

LEARN HOW SLEEPING IS HEALING and BETTER WAYS TO IMPROVE SLEEP QUALITY by Mary Beth DeVillar (Autumn, 2007)

How well are *you* sleeping? Some people can't fall asleep at night; others wake up at specific times at night; others can't stop thinking even when asleep and wake up thinking (feeling like they have not slept at all--and parts of themselves have not!). You may wake up feeling lousy and dopey. If you find this a routine occurrence, you are one of the 60 to 70 million people who suffer from sleep deprivation and insomnia. Lack of restful sleep is one of the major health issues of our modern, industrialized world. Continued sleepless nights lead into daytime fatigue, irritability, anxiety and compromised daytime functioning often promoting accidents, reduced activity and lost workplace productivity.

How much sleep do you really need? While 6 to 10 hours is normal for most adults, some people manage on less. Women generally require an hour and a half more than men. According to K.J. Zerbe in the March, 2001 edition of *Primary Care Update for OB/GYNs*, women need a suggested total of 8 to 9 hours of sleep per day. Zerbe adds, "Sleep needs among individuals vary a great deal, but a basic step that anyone can take to feel healthy, increase energy and even fight disease is to get as much sleep as needed."

A good night's sleep disappeared in my 50's when the body began to make more changes during menopause (aka "the many pauses"). I began to change habits by weaning myself off caffeine, reducing sugar from my diet and adding more forms of protein. To further help balance my internal systems, I started working with an acupuncturist and using herbal medicines. Not one to be daunted by the natural flotsam and jetsam of the body, I experimented with natural hormone therapies, more acupuncture, western and Chinese herbs, homeopathy, tonics. I experienced short spurts of relief. And still I was not getting enough quality sleep. I asked what else does my body need and want for better sleep. I found more answers in a meditation and bodywork practice.

In 1992 I was introduced to a bodywork healing practice called Chi Nei Tsang (*say chee nayt song*) which blends gentle massage focusing primarily in the belly/abdominal area of the body with movement exercises (Chi-Kung), deeper breathing techniques and guided meditations. These techniques bring deeper awareness and increase vitality (chi) to the internal organs of the body. Using a firm, gentle hands-on approach, this form of bodywork includes teaching each person how to "digest" negative emotional charges/issues that cause toxins in the body.

To improve sleep quality I now instruct clients to gently lay their hands on their belly---to listen, feel and appreciate these internal organs. Then with an open and curious mind explore around the rim of the navel and outward into the belly with a gentle "peace" touch. Often just placing the hands on the belly in an appreciating way triggers the calming parasympathetic response. Breathing begins to relax and you find yourself slipping into Dreamtime. Dreamtime is a safe place to process all those emotional experiences of your life.

What continues to help me and clients is listening to the body, respecting the body's needs. Using a blend of different meditations/healing visualizations, chi exercises (Chi-Kung or Qigong), getting short bits of direct sunshine, light walking exercise, easing yoga stretches, gently unwinding the belly with light massage (CNT), drinking quality water, eating regularly, supplementing with herbs and minerals, I can now feel I am sleeping well. As Pema Chodron says in her book The Wisdom of No Escape, "we're here to study ourselves and to get to know ourselves now, not later."

Read more below and discover common causes for poor sleep and remedies to improve your sleep.

IT TAKES ENERGY TO SLEEP!

Common Causes for Poor Sleep and Insomnia:

~**Lack of sunshine.** Spending too much time indoors and living in artificial light during the daytime causes an imbalance of the serotonin (waking time hormone) and melatonin (sleeping time hormone) production in the body. 5 -10 minutes of direct sun helps.

~**Watching TV or sitting at the computer before bedtime.** TV and Computer monitors emit positive ions which have negative impact on our nervous system and an inhibiting affect on the natural hormone melatonin, the sleep hormone.

~**Going to bed on a full stomach.** Lying horizontal digesting on a full stomach can cause gastric reflux, heartburn and asthma-like respiratory distress.

