COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUES FOR SLEEP

The foundation for a restful night's sleep is proper sleep hygiene -- managing screen time, lowering lights before bedtime, room temperature, not getting chilled, breathing practices and so forth. Good, research-based information is available on the Internet.

This article is about cognitive behavior techniques (CBT) that are especially useful for busy minds and anxious thoughts. I've developed these techniques over years of practice with my clients and myself. The practices work best accompanied with good sleep hygiene.

Busy minds and anxious people find it difficult to quiet their thoughts and fall asleep. Usually once they fall asleep they sleep well and wake refreshed, ready to meet the day.

Once in bed, tell yourself 'this is my time to sleep and I will think about other things tomorrow'. I like the mental image of the Microsoft icon for downloading files from one file to another – imagine your thoughts being transferred from your mind into another file. 'It is there whenever I want it, but this is my time to sleep.' You can imagine a real place to transfer thoughts, such as your desk drawer or an imaginary place. It is there whenever you want it, but this is my time to sleep. It can be a good idea to promise your busy mind something similar to 'I will spend 15 minutes at 3 pm tomorrow to think about this'. Scheduling a short amount of time at a particular time is important. 'I'll think about it tomorrow' isn't very effective. Nor is it effective to schedule more than hour unless there is a particular project to accomplish. The brain needs to know that you will at some time process what you are thinking – it doesn't work to just tell yourself that you won't think of issues at all.

Because it is hard to think about two things at once, I recommend *thought substitution*. Select a short poem, a nursery rhyme, the chorus of a calm song or a brief prayer to recite. It is kind of like counting sheep but losing track of where you are and staring over won't be an issue as it can be with counting sheep.

When you begin to learn this you will find it difficult to focus on your mantra. Each time your thoughts jump around, gently bring your focus back to your mantra and start over. Don't give up or stress over losing track. Have patience – it won't work if you keep changing your mantra. Developing the practice over time keeps away the thoughts that may prevent you from falling asleep.

At bedtime, tell yourself that 'it is okay if I wake during the night; and, if I do I will recite my mantra'. Then, if you wake, you will remember that you are to recite your mantra and focusing on the mantra will keep away the worrisome thoughts that keep you awake.

Depressed people typically fall asleep without much difficulty but wake during the night. These techniques are useful for depression. Sometimes clients tell me they are anxious and not depressed. It is important to understand that some people experience 'anxious depression'. Sorting out what is going on can be complicated. Some people with depression feel foggy and sleep too much while others can't shut off thoughts. It is important to determine if you have an agitated depression, anxiety or stress.

Judy Cantwell
Licensed Professional Counselor
www.judycan.com
404-315-7331
judycanLPC@gmail.com