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ADHD and Sleep: The Basics

DIG Coaching is the leading coaching practice for adults and children looking to manage attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms and attention deficit disorder (ADD) symptoms. We focus on managing symptoms of attention deficit disorder, adults with ADD, or adults who have children with ADHD. DIG Coaching, led by attention coach Jeff Copper, helps adults and children (particularly those diagnosed with or impacted by attention deficit disorder or its symptoms) in life or business who are stuck, overwhelmed, or frustrated. DIG Coaching helps adults and children get unstuck and moving forward by helping to open their minds and pay attention to what works.

ADHD and Sleep: The Basics

By Jeff Copper, Manager & Head Coach, DIG Coaching Practice LLC



An ADD-er once said that, of all the issues associated with ADHD, sleep issues are the most annoying. In varying degrees and intensity, the issues in general fall into four main categories:

- **Difficulty going to bed:** Physically getting yourself to bed.
- **Struggling to fall asleep:** Nodding off at the designated hour.
- **Sleeping peacefully:** Staying asleep once you fall asleep.
- **Awaking from a dead sleep:** You would expect getting up at 7 A.M. to be hard if you went to bed late, but for those who have ADHD, it can be hard even after sleeping a reasonable number of hours.

The majority of ADD-ers struggle with sleep. The fact of the matter is, sleep deprivation can intensify ADHD symptoms, making them more difficult to manage. Furthermore, sleep, or good sleep hygiene, requires organization which historically is problematic for ADD-ers.

When addressing sleep issues, experts suggest starting with the basics and working from there. Let's take a closer look at the fundamentals and their progression.

Diagnosis

A proper diagnosis is key simply because, if you have sleep apnea and you are not paying attention to that diagnosis, you are NOT addressing the issue effectively. Same goes true for coexisting conditions. If you have anxiety or depression, effective sleep management starts with addressing the coexisting condition first. Another distinction that is helpful is to know if you have a delayed sleep phase. If not, you are just not willing to go to bed at the appropriate time. It is worth noting that finding knowledgeable help for sleep

issues can be more challenging than finding help with ADHD in general.

Sleep Hygiene

Moving past diagnosis but before turning to medication or melatonin to promote sleep, experts recommend focusing on good sleep hygiene. In general, I like to think of this as managing external stimuli, which include the following key areas:

Regular bed and wake times: You should have a fixed bedtime and wakeup time so the body can synchronize its internal clock. Thus, it is important to get accustomed to falling asleep at certain times, even if you are not tired or have a reason to get up early the next day.

Block out distracting noise: This is especially important for light sleepers. Find a quiet place to sleep, wear earplugs, turn on some white noise like a fan to drown out distracting sounds, or even buy audio CD/MP3s with white noise and play them at night.

Light management: Our internal clocks are affected by light. At night we need to dim the lights before bed and sleep in a dark room. Wear a sleep mask if need be. Keep in mind that computer and TV screens are a form of light and should be minimized. In the morning, it is all about maximizing light, so up with the shades.

Sleep conditioning/routine: This is the association of sleep-promoting activities with a regular bedtime like taking a warm bath, dressing for bed, brushing your teeth, cleaning your face, and maybe some not-so-stimulating reading. Promote relaxation. Avoid stimulation or vigorous exercise within an hour or two of bedtime.

No naps: If you are having difficulty going to sleep at night, naps may be the culprit. Many find it best to exclude naps.

Stomach management: Avoid heavy, spicy, or sugary foods before bedtime. Also avoid alcohol before bedtime. Even though alcohol helps some people get to sleep, for most, alcohol can produce a wake-up effect a few hours later. Instead, try a light snack, warm milk, or food high in amino acid. Finally, manage caffeine. For some, caffeine helps them to sleep; for others, it may keep them awake far into the night.

Bedroom management: Reserve the bed for sleep (and, for adults, sex) to train your body to associate a bed with sleeping, not playing video games, watching movies, or surfing the Internet. Sleep in a well-ventilated room at a cool (not cold) temperature.

Regular exercise but not right before bed: Regular exercise can deepen sleep, but strenuous exercise within two hours before bedtime can inhibit falling asleep.

Medication management: Some medications promote sleep while others interfere with sleep. It is important to review your medication with your physician to make sure your medications do not exacerbate the problem. For example; ADHD medication can create sleep problems in some adults. If this is the case, talk with your doctor about fine-tuning your treatment. On the other hand, some experts believe that taking a stimulant 30 minutes before bedtime can shut off a buzzing ADHD brain and actually help you turn off your brain so you can fall asleep. The point here is to talk to your doctor about the timing and dosage for optimal results.

Circadian Rhythm and Hormones

Good sleep hygiene is about managing outside stimuli to manage your body's internal clock. One factor influencing your internal clock is melatonin. Melatonin is a hormone produced by the brain's tiny pineal gland. The gland secretes melatonin in sync with the circadian rhythm. Many factors such as insufficient light exposure can upset the rhythm. Taking over-the-counter melatonin supplements can be an effective means of resetting your internal clock. In general, melatonin is considered safe in low doses for short-term and long-term use, but you should be sure to talk to your doctor first.

If you consider using melatonin supplements, you should be aware that there is some controversy around the optimal timing and dosage. One school of thought is to take a very small dose (1/2 milligram) at dinnertime. Others think a larger dose (3 to 5 milligrams) should be taken just before bedtime. Experiment and learn what works for you. There are some other over-the-counter products such as amino acids or chamomile and valerian tea, but results are inconsistent.

When you've been checked out and don't have sleep apnea, depression, or some other condition that can impact sleep, and your sleep hygiene is good but melatonin isn't helping, there are two alternatives left to explore. The first is to consider hiring a coach to help you learn how to unplug your ADHD brain; the other is to talk to a physician about other sleep aids or remedies.

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