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Sleep Matters to Our Mental Health:
The Elusiveness of Sleep

Is my job secure? How am I going to pay next month's bills? Are my children safe? How am I going to balance working and making sure my children are okay and doing their schoolwork? Is this headache…stomachache…fever…. cough a symptom of COVID?

Sleep can often be elusive, but with COVID-19 and all the additional stressors placed on individuals, more and more are struggling to find a good night's slumber. Worrying thoughts often intrude when

we are trying to decompress and get to sleep, gnawing at the edges of our consciousness. Or we wake up in the early morning hours before dawn, with thoughts running through our brain like the bulls of Pamplona. Others report having bad dreams or sleeping in later and later and still feeling tired.

Studies indicate that insomnia is a common problem with approximately 33% of the world's population impacted. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), a third of adults in the U.S. report that they get less than the recommended seven or more hours of sleep each night. In addition to the impact the pandemic is having on our waking lives, it is also having an impact on our sleep as well. We know stress, anxiety and depression can have an affect on our sleep and all are on the increase during these difficult times. In the short-term, lack of sleep can leave us irritable and exhausted, but over time, a continued lack of healthy sleep can impact both our physical and mental health and overall well-being.

According to Kendra Cherry in her article titled *How Does Sleep Affect Mental Health*, "Research suggests that the relationship between sleep and mental health is complex. While sleep has long been known to be a consequence of many psychiatric conditions, more recent views suggest that sleep can also play a causal role in both the development and maintenance of different mental health problems." This means that problems with sleep can lead to changes in our mental health, as well as cause such mental health conditions as anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder to worsen.

Many aspects of the pandemic are impacting our sleep, including the following from the article *Sleep Problems During Coronavirus* by Lawrence Robinson and Melinda Smith, M.A.: Increasing stress, anxiety, and worry. You may be worried about your own or your loved ones' health, stressed about money and the economy, or anxious about what the future holds. Whatever the cause, when your body produces more of the stress hormone cortisol it can keep your body aroused, your mind turning, and lead to fragmented sleep and insomnia. (To address your stress, join me for MHA's Mental Health Matters on Tuesday, August 18 at 3 p.m., focused on Stress Management during the Pandemic. **Register for free here**.)

Disrupting your daily schedule. In many places, schools, offices, and gyms are still closed, your social life has been curtailed, and your normal daily routines are a distant memory. If you're out of work and confined to home, you have no set time to wake up each day, eat meals, or get dressed. This can disrupt your body's natural sleep-wake cycle or circadian rhythm, as can spending less time outside in sunlight each day - which the recent heat and humidity have necessitated.

Creating feelings of isolation. Quarantine and social distancing can cut you off from family and friends and trigger symptoms of depression and a variety of sleep problems.

Prompting you to spend more time on screens. Whether you're working on a computer at home, video chatting with friends, or bingeing on Netflix shows, you're likely spending more time in front of a screen than ever before. The blue light emitted by your phone, tablet, computer, or TV disrupts the body's production of melatonin at night, a hormone that helps regulate your sleep-wake cycle.

Leading you to consume more alcohol. During these traumatic times, you may be drinking more than usual to relieve stress and boredom, or to help you drop off to sleep at night. But while alcohol may help you to fall asleep, it interferes with your sleep cycle, causing you to wake up multiple times during the night, leaving you feeling tired and unrefreshed in the morning.

Promoting unpleasant dreams. Many people have reported having intense, troubling dreams and nightmares during this pandemic. In extreme cases, anxiety can prompt disturbing dreams, but for most people, vivid dreaming is down to stress increasing how much you recall of your dreams. The more fragmented your sleep and the more often you wake from REM (dreaming) sleep during the night, the more likely you are to remember your dreams.

While the additional worries from living in quarantine are definitely adding to the difficulty of getting a restful night's sleep for many, including those who never had an issue with sleep, there are helpful tips to ensure a healthier sleep routine.

