your sheets are inviting. Turn off the lights, turn of the television. Have a cup of warm milk (it really does work) or chamomile tea (like Sleepytime) before you turn out the light. Breath deeply and (see "deal with stress" above.)

Remember, sleep problems can also actually be dangerous to yourself and others. Over time you can develop what is called a "Sleep Debt," meaning that even though you might have slept 8 hours last night, if you've gone for four or five days without sleep, your ability to think clearly, function and react is as impaired as if you had been drinking – according to the NHTSA over 100,000 car accidents a year are caused by driver fatigue.