

FREE

walkabout

WALKING & HIKING FOR FITNESS

November | December 2009

Part Two

Walk Before You Run

A Healthy Woman's
Story of Breast Cancer

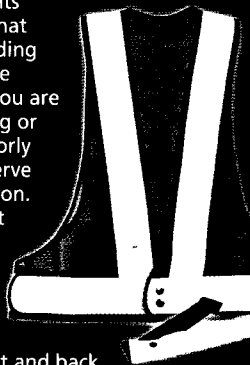
Holiday Gifts for the Walker

A Perfect Recipe
For Cooking Up
Holiday Stress



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Sleep — Relax, Restore, Renew!

Shani Fox

What would it be like to have optimal energy and mental clarity so you could live life with gusto?

Many factors affect our energy and focus, but restful sleep is undoubtedly among them. Adequate nighttime rest is critical to functioning at our physical and mental best and keeping us from illness. Yet about one third of us have trouble getting a restful night's sleep.

There are many possible causes for insomnia, but a surprising number of cases resolve with simple changes that align our daily routine with nature's circadian rhythms. Many of our hormones cycle with circadian rhythms: hormones that make us alert and active are at their highest levels during the day, while hormones that repair cellular damage and restore the health of our tissues peak while we rest at night. The pineal gland, which oversees the ebb and flow of these hormones, is regulated by the amount of light transmitted through our eyes. Thus, adequate periods of natural light during the day and true darkness at night are essential to harmonious hormonal orchestration.

To optimize your hormonal rhythms, get outdoors daily. Thirty minutes or more of natural light each day does wonders for the spirit as well as normal hormone function. At night, go to bed no later than midnight and as early as you need to allow for eight hours of sleep. Maximize the darkness in your bedroom: block light coming in through the windows with dark curtains, and turn any digital displays away from your eyes. In addition to optimizing your body's restorative activity, don't be surprised if true darkness deepens your sleep. Synchronizing ourselves to nature's rhythm pays off in improved health.

We may find that in our overscheduled lives, we've relegated sleep to a low priority, and our bedrooms may reflect this. Is your bedroom a place of activity, or of rest? Are mental stimulants like TV, computers, or work desks present? Treat your bedroom as a sanctuary. Minimize electrical wiring and work-related furnishings. Remove noise-generating devices, and ask that others in your vicinity honor your quiet time. Invest in a comfortable mattress, natural fiber linens and blankets in soothing colors, and you'll be making a great investment in yourself. Let your bedroom be a place where you look forward to spending time.

It's also a good idea to look at how you're spending the 30-to-60 minutes before bedtime. Few of us can make an immediate transition from mental stimulation to blissful rest; a period of wind-down is often very helpful. Turn off the computer and television during this period, and replace them with a favorite calming activity. For some this may be

a warm bath — add Epsom salts, which contain soothing magnesium, or a drop of a favorite essential oil to turn your bathtub into a spa. Meditation or intentional deep breathing, during the bath or on their own, let your body know that a period of rest is ahead. Some people enjoy listening to calm music, or recordings of the ocean or rain. This is a good time for quiet, reflective journaling if you're so inclined, or for counting your blessings. Go to bed having taken good care of yourself, and deep rest will follow.

Stress management is another critical element of self-care that supports our ability to rest at night. If work or relationship issues, grief, or negative self-talk are occupying you during the day, they're likely to disturb you at night as well. Potential solutions abound, but typically require that you reach out for support. Find a trusted friend, counselor, or support group and you'll learn ways to lay down your burden of stress, rest more deeply, and move on to a life of greater ease and enjoyment.



If you've adopted all of the suggestions above and you're still not sleeping well, visit a holistic physician. Your holistic physician will help you identify and treat any underlying physical condition that may be interfering with your sleep, such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, hypoglycemia, or allergies. A holistic workup will also identify other factors affecting your ability to rest. For example, we all know that caffeine from coffee, tea, cola or chocolate — especially during the late afternoon or evening — can disturb sleep. But did you know that exercise late in the day could be disturbing your sleep as well? Simple lab tests can determine the optimal time of day for your workout, as well as the eating schedule that best supports steady energy and focus throughout the day and unbroken rest at night. And wouldn't that be a great way to live? **WA**

Shani Fox is a naturopathic physician who speaks and writes about the joy and mystery of natural medicine. She envisions the day when all Americans have access to the life-affirming benefits of natural medical care. Contact her at womanascending@gmail.com.