

The Catholic Doctor is In: The gift of a good night's sleep

What is it with kids and teenagers? It's nothing for them to sleep 12 hours or more if given the opportunity. I can still remember that in college it was not uncommon for me to sleep until noon on weekends. What happens as we age that shortens our sleep cycle and for many of us causes insomnia? Life! We begin to worry about our job, our friends, our parents, our spouse, our children, our bills and our soul.

There are a number of different patterns of insomnia. If it takes you over 20 minutes to first fall asleep you are experiencing one type. Then there is the kind that I have struggled with for years now: waking up in the middle of the night and having trouble falling back to sleep (I have seen the clock hit 3 a.m. too many times over the past decade). Then there is waking up an hour or two before your friendly alarm startles you. This last type is frequently correlated with depression.

As a physician discussing insomnia, I must go through the obligatory checklist of things that contribute to insomnia. Avoid caffeine for at least six hours prior to going to bed (no big revelation here); also, drinking alcohol late in the evening or even right before you retire may help you fall asleep but frequently contributes to insomnia in the middle of the night. And exercising before you go to bed can cause significant difficulty falling asleep by stimulating your adrenal gland. But everyone is different, and in my case, exercising late in the evening is just about my only option. It actually helps me get a good night's sleep and does not cause insomnia for me.

The sleep experts use a term called sleep hygiene. I've always thought it was a strange medical term. For most of human existence, sleep hygiene is something that happened to people naturally. The sun sets, it gets dark and you have little choice but to slow down, rest and prepare for sleep. Now we have electric lights, television, video games, computers and smart phones. Part of sleep hygiene means avoiding mental stimulation and stressors for at least one hour before you plan to sleep. Watching a news show that is debating politics right before you go to bed would be considered bad sleep hygiene, and it may actually be detrimental to your mental health as well! Checking your email right before you settle into bed is more likely to stir the brain up, not settle the brain down. Then there are those who don't shut their phones off and continue to receive texts through the night. Seriously?

There are also specific sleep disorders that may contribute to insomnia or a poor night's sleep, like sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome. These are best diagnosed in a formal sleep lab study and are beyond the scope of this article.

Now for the Dr. Kaminskas' plan of treatment, which will not be found in any scientific journal. There is no better plan, as part of good sleep hygiene, than to spend a few

minutes with your Creator before you go to sleep. Possibilities include reading a chapter in a book written by one of your favorite Christian authors, saying some prayers for your loved ones or reading some passages from the Bible. Very importantly, handing off your worries to God before you retire for the night is the best way to settle an overactive mind that I know.

This past summer, I occasionally did something that turned out to be extremely effective at enhancing my chances of a good night's sleep. Just as the sun was going down, I grabbed my rosary and headed out for a walk. The very first time I did this I kept my rosary in my pocket as I passed some of the neighbors walking their dogs or taking an evening stroll with their loved one. The next time I was inspired to carry the rosary where all could see. I can remember thinking that if I am to emulate the Apostles, I need to be open and proud to be a card-carrying Catholic. Then one night as I walked, I had this vision of thousands of Catholics in our diocese, from Fort Wayne to South Bend, taking evening walks to pray the rosary for all to see. Now, that would be very effective evangelization — followed by a good night's sleep.

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