~**Daily caffeine intake.** Caffeine produces spasms along the digestive tract which produces bowel movement. This produces anxiety felt in the stomach promoting the flow of stress hormones (adrenaline and insulin) and triggering the stress response in the entire nervous system. Coffee is a bladder irritant: Just one cup in the AM can wake you up at night to urinate.

~**Alcohol consumption in evenings.** Although a sedative, it also disrupts the brain-stem sleep mechanism, causing a rebound of insomnia: waking up in middle of night with a demand for more of a sedative.

~**Environmental noises/sounds and lack of pure darkness.** Loud music, TV, angry/argumentative voices, barking dogs, light streaming into the sleeping room can act as potential threats and wake you up.

~**Hot flashes & night sweats.** You may have an imbalance of estrogen and progesterone levels. Check with a doctor.

~**Adrenal & Nerve exhaustion.** When over-tired the hyper-vigilant mechanisms in the body remain at go (sympathetic response aka “flight or fight”) using up reserve energy---leaving less energy to sleep. Yes, it takes energy to sleep.

~ **Emotional Distress: Either short-term or continual.** Most sleeping issues/problems are STRESS related and lead to an overload of toxins in the body. It is almost impossible to reduce stress when you don’t get enough sleep---preferably 7 - 10 hours including naps.

Practical Sleep Remedies: Creating new habits and habits to let go

~**Avoid Caffeine.** If you are hooked on coffee or caffeinated sodas, you need to quit until you experience complete rest after sleeping and have developed energy reserves. Caffeine clears the body more slowly in women than in men.

~**Contact a healthcare provider** to suggest nutritional supplements, homeopathic or herbal remedies for your individual health needs. Magnesium and calcium in the proper balance can promote a more relaxed state. L-theanine is calming to the nervous system without being sedating.

~**Finish the evening meal at least 2-3 hours before bedtime** (4-5 if eating substantial meat portion). When the digestion system starts working hard with a big meaty/spicy meal this keeps the body awake or reduces recuperative sleep.

~**Limit evening eating** of sugar, refined foods (simple carbs), and fried foods. If evening meal leaves you hungry, supplement with a small protein/complex carb snack.

~**No TV or computers** for at least 1 hour before bedtime. Light or easy reading is fine.

~**Do a light exercise** after evening meal or before bedtime. Choose exercises to get some breathing going and movement in your legs to activate the digestive meridians in your body---brisk walk, light Yoga, Tai Chi, swimming.

~**A warm bath** with Epsom salts relaxes and provides additional magnesium to your system. Or, take a warm shower.

~**Lightly massage** neck, feet, ankles or back.

~ **Most important is to be asleep by 11PM**, or you will be awake until 1-2AM. Go to bed by 10PM, read a little, do sleeping chi-kung, massage your belly, and be asleep by 11PM with all lights out.

~**Remember to enhance your sleeping Dreamtime by using gentle self-massage on your belly before falling asleep.** This technique is helpful for those who wake up between 3-5AM, the time connected with emotional sensitivity. It counters the negative effects of emotional stress---helps with emotional digestion by internally processing emotional charges with simple, gentle touch on the belly connecting with the internal digestive organs (stomach, small and large intestine).

~ Sleeping Meditation Techniques

Meditation has been known to lead to deep relaxation, better sleep, clarity of mind, and the easing of symptoms in many medical conditions such as depression, heart disease, binge eating. With improved sleeping, healing occurs on a deeper level and various symptoms will recede. Use only one meditation/visualization technique/exercise at a time for 7 to 10 days to discover which one works best for you.

~Healing Light Breathing Meditation:

This meditation is a must for those who have been through long periods of mental/emotional stress. Using deep breathing and visualization this meditation helps to harmonize nerve function with the endocrine/hormonal system.

Visualize bright purple starlight coming from beyond our Milky Way and shining down through the crown chakra and continuing to shine through all the chakras or body centers. Breathe through each chakra point 6 times. Remember to breathe long and deep for this meditation to help repair your exhausted nerves.

