

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PAIN AND SLEEP

“Food, water and shelter” are easy answers when the question is “What are the basic necessities of life?” However, we often overlook the importance of quality sleep as a primary building block of productivity, attention and peace in our lives. Pain can be a major disruption to the restoration achieved during a successful night’s sleep.

Pain and disturbed sleep can create a negative cycle:

Pain as a cause:

Pain can make it difficult for us to fall asleep, wake us up after we’ve begun to sleep, or cause us to have non-restorative sleep.

Pain as a result:

Sleeplessness, on the other hand, can lower a person’s threshold of pain during waking hours, and it can also impair recovery, extending the intensity or duration of pain.

The brain’s reactions to pain and to sleep are vastly different. The dichotomy between pain and sleep make it difficult for the brain to decide a correct course of action. Pain prompts the brain into a state of hyper-reactivity, protecting the injured organ or tissue, gauging the progression of the pain, and problem-solving for remedies. The body is trying desperately to convince the mind to pay attention.

Sleep, oppositely, prompts the brain into a state of hypo-reactivity, disengaging the senses, cooling the body and retreating to regeneration. The sleepy mind begs the body to relax and release.

What makes for a good sleeping environment?

Sleep Factors:

- Choose a pillow and mattress that are not too soft and not too hard. Too soft will lead to a lack of support – too hard will lead to pressure on the sacrum and back of the head.
- Sleep in a cool room – the body temperature drops while the body slips into repair mode and that transition is easier when the room is cooler, making it easier to fall asleep.
- Sleep in the dark – even a small amount of light keeps the brain more alert.
- Avoid stressful thoughts, exercise, caffeine and eating close to bedtime.

- Develop a nightly ritual – checking the doors, brushing your teeth and taking a moment of reflection may be among the habits that our brain recognizes as putting ourselves to bed; rituals help us to wind down and transition to sleep. Sleeping and waking at the same time each day is another habit that helps train the brain and body into following a productive cycle.
- Keep the bedroom reserved for sleep and sex – no television or devices.

Under the care of a physician, determine the origin of the cycle – was the pain first? Or the disturbed sleep? Once you understand the beginning of the circle, you and your doctor can take steps to eliminate the pain and reinstate a good night's sleep.