

INSOMNIA & GRIEF

It is common for people to experience distressing physical changes in the weeks and months after a death. These changes might include headaches, stomach aches, heart palpitations, weakness, tightness in your chest or throat, fatigue, dizziness, increased illness; or you may just not feel 'right' physically for a long time.

Of all the physical changes people experience, perhaps none is more common and few more distressing than insomnia—the inability to get to sleep or to stay asleep. Family members, when asked to identify the most difficult things about the first year after a death, more than 80% listed sleep disturbances. Some people find it difficult to fall asleep; some wake up repeatedly during the night; some find it impossible to fall back asleep after the first time they awaken and spend the rest of the night tossing and turning. People who have trouble with insomnia at other difficult times in their lives are especially apt to find that this is a problem after the death of a loved one.

Although it may be of some comfort to know that what you are experiencing is “normal,” that knowledge doesn't make it easier to go day after day with less sleep than you need. Many of the symptoms of grief become even worse when compounded by persistent insomnia. It is harder to concentrate...to remember things...to be patient...to have enough energy...to enjoy anything when your body is physically exhausted and you need rest.

Following are a number of ideas to try if you are having trouble getting a good night's sleep. It is recommended that you give each suggestion several chances before deciding whether or not it works for you. Many of these ideas have come from hospice family members troubled by insomnia who finally figured out their own ways to overcome their sleep disturbances. Hopefully these suggestions will help you find some strategies that work for you.

Take comfort in knowing that, for most people, insomnia is most intense during the first weeks after the death of a loved one. You can be confident that, over time, your sleeping patterns normally return to what they used to be.

During the Day:

- Exercise; but exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. A walk around the block or through a mall will help you feel more relaxed. Exercise helps in other ways while you are grieving.
- Don't take long naps during the day, no matter how tired you feel. Short naps, however, especially before late afternoon, can keep you from becoming too sleep-deprived if you are not getting enough sleep at night.
- Pay attention to your diet. Don't drink caffeinated coffee, tea or sodas in the evening. Food that is high in fat or hard to digest may make you wakeful. Sugar during the day may make you more edgy and tired by mid-evening, but not sleepy.

- If you are taking over-the-counter pain medications, see if they have caffeine in them.
- Alcohol in small quantities may help you relax. But more than a drink or two will actually worsen your sleep cycle. Making you more apt to waken during the night and be unable to get back to sleep. An unhealthy drinking pattern only lets people postpone their grieving not avoid it.
- If your doctor prescribes medication to help you sleep, ask how to avoid becoming dependent on it. Some medications have a "rebound effect" which can make them contribute to your insomnia if you take them too regularly.
- Maintain a regular bedtime.

During the Night, If You can't Sleep

- Keep a tape recorder by the bed. If you waken, talk into it. When you have said everything that is on your mind, you may be able to return to sleep.
- Listen to the radio or tapes. Some people find music relaxing; others like "talking books" that demand your concentration, making it harder to brood.
- Get up! Sit in your living room and have a cup of herbal tea, hot water, or warm milk. Read a book or magazine. In half an hour go back to bed.
- Imagine a peaceful situation. Some people think of themselves lying on warm beach, or in a hammock in the forest. Select whatever image makes you feel relaxed and quiet. Now picture yourself there in as much detail as you can. Notice how calm you feel. (While you are newly grieving, it may be better to pick an imaginary situation rather than something from your past. Memories can be too painful for the first months after the death of a loved one to help you relax and sleep).
- As you lie in bed, deliberately relax each part of your body. Begin with your toes, going up your legs to your thighs. Then your fingers going up your arms to your shoulders. Next, your back and buttocks. Last are you neck and head. The process of body relaxation takes about 15 minutes; many people fall asleep before they finish.

If you are concerned or worried about your reactions, or need to talk to someone, call our office. There is no charge.

Cascade Health Solutions Hospice, Bereavement Services @ 541-228-3050.