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Introduction

➔ Key points

- ◆ Sleep is an essential part of human existence.
- ◆ Disturbed sleep (which is common) can have various serious consequences, especially concerning mood, behaviour, performance at work or at school, and social relationships.
- ◆ It is essential, therefore, that people seek help for their sleep problems and that effective treatment is provided.

Differing attitudes to sleep

Attitudes to sleep vary significantly from one person to another. Some see it as an enjoyable experience and even a relief from daytime pressures and cares—a view expressed poetically by Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586):

Come, Sleep! O Sleep, the certain knot of peace,
The baiting-place of wit, the balm of woe,
The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release,
Th'indifferent judge between the high and low.

Astrophel and Stella (Certain Sonnets, Sonnet XXXIIX)

On the other hand, those who sleep badly can regard the night as a distressing time, sometimes even to be dreaded, partly because of their inability to sleep but also because things can generally seem much worse at night than during the day. Literature again illustrates the point in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

Macbeth, III, ii, 45



Insomnia and other adult sleep problems · thefacts

If you sleep well and enjoy sleep, you might not mind that much of your life is spent asleep—on average 24 years, or even more allowing for the greater proportion of time that we sleep as children. However, if you are a poor sleeper, you are more likely to regret the proportion of your life that you spend sleeping—or trying to do so. Even if you have no trouble sleeping, you might resent the need to ‘waste’ time that might otherwise be used for more interesting and productive activities.

Some species of animal do not suffer this disadvantage: while one half of their brain (or cerebral hemisphere) is asleep, the other half remains awake! Examples of this so-called ‘unihemispheric sleep’ include certain types of dolphin and porpoise.

Sadly (at least for those frustrated by having to sleep), we show no capacity for this type of sleep. Instead, we need to sleep solidly and completely in order to function at our best during the day. Unfortunately, about a third or more of people of all ages have problems with their sleep, and many do not seek help, even though their poor sleep seriously affects their lives.

Effects of poor sleep

You may already know from personal experience that persistent loss of sleep or disturbed sleep can cause all sorts of problems. Most people become tired, irritable, and out of sorts. Coping with everyday challenges or stresses becomes more difficult, causing upset, depression, and even aggression—and this affects family and friends. Children do less well at school and adults have difficulty doing their job properly, especially if it requires sustained concentration and effort.

Accidents at work or while driving are often caused by lack of sleep. Some major disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spillage and the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986, have been attributed to sleep disturbance in key personnel.

It has been estimated that the effects of sleep problems cost the USA many billions of dollars a year. It is likely that the economic consequences are similar in the UK and elsewhere.

For these various reasons, much more attention should be paid to the importance of sleeping well. However, in order to prevent or treat sleep problems, doctors and other professionals also need to know more about sleep and its disorders.



Personal awareness of sleep disorders

Most people need to know more about the nature and importance of sleep to recognize in themselves and others the signs of unsatisfactory sleep and to know what they can do to help themselves and how best to obtain help.

It is particularly important that everyone should consider sleep a very important part of their lives and should ask for help at an early stage if they think that they (or someone close to them) have a sleep problem.

At present, comparatively few people seek help, even for serious sleep problems. For example, only about 10% of adults whose breathing is interrupted during sleep (see obstructive sleep apnoea, Chapter 9) seek help from their doctors, even though, as discussed later in the book, the condition results in poor-quality sleep and often severe daytime problems.

Professional awareness of sleep disorders

Surveys carried out in the UK and elsewhere have shown that usually very little time (if any) is given to sleep and its disorders in the training of medical students, family doctors, hospital specialists, and nurses. The same is true of psychologists, teachers, and others involved in the care of people from childhood to old age. For example, medical students are taught to ask only superficial questions about patients' sleep. Qualified doctors in the various specialties may well fail to enquire about sleep problems in their patients, whether adults or children.

Thus, it is no surprise that many significant sleep problems are not recognized (still less treated properly) and that they continue to affect people's lives unnecessarily, quite possibly for years on end.

Almost all sleep problems can be treated

Overall, there is a vast number of people with significant sleep problems who are not receiving help, mainly because they do not realize that they have a serious but treatable condition. If more people recognized the importance of seeking help with their sleep problems at an early stage—and insisted on getting it—improvements in the education and training of doctors and others would be much more likely to happen. All concerned need to realize that, in fact, there is a wide variety of types of treatment that can be used effectively if sought and then provided.



The purpose of this book

This book is intended mainly to help members of the general public to recognize the importance of sleep and to understand its disorders (including their recognition, importance, and treatment) in adults. Some professionals may also find it useful.

It should help you towards an understanding of the modern approach to sleep problems and encourage healthy sleep patterns in yourself and others close to you, as well as encouraging you to seek the right kind of help when needed. It is hoped that it will contribute to a greater general awareness of the topic.

Certain points about the book should be emphasized.

- ◆ The account it provides is only general in nature, without any attempt to go into detail. For this, it would be necessary to consult more technical books such as those described under Sources of further information in the Appendix.
- ◆ The later chapters presuppose that the earlier chapters have been read.
- ◆ To aid understanding of certain points or concepts, reference is made to other chapters elsewhere in the book.
- ◆ The case studies have been made anonymous to preserve confidentiality.
- ◆ In places, reference is made to ‘he’ or ‘his’, and not to the female gender, for the sake of brevity.
- ◆ Reference is made to the kind of sleep problems that affect children and adolescents only in relation to the effects on their parents’ sleep. A companion book specifically about the sleep problems of children and adolescents is available in this *Facts* series (see Appendix).
- ◆ **This book is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice from your own doctor.**

