

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Good Sleep - Good Life

By: Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

*“When I woke up this morning my girlfriend asked me, ‘Did you sleep good?’
I said, ‘No, I made a few mistakes.’” - Steven Wright*

An Irish *proverb* tells us that “A good laugh and a long sleep are the best cures in the doctor’s book.” It seems like the Irish realize the importance of sleep in our daily lives. In fact, we humans spend about a third of our lives sleeping, so it follows that the *quality* of our sleep must impact the *quality* of our lives in many ways.

Unfortunately, it is estimated that as many as 70 million people suffer from some type of sleep disturbance, more so returning soldiers. One study conducted in San Antonio (2010) found an extremely high prevalence of sleep disturbance in soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan - Eighty-six percent! Researchers theorized that the stress and uncertainty involved with deployments can have a significant impact on the quantity and quality of sleep of the returning soldier; this is certainly true for the majority of Vietnam veterans that I treat. For example, some veterans report that their camp would be mortared by the enemy at approximately 0300 every night. Not surprisingly, when they finally returned home, they would wake up at 0300 every morning, and could not return to sleep. Some veterans diagnosed with PTSD also have trouble sleeping. The veteran constantly feels the need to be ‘on guard’, even at night; and this hyper-vigilance can lead to a form of insomnia. It can take time to relearn that sleep here is safe.

If you have some form of a sleep problem, finding its cause and getting proper treatment can have a tremendous positive impact on the quality of your waking life. One of the most common forms of sleep disturbance is called insomnia. Insomnia is difficulty in falling or staying asleep and people with insomnia suffer from insufficient sleep. Insomnia may arise as a result of aging, physical illness, or emotional problems such as anxiety or depression. It can also arise from the abuse of drugs or alcohol, or any situation which disrupts a person’s normal sleep schedule; such as travel or military deployments and combat. Insomnia can also coexist with other sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea or restless leg syndrome.

Insomnia or other sleep disturbances aren’t just annoying; they can lead to real health problems. If you think that you have a problem with sleeping, the first step is to have a medical evaluation to rule out any physiological problems. This can be conducted at the VA or by your primary care physician in the community. Additionally, a mental health evaluation can be beneficial in determining if anxiety or depression is a factor; treating these may resolve the sleep problem. Many medications are also used to treat insomnia; however, these tend to be only effective in the short-term. Indeed, ongoing use of sleeping pills may lead to dependence and actually interfere with developing good sleep habits or sleep ‘hygiene,’ common sense strategies for improving the quantity/quality of sleep, such as:

- Do not go to bed until you are sleepy. If you’re not sleepy at bedtime, do something relaxing (not stimulating) to take your mind off worries about sleep.

- If you are not sleepy after 20 minutes, get out of bed. Your bedroom should be where you go to sleep, not a place to go when you are bored.
- Begin rituals to help you relax each night BEFORE bed. This can include such things as a warm bath, or a few minutes reading.
- Get up at the same time every morning. This includes weekends and holidays. While tough, especially if you are currently working, it's an effective way to develop good sleep patterns.
- Avoid taking naps.
- Keep a regular schedule. Regular times for meals, medications, chores, and other activities help keep the body's inner clock running smoothly.
- Use your bed for sleeping and sex only. Don't write, eat, watch TV, talk on the phone, or play video games in bed.
- Avoid caffeine after your morning cup.
- Practice some form of relaxation; such as diaphragmatic breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.
- Exercise regularly, but not within four hours of going to sleep.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and a little cool. Remember, it is your sanctuary.

Another technique for improving sleep is the use of 'thought stoppage,' willfully forcing your mind to stop thinking thoughts which keep you awake. For example, you may think about your boss chewing you out tomorrow. You mull it over, every detail. Now, try suddenly ordering yourself to "Stop!" If the thought creeps back, yell to yourself again, "Stop!" Keep interrupting your unpleasant thoughts with unpleasant commands to yourself. This technique is forces an immediate shifting of our attention, which helps to lead us away from preoccupied thoughts. Thought stoppage proves that you have control over your mind and body, and the awareness of this control can lead to self-assuring, self-accepting thoughts...thoughts that are more conducive to sleep.

Keep in mind that having a problem sleeping for one or two nights does not mean that you have a sleep disturbance. While life can be beautiful, it can also be very stressful; this normal stress can temporarily interfere with sleep. When this happens, a little humor is helpful. As Leah Stussy once said "life is too short to sleep on a low thread - count sheets."