~Bone Dreaming Meditation:

This meditation puts the body into a state of deep relaxation while triggering a combination of sleep centers inside the body. Bone Dreaming is a foundation for inner awareness and has a very profound healing effect. You focus your inner seeing on specific bones throughout your body as you connect with deeper, fuller breathing. This practice is fundamental to any CNT practice whether working on your own body or with a practitioner. This practice unwinds the deep muscle tensions surrounding your bones in your body.

~9 Turns and Sleeping Loop Meditation:

The acupuncture meridians flow one way when you are awake and change/reverse when you sleep. This meditation directs meridians to flow in the direction when you sleep.

This meditation practice is for those waking up at night, needing to return quickly to sleep. It is also helpful for busy people on the go. Make an opportunity to use it and take a short nap, feeling refreshed. It is also useful for long distance air travel and jet lag.

~Inner Smile Meditation

This meditation is simple and effective instructing you to visualize and send a sincere, loving, nurturing, happy smile throughout your body. Smiling is contagious. Smiling has the power to instantly reverse the effects of the stress response in your body. It can be done sitting comfortably or lying down. The *Inner Smile* creates a deep sense of calm, balance and peace of mind.

First, create a quiet zone by turning off the phone, TV, music, etc. Close your eyes to look within. Take 2 to 3 long easy breaths focusing on the inhale and exhale. Visualize your *Inner Smile*---the feeling you have when you greet someone you dearly love.

Once you clearly see your *Inner Smile*, direct your *Inner Smile* to each area, pausing briefly to feel the healing energy. First to your eyes . . . to your heart . . . to your lungs . . . to your liver (near your right lower ribs) . . . to your stomach (near your left lower ribs) . . . to your kidneys (near your lower back ribs) . . . to your sexual/reproductive organs.

Bring your *Inner Smile* back up to your eyes. Into your brain . . . to the base of your skull, now down and through your backbones, spinal cord and all the nerves in your spine and your body down to your tailbone. From your tailbone smile up through your body returning to your eyes. . . . Smile in your mouth, jaws and throat . . . to your gallbladder (next to the liver) . . . to the pancreas and spleen (near the stomach) . . . to the small intestine (behind the navel) . . . then large intestine (around your abdomen) . . . to the bladder (above your pubic bone) . . . to all the bones in your body . . . to your muscles . . . to your skin. Feel your entire body smiling. Notice now your body smiling back at you with warmth, or tingling, or a feeling of well-being. Once again, take a few cleansing breaths, then open your eyes.

MEDITATION also encourages deep breathing which oxygenates your entire body. It brings cortisol levels down, refocuses the mind and takes you out of the work/chore/parenting mode to better cope with your daily life.

REMEMBER SLEEPING IS HEALING. A regular and satisfying sleeping schedule of 7-10 hours brings clarity of mind and an ability to solve emotional issues/problems more easily. You will be surprised by your increased energy levels and a stronger sense of well being as you experience deeper, sounder sleep.

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To learn more sign up for the Sept. 19 – Oct. 24, 2007 Chi Kung Class: Movements for Wellness and Inner Peace with Guided Healing Meditations at QuietStar Center for Transformation (Wednesdays from 11am to 12:30pm).

After you have read this, consider scheduling an Unwinding your Belly, Body and Mind session of Chi Nei Tsang and receive \$20 off your session (expires 1/07/08 and one discount per reader).

References: Healing From Within with Chi Nei Tsang, Gilles Marin; The Wisdom of Menopause, Christiane Northrup, MD; "Rest Assured" GreatLife, Dec. '02; "Getting Enough Shut-eye," GreatLife, Kim Ericson; Creative Menopause, Farida Sharan; Sleeping Chi-Kung, CD by Gilles Marin; Wuji Yuan Gong, A Return to Oneness, Li Jun Feng