

IN TOUCH



Fall, 2010



A few images from my recent kayak trip to the west coast of Vancouver Island



Volume 1, Issue 1

Newsletters are my way of staying in touch with my clients, and providing a little “extra” information that I hope you’ll find helpful. I choose topics based on issues that have come up in sessions with clients and try to provide hints and recommendations that will contribute to your overall health and wellness. The topics I’ve chosen for this newsletter all relate to sleep and relaxation. Enjoy!

HAVE A NAP

Recent research on napping suggests that an afternoon nap as short as 10 minutes or as long as 60 minutes can enhance alertness, mood, memory and mental performance. According to the US National Sleep Foundation, 31% of the population sleeps less than 7 hours at night. Healthy adults have a basic sleep need of 8 hours every night to function efficiently.

In 2007 Greek researchers reported that people who took regular naps (defined as at least 3 naps a week for at least 30 minutes) had a 37% lower coronary mortality than those who did not nap. The study involved over 23,000 Greek individuals with no history of heart disease, stroke or cancer. They followed the participants for an average of 6.3 years.

NASA researchers report that a 26 minute nap can increase performance by as much as 34%.

A 2008 University of Manitoba Faculty of Nursing study has found that “a number of personal health, safety and patient care issues can arise when most critical care nurses who work the night shift are unable to take a nap”. The study concluded that “it is to the betterment of nurses and their patients to take a restorative nap”.

In a recent book, Sara Mednick, Ph.D., a research psychologist at the Salk Institute in California reported that her studies showed that “without a midday rest, performance falls apart across the day.

Napping maintains and even boosts your skills, from creative problem solving, alertness and physical stamina, to mood and memory”. Dr. Mednick suggests the best time to nap is about 8 hours after you wake up. She states that human beings are creatures of habit and having a regular routine, with respect to sleep, is beneficial. In a study she conducted with 40 volunteers at a Manhattan publishing house Dr. Mednick found that nappers take less time to fall asleep, have an increased ability to sleep through the night, felt more refreshed, and decreased their daytime sleepiness by 10%. It was 38% less likely that sleepiness interfered with their daytime activities and they experienced increased alertness, stamina and mental acuity. Dr. Mednick takes a 45 minute nap every day, as do I, and advises at least 20 minute naps. If you have time, up to 60 minutes is helpful.



I realize that it may be very difficult for many people to take a mid afternoon nap due to work constraints but more and more employers are coming to an understanding that the benefits of napping may far outweigh the time lost.

The optimum nap experience includes resting in a dark and quiet room, covering the eyes with an eye- shade, and wearing earplugs if necessary, setting an alarm and establishing a firm schedule.

SLEEP

We all know how important sleep is to our health, but do you know how significantly your mattress, pillows, sleeping positions and room conditions can effect the quality of your health?

The Mattress: Lancet, a United Kingdom medical journal, recently reported that researchers in Spain monitored 313 adults who reported back pain when lying in bed and on rising. They were all given mattresses with varying degrees of firmness. After 90 days, subjects with medium-firm mattresses had significantly less pain than those with firm ones. The bottom line: firm mattresses are NOT necessarily the best!

Pillows and Positioning: I always advise my clients that sleeping in a side lying position is optimal. Back sleeping is not bad as long as the neck is supported in a neutral position and snoring is not a problem. Lying on one's stomach is detrimental because the neck is radically rotated and prone sleeping is a position that is not conducive to proper biomechanical efficiency. Sleeping on your side, you will usually require two pillows to allow the neck to be in that neutral position. You may have to experiment with various combinations of pillows. The idea is to have the head and neck supported so that they are in line with your spine. If you find it difficult to find the perfect set of pillows try this trick. Take a pillow case and fold up a towel so that it fits in the pillow case. Add more folded towels until you have that pillow at the appropriate height. Then add your favourite pillow on top. Pillow support should alleviate shoulder compression as much as possible. To create a neutral sleeping position, a pillow between the knees is often a good idea. If necessary stuff two pillows in a pillow slip. This will keep the spine straight, keep you from rolling into the prone position if that is your tendency. Fancy or expensive pillows are not necessary: inexpensive department store pillows can provide terrific sleep support if positioned correctly!



The Physiology of Melatonin: Melatonin is a hormone produced in the human by the pineal gland, a gland located in the cerebrum. There is some evidence that endogenous melatonin (the natural melatonin produced by your body) stabilizes and strengthens coupling of circadian rhythms, especially of core temperature and sleep-wake rhythms. Melatonin production seems to increase with low light levels which assists the sleep process. The presence of light will inhibit and even stop melatonin production. During the day melatonin levels remain low, as light shuts down the pineal gland's production of melatonin. As night falls, melatonin production rises. At an individual's habitual bed-time the pineal gland significantly increases production of melatonin and the body sleeps. As the day dawns and light becomes stronger, plasma levels of melatonin decrease over time, the body gradually wakes up. A dark environment may increase the production of melatonin and facilitate a beneficial sleep. Please note though, that this this process is very complex and many factors to do with sleep have not yet been identified.

MEDITATION

Meditation is simply a way to consciously relax. One study found that meditation before bedtime increased melatonin levels for that night. No increases in blood melatonin levels were noted on nights where participants didn't meditate.

Meditation can improve concentration and creativity, contribute to better mental and physical health and allow you to worry less about small problems which have been magnified by your mind. Attaining a state of serenity is actually easier than you might imagine. A simple way to meditate is to sit in a chair with your feet hip width apart, your back straight, your chin parallel to the floor. Place your hands, palms up, comfortably on your thighs. Close your eyes and relax all the muscles in your body. Disregard your thoughts of the day. Breathe normally, and count to a comfortable number (like 5 or 10) on inhalations and exhalations. Go through 5 to 10 cycles of this breathing and then proceed to breathe normally. As thoughts come, treat them as "clouds passing by". Strive to be present and concentrate on your breathing. Begin with 10 minute sessions to gain experience then extend the sessions to 20 or 30 minutes. When you have finished meditating, gradually become aware of your surroundings and get up slowly. I have been meditating for 10 years now. If I can do it, so can you.

Meditation can help focus on feelings like empathy, kindness, and compassion. Practice daily to get cumulative benefits. Like any discipline, the more you practice, the more proficient you become. If you do not have a lot of time even a 5 minute meditation can be beneficial. The best times to meditate are in the early morning and or just before you go to bed. I try to meditate twice a day. Meditation has helped me to attain a deeper understanding of my inner self and to gain a better understanding of my life's purpose.



The information in this newsletter has been carefully reviewed for accuracy and is intended for general information only. The body of knowledge is constantly changing and this newsletter cannot reflect all changes. For specific questions and problems I encourage you to see a physician in your area. I hope this newsletter is informative and I welcome your feedback.

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