Stressed Out? You Might Need Sleep

Feeling irritable lately? You might need more sleep.

Snapping at your kids or spouse, stewing in checkout lines, shouting at road hogs . . . cultural negativity abounds. A recent National Sleep Foundation (NSF) poll suggests links between sleep deficiencies and negative attitudes and behavior.

Over one-third of respondents said they are sleepy during daytime at least a few days monthly. Those who slept under six hours on weeknights reported tiredness, stress and sadness more than eight-hour sleepers did. In general, sleepy people reported more dissatisfaction and anger while better sleepers said they were “full of energy,” “relaxed” and “happy.”

The NSF detects what may be a possible trend toward declining sleep and claims that as many as 47 million sleepy adults may be at risk for injury, health problems, even overeating. NSF Executive Director Richard L. Gelula notes that, “Some of the problems we face as a society—from road rage to obesity — may be linked to lack of sleep or poor sleep.”

I’ll bet that’s why just recently, two inconsiderate drivers blew their horns at me in sticky traffic situations. At least I thought they were inconsiderate. In retrospect, I probably could have been more careful. Their angry horns brought feelings of surprise, shock, tension and a bit of anger. Perhaps we all needed more sleep.

Fatigue can hamper coping and make life seem gloomy. But emotional stress can also hamper sleep. The NSF found this especially true after September 11. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington saw reported sleep problems rise. Respondents claimed stress or anxiety as

chief causes, citing fear, depression and nightmares as well.

Sleeplessness influences stress, and anxiety influences sleeplessness. How to break the vicious circle?

Admitting your sleep needs can be a start. NSF spokesman and University of Minnesota neurology professor Mark Mahowald, MD, told WebMD that some see sleep deprivation as a "badge of honor." "We never brag about how much sleep we get," he notes. "We only brag when we get too little sleep."

NSF president James Walsh recommends scheduling "worry time" during the day to consider troublesome issues and plan to resolve them. Then when worries shout for your attention at bedtime, knowing you already have an action plan can bring comfort.

Developing inner stability can enhance personal peace. One ancient Jewish king thought he had it all. Wealth, power and pleasures were his to enjoy. But in the end it all brought him pain. As he reflected on his life, he concluded that strengthening spiritual roots was essential to contentment.

"The reverence of the Lord leads to life," he wrote, "So that one may sleep satisfied." He felt that faith even had implications for work:

"Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is useless. Unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to his loved ones."

Workaholics take heed: Get more sleep. Your family and coworkers may thank you. You might become happier, safer, saner, even thinner. And consider that—just maybe—knowing and following the One who makes life possible might help bring you pleasant dreams.

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