The importance of good sleep and what you can do if you have problems.

What is happening when you sleep? Why do you feel so rotten if you miss out on your beauty sleep? A good question! Sleep is a natural process - or meant to be! Every twenty four hours the body is designed to enter a period of *restful unresponsiveness*.

Good sleep is restful but it is so much more than that. Unlike in Victorian times, when it was thought that during sleep everything switched off, we now know that it is highly restorative. When we are asleep the body undergoes many important processes essential for physical and mental health. Think of it as nightly maintenance.

But these days sleep doesn't always come so naturally, does it?

Ask your friends or work acquaintances about sleep and you'll soon come across at least one or two who complain of problems. Instead of sleep being something we do easily and naturally, it becomes a struggle.

It's no surprise to find then that we now sleep an average of 90 minutes per day less than we did in the 1920's and that one in ten people suffer from insomnia.

There is, of course, a world of difference between the odd bad night and true insomnia. Chronic lack of good quality sleep affects your whole life, not just for a day or two but week in, week out. Your health, work performance and relationships all suffer.

So why is sleep such a problem for some people?

Firstly, modern lifestyles have eroded the time and attention we give to sleep and rest. Technology and social media mean it is much harder to withdraw from the world. Facebook, Twitter, email and the endless possibilities of the internet mean that, if we wish, we can stay switched on 24/7.

To first feel sleepy and then fall asleep naturally, the body and mind need to unwind. The light from laptops, phones and tablets has been found to interfere with sleep by inhibiting the production of melatonin, the body's sleep hormone. Moreover, checking email late at night or endless browsing of the net keeps the brain alert so sleep cannot come.

Secondly, we are naturally programmed to feel sleepy at certain times of day, particularly in the evenings. You have perhaps heard of *Circadian Rhythms*, the cycle of activities, including sleep, that happen at particular times during a 24 hour period. This cycle relies on natural daylight to keep it in synch. That's why jet lag messes with your normal patterns and why shift workers are prone to sleep (and other health) problems.

Take your typical teenager for example. **Young adults need more sleep than older people, around 9 hours a night. Yet studies show that the average for 13-18 year olds is just 7 hours.** What are they doing instead? Ask any parents of said teenagers and the answer will probably be *sitting in their bedrooms on their computer or X box playing games or chatting to mates.* Do this repeatedly late into the night, add in lack of exercise and midnight fridge raids and you can see how the body gets completely confused and starts to turn night into day. Result: one very grumpy and under-performing teenager at school/college. (That's why there's a new research study into sleep deprivation in young adults).

Nipping sleep problems in the bud is particularly important for young people as studies also show that once established, difficulties tend to get worse as they grow older.

The answer for teenagers and us all: don't turn night into day. Keep your body clock regulated with lots of natural daylight and exercise and have regular bedtimes. Avoid excessively long lie-ins at weekends. Granted, this will be hard to achieve with teenagers (and the body clocks of adolescents do seem to be set to favour later waking) but establishing boundaries around sleep is just as important as in other areas.

The third reason for sleeping problems that I want to mention here really is an unfortunate Catch 22: if you have difficulty sleeping, that experience in itself erodes your ability to sleep well.

How does this happen? Well, if you actually want to sleep but can't and this happens over several nights, you start to unlearn all your previous positive conditioning around sleep. **So instead of getting into bed and anticipating a restful night, you become anxious, worrying that you'll have another bad night.**

Remember what I said earlier that the body and mind needs to unwind so you can feel sleepy? Well worrying about sleep does the complete opposite and keeps you alert and awake. This is where you need to use a simple relaxation exercise to calm your racing mind.

Sleep patterns become established really quickly. While it may take months and years for the ill-effects of diet or lack of exercise to show themselves, **a pattern of poor sleep can set in over just a few weeks.** This is why it is really important to take sleep seriously and do everything you can to prevent a run of bad nights turning into insomnia. Even parents of newborns, who naturally will have many weeks and months of sleep deprivation, can take steps to protect themselves.

Sleep is one of the pillars of good health along with diet and exercise. Yet many people take it for granted, until they notice how rotten they feel when they don't get enough. If you start to have a problem, don't ignore it or think you just have to accept it. There really are many simple strategies and tools you can learn to sleep well again!

Frances Taylor is a Sleep Well and De-Stress Coach. Find out more (link to info on Riverside website) or contact Frances frances@francestaylor.net

07967 968 821