Robinson and Smith offer several insights into getting a better night's sleep, including finding ways to manage stress and anxiety. "With so much uncertainty in the world at this moment, it's no wonder so many of us are struggling to get to sleep at night…when you're stressed and desperate for some rest, it can be tempting to resort to sleeping pills and sleep aids. But medication doesn't address the underlying cause of your sleep problems."

The authors recommend finding ways to practice relaxation techniques such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxing or a breathing exercise as part of a bedtime routine. They also recommend dealing with worries. "Whether worrying stops you from getting to sleep or if you wake during the night feeling anxious about something, you can learn to 'postpone' worrying." Establish a set time each day to allow yourself the freedom to worry about whatever is one your mind. Getting active during the day is also a great way to alleviate stress and anxiety and also increases the amount of time you spend in "deep, restorative stages of sleep at night." Working out too close to bedtime, however, can interfere with your sleep.

Here are other tips Robinson and Smith recommend for a good night's sleep:

Establish a regular sleep schedule
Structure your days. Try to get up at the same time each day, even if you have no job to go to, kids to take to school, or social events to attend. If you're working, maintain normal work hours wherever possible. Establishing a structure helps to set your body's internal clock and optimize the quality of your sleep, so try to also be consistent about when you eat, exercise, and spend time outside.

Set a regular bedtime. To avoid tossing and turning or staring at the clock, choose a time for bed when you normally feel tired. If you're getting the right amount of sleep, you should wake up naturally without an alarm. If you need to keep hitting the snooze button in the morning, it may be a sign you need an earlier bedtime.

Create a relaxing nightly routine. Turn off screens at least one hour before bed and spend the time unwinding and preparing your body and mind for sleep. You could try reading by a soft light, listening to calming music or an audio book, taking a bath, gently stretching, or meditating.

Reserve your bedroom for sleep. Where your bedroom was once solely a place for sleep, it may now also be somewhere you work, home school the kids, exercise, or grab a few minutes to yourself throughout the day. The more you can restrict your bedroom to just sleep (and sex), the more your mind will associate it with sleep and the easier it will be to unwind at night.

Adopt healthier daytime habits.
All the disruption and added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused you to develop some unhealthy daytime habits which can disrupt your sleep at night. Not only can poor daytime habits contribute to sleep problems, but a poor night's sleep can make these habits harder to correct, creating a vicious cycle. For example, you sleep badly at night so feel too tired to exercise during the day, which in turn makes it harder to sleep. Keeping a sleep diary can help you identify which daytime

habits and behaviors may be contributing to your sleep difficulties at night. These tips can also help:

Find new ways to connect with loved ones. Even if you're in quarantine or observing social distancing, that doesn't mean you should feel isolated and alone at this time. While nothing helps to relieve anxiety and stress like old-fashioned face-to-face contact, you can still stay connected via video link, phone, or social media. Scheduling regular contact with those who matter most to you can improve your mood as well as your sleep.

Eat a healthy diet. Many of us turn to comfort foods when we're bored, stressed, or anxious. But these tend to be high in sugar and refined carbohydrates, which make it harder to fall and stay asleep at night. Limiting your alcohol and caffeine intake can also help to improve the quality of your sleep.

Minimize naps. If you're out of work and at home all day, it's tempting to try to make up for a poor night's sleep by taking a nap during the day. But napping for too long or too late in the day can make your sleep problems even worse. Try to limit naps to no more than 20 minutes in the early afternoon.

Make time for yourself. Whatever your commitments and responsibilities during this difficult time, it's important to make time for activities you enjoy. Whether it's painting, writing, spending time in nature, or playing with a pet, adding joy to your life can help you relax and get a better night's sleep.

Whether you have been a long-time sufferer of insomnia or the pandemic has brought on your sleepless nights, finding healthy, consistent ways to improve our sleep is as important as the other things we do to live a happier, healthier life. Now, more than ever, we need to find ways to create some semblance of structure in our lives and that includes a good night's sleep.

Have you had trouble sleeping lately? We'd love to learn more from our readers by using #MHADirector'sBlog.

Thank you!