

# Sleep: The Gentle Tyrant

By Tish Vincent

**C**an you remember your life in the month of June during high school? Maybe this sounds familiar. The school year had ended and your summer employment had not started. You stayed up late talking to friends on the phone and fell into bed later than usual. You woke to the sounds of birds outside your open window, the curtains blowing in a gentle breeze. You checked the clock. Whoa! It was 1 p.m.; you had slept for 13 hours. Such an experience is a distant memory for many legal professionals.

## Factors That Contribute to Sleep Problems

Sleep problems are altogether too common in our harried lives. Factors that can cause sleep problems include:

- Emotional
- Environmental
- Medical<sup>1</sup>

## Types of Sleep Problems

As a mental health therapist, I ask people to identify the type of sleep issue they are having: difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, early-morning awakening, or inability to sleep at all. Often, people who have difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep have anxious dispositions. As the day winds down, their minds have time to brood over certain circumstances and worry about things that have happened or might happen. People who experience early-morning awakening and an inability to fall back asleep are often struggling with depression. Something about depression's effect on the brain disrupts their sleep cycle. These sleep difficulties are secondary to emotional diagnoses.

The values we absorb as lawyers—analytical thinking, perfectionism, emphasis on cognition over emotion, competition, and extrinsic motivations—make us good at what we do. These same values can increase our stress levels, depression, and anxiety and cause significant sleep disturbances.

## Effects of Sleep Deprivation

Individuals who struggle with a sleep disorder for too long begin to suffer from sleep deprivation, which can affect (1) mood, resulting in irritability, lack of motivation, anxiety, or symptoms of depression; (2) performance, causing lack of concentration, fatigue, lack of coordination, increased errors, or forgetfulness; and (3) physical health, evidenced by high blood pressure, heart attack, obesity, or diabetes.<sup>2</sup>

## An Eating Disorder May Play a Role

In our diet-obsessed culture, people are prone to develop eating disorders in response to stress. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder in which the sufferer severely restricts food intake, increases exercise, and is obsessed with feeling fat. The sufferer becomes overly focused on outward appearance. At times, a healthy interest in an appropriate nutritional balance can turn into an eating disorder.

Some health care providers who treat eating disorders are concerned that vegetarian or vegan diets can hide the development of anorexia nervosa in certain individuals; the need to carefully monitor what they eat can transform into an eating disorder under stress. In my clinical practice, I have seen many young women who were dancers or swimmers commit to vegetari-

anism while pressured by authority figures to maintain a certain weight. This can be fertile ground for the restrictions and obsessions of anorexia and can result in muscle loss if left untreated, compromising the ability to compete in sports.

Warning signs of anorexia include:

- Avoiding food prepared by family members even if it conforms to prescribed dietary requirements.
- Eliminating vegan food essentials such as tofu, nuts, and pasta.
- Displaying compulsive, ritualistic behavior when eating or exercising.<sup>3</sup>

Anorexia can lead to fatigue, *difficulty sleeping*, and difficulty concentrating. The sufferer is literally starving and experiencing the effects of malnutrition. If you recognize these warning signs, consult an experienced physician who can refer you to the appropriate eating-disorder treatment, which should consist of a therapist, a nutritionist, and a psychiatrist working with your primary-care physician.<sup>4</sup>

## Sleep Hygiene

The National Sleep Foundation recommends the following practices:

- Avoid napping during the day.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol.
- Schedule vigorous exercise for the morning or afternoon to promote restful sleep.
- Avoid eating large meals or snacks close to bedtime.
- Spend some time in natural light each day.

- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Associate your bed with sleep.
- Create a comfortable and relaxing bedroom environment.
- Maintain a regular bedtime and wake up at the same time each morning.<sup>5</sup>

Your primary-care physician is an important resource if sleeplessness is an issue. Naturopathic physicians also offer a number of innovative tests and remedies for sleeplessness; perhaps your body is suffering from an imbalance of certain vitamins, minerals, or hormones. Don't be too quick to accept a prescription sleep aid as the solution. Ask for a referral to a therapist the physician trusts. There are many remedies that may help without resorting to medication. With adequate sleep, mood and concentration improve and anxiety and depression lessen. ■



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## ENDNOTES

1. WebMD, *Causes of Sleep Problems* <<http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-disorders-causes>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed April 8, 2013.
2. American Academy of Sleep Medicine, *Sleep Deprivation* <<http://www.aasmnet.org/resources/factsheets/sleepdeprivation.pdf>>.
3. Ann Olsen, *Is She Vegan or Anorexic? 3 Signs to Watch Out For* <<http://voices.yahoo.com/is-she-vegan-anorexic-3-signs-watch-out-for-5208557.html>>.
4. Wellness.com, *Eating Disorders/Malnutrition* <<http://www.wellness.com/reference/conditions/eating-disorders-malnutrition/symptoms-and-causes>>.
5. National Sleep Foundation, *Sleep Hygiene* <<http://www.sleepfoundation.org/article/ask-the-expert/sleep-hygiene>>.