

Executive Health Corner

by Howard E. Wolin, M.D.

Stress and sleep

No less an authority than the Dalai Lama, the embodiment of serenity, has said that "Sleep is the best meditation." Sleep is the body's way of rejuvenating its cells and organs, of easing tension, of laying to rest the cares of the day. Sleep helps bring a fresher outlook to life and can even help us in making decisions.

The insomniac should construct a "stress profile."

It's not for nothing that we often say "Let me sleep on it" before making a major decision. Author John Steinbeck once said that "It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it." We can safely assume that Steinbeck solved the problem of many a plot line after a good rest.

So we know how we can benefit from sleep, and we know that "cranky" may be a kind word to describe someone who "got up on the wrong side of the bed." And we know that stress may well be the cause of many sleepless nights, especially for high-powered business executives whose minds keep racing even as they attempt to sleep.

Stress comes in a variety of forms for today's entrepreneurs and may result from either internal or external pressures. No matter what the source, the result is the same. You feel uptight and you worry, and that in turn can exacerbate existing physical maladies or help induce new ones. And you then will worry about *them*, fostering a whole slew of bad psychological feelings that will themselves in turn cause even more stress.

And, of course, you won't be able to sleep because you'll be so worried about all of these things.

Is the inevitable result a never-ending cycle of insomnia, a non-stop, tension-filled merry-go-round on which Hypnos never rides? Not necessarily.

There are ways to alleviate if not prevent this stress and get a better night's sleep.

Reasons for worry

The first step in doing so is to realize that insomnia is often a stress-caused physical symptom. It aggravates any physical and psychological damage that the stress has already produced because it deprives the insomniac of the aforementioned meditation brought on by sleep.

Further, this stress may emanate from external and/or internal sources. External stress may arise out of work-related factors such as fear of job loss, unreasonable deadlines, demanding bosses, mergers, downsizing and acquisitions, or from personal concerns such as marriage, divorce, sickness and old age. Internal stress may stem from internal drives, desires and worries, including such emotions common to entrepreneurs as unrealistic expectations, self-criticism, need for approval, inability to express anger or problems with authority.

Because one or more of these factors may be causing stress and sleepless nights, it's important that regular or even occasional insomniacs construct stress profiles of themselves. That is to say you should begin to pay careful attention to stressful factors or activities you encounter in your professional or personal life. The more you know what you are stressed about, the more effective you will be in taking actions that will diminish if not

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eliminate the stressors.

Even after you take inventory of such stressors, you should be aware that there could be emotional distress in your unconscious mind causing the insomnia. Although in this situation you would be well advised to seek professional help, some of the techniques which follow could still be useful.

A crucial thing to remember is that a lack of sleep or the inability to fall asleep easily is not life-threatening unless you're awake 24 hours a day for days on end. But some people get panicky about it, which adds another stressor and compounds fatigue and exhaustion. Don't work too hard at trying to fall asleep!

Temporary insomnia

Often, if you simply identify sources of concern, you can ease your mind and sleep. If not, here are some steps you can take which might help.

Don't eat a meal later than 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. Your digestive system will be working at a later hour on food which it could have handled better earlier. This means that you as an entrepreneur and sometime-insomniac might be better served by scheduling working lunches rather than working dinners.

If you've had a busy day at the office, followed by an evening meeting or dinner, and you then pursue aerobic exercise, you might suffer a sleepless night because the exercise will heighten your senses rather than inducing sleep. You'd be better off exercising in the morning, which will lead to the production of endorphins and a more produc-

tive and energetic work day. Exercise in and of itself is a great reliever of stress, allowing you to blow off steam.

A "time-out" during the day can also help, whether it's a cat nap or simply a non-sleeping rest period. Mini-vacations or short holidays can also be great stress alleviators.

Don't fight yourself if you can't sleep. Stay up and watch movies or TV or listen to music or anything you find relaxing. Meditative or relaxation techniques also can be quite beneficial; movement therapists teach a program of very gentle exercises for this purpose.

Sexual activity can also lead to soporific reactions, as can herbal teas or some other teas that should be prescribed and monitored by a physician versed in alternative or herbal medicines. You might also have an evening meal of turkey or a near-bedtime glass of warm milk, both of which are high in the sleep-inducing chemical, tryptophan.

Whatever you do, don't panic. Some kinds of stress will simply cause insomnia, but most of them will pass—as will the insomnia. In those situations where neither the knowledge of what the stressors are nor the heretofore mentioned techniques prove beneficial, it might be best to seek out the intervention of a psychiatrist or social worker.

TALKING
TO THE
BOSS