

SLEEPING BETTER, Part 2
By David G. Schwartz, M.D.
June 27, 2016

In this part of the sleep presentation, I review Dr. Naimin's portrayal of the ultradian rhythms of our consciousness that often is overridden by our lifestyles, how these rhythms affect our days and nights, and how we can restore these rhythms. He covers napping, middle-of-the-night wakefulness, the importance of dusk, dawn, and dreaming in the whole spectrum of our day and night consciousness, and how waking, dreaming, and sleeping can be woven together into an integrated whole.

Nature's ultradian rhythms of our consciousness have an average period of 90 minutes, known as Basic Rest and Activity Cycles (BRAC). Throughout the day, 70 out of the 90 minutes are devoted to focused, active, productive consciousness. The last 20-minute phase makes a more diffuse, expansive dreamy awareness, suitable for rest, imagination, and creative thinking. It is helpful to be aware of the times when we are feeling distracted and dreamy. That may be the "rest" part of the cycle. It may be the time to take a walk, stretch, breath deeply, let the focus become abstract, artistic, imaginative, and to be mindful of feelings and needs in the background.

During the night, the 90 minutes are divided between sleep and dreaming, the first $\frac{1}{2}$ of the night having a higher proportion of sleep in each cycle, and the latter $\frac{1}{2}$ of the night having a greater proportion of dreaming in each cycle.

The author states that by mid life, most Americans experience little deep sleep and diminished dreaming due to the natural rhythms being overridden by our lifestyles. Our personal sense of time reflects the resonance between our inner biological clock and the outer cultural clock. We mostly live our days in response to the artificially determined time of our culture, leading to a temporal disorientation due to the conflict between the inner and outer clock. These dysrhythmias not only interfere with normal sleep and dream patterns, but also they are associated with depression, chronic illness, and mortality.

We have to learn to rest before we can sleep. So to restore the rest parts of the cycles, we need to understand what rest is and what it isn't. We often confuse rest with recreation, eating, drinking alcohol, watching TV, reading, athletic activities, etc. Although some of these activities are beneficial, they are not rest.

True rest looks more like prayer, meditation, gentle Yoga, strolling in a garden, lying on a couch, rocking in a rocking chair, or just sitting still. These may seem like depression to those hooked on a "workaholic" lifestyle. Then symptoms of fatigue and depression call out a need for deep rest.

Dr. Naimin recommends several practices to rediscover our natural rhythms. One is to take a day or a weekend without any timepieces and to do whatever your body-mind feels a need for whenever you please.

To rediscover dusk, we need to recognize that “nightfall” does not fall. It slowly descends. Neither do we naturally “fall” asleep. (If you fall asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow, you are sleep deprived.) Sleep begins gradually through several stages. One stage is hypnagogic dreams, brief, fleeting images, unlike the REM stages later in the night. To experience the transition, it is helpful to be aware of sensations, thoughts, and feelings, as you descend deeper into sleep. This is a form of mindfulness meditation.

Light at night and “night life” with excesses of eating, drinking, alcohol, caffeine, exercise, dramatic entertainment, TV, videos, etc. all interfere with the experience of dusk, and most interfere with melatonin production in the pineal gland, which is supposed to regulate sleep and dreams. Alcohol facilitates drowsiness but alters circadian rhythms and interferes with sleep and dreaming. Over-the-counter and prescription drugs to aid sleep produce an artificial or simulated sleep and dreaming, and they produce rebound insomnia. Unconsciousness does not equal sleep. Some drugs cause amnesia, so the person doesn’t remember wakefulness that occurred during the night. In contrast, Valerian, 5HTP, and Tryptophan and many other herbal calmatives (called nervines) support natural sleep patterns.

He recommends 3 steps for the transition of dusk from waking consciousness to sleep. First, turn the lights down low (or use blue-blocking sunglasses). Second, do some evening ritual to heal the anxieties of the day, of which we often become aware, as soon as we slow down. Third, surrender to sleep.

The evening rituals one hour before sleep can be changing clothes, bathing, gentle Yoga, meditation, prayers, contemplation, story telling, and self-reflection on the feelings of the day. Lower lights often lead us to connect with others (social huddling). Have a comfortable, dark, sleeping environment. Trying to go to sleep, as an act of will, leads only to frustration. It doesn’t work. It’s like trying to look at your own eyebrows (with no mirror). We don’t “go” to sleep. It is a letting go of wakefulness, a surrender.

For people with severe physical or neurobehavioral problems that are interfering with sleep, or true insomnia, if these methods do not produce the desired results, people are advised to get professional help.

Awakening in the middle of the night may not always be pathological. Historically in environments without light, people would sleep for a few hours, then have a period of quiet wakefulness used for reflection, meditation, prayer, or conversation, and then they would go back to sleep for several more hours. This may be more normal than sleeping straight through the night, which may be a sign of sleep deprivation. Our industrial schedule does not allow enough time between going to bed and morning arousal to allow for that. We try to cram all that into an uninterrupted segment of time. We need to see if we can schedule more time for darkness, and let go of some of our other activities, if we want to improve our nights.

To recover dawn, we need to awaken gradually. The grogginess can be a time of creative expression, inspiration, healing, getting up with the sun, instead of jumping to the alarm. Don't expect to awake like the flip of a switch. Pray, meditate, think of what the day has to offer. Then after getting up, go outside and look at the sky, to introduce light to help set the circadian rhythm.

Napping is not helpful for insomniacs, as it further diminishes nighttime sleep, but napping otherwise for around 15 minutes in the middle of the day or just resting with the eyes closed can be respectful of the daily rhythms. Just like a little wakefulness in the middle of the night, a nap in the day can be a natural process.

Dreaming is a vital part of the whole 24 hr day. Like a braid of hair, 3 separate strands weave together. "Sleeping, dreaming, and waking are woven rhythmically into a strand of consciousness." Dreaming is a neurological art, gathers dark, splintered, disparate emotions and experiences, transforms them into something cohesive, presentable, and imaginative, mysterious, into short stories and epic tales. "Dreams provide a poetic cushion for our sharply literal lives." Dreaming may be a natural self-healing process.

We, as a culture, are as dream deprived as sleep deprived. Dream deprivation is a major cause of depression, and is probably a contributing factor to cancer. Loss of dreaming causes lack of creativity and imagination.

Neuroscience relegates dreams to a byproduct of the brain's nightly house cleaning. Sleep science minimizes dreaming by making it a subset of sleep when, in fact, it is as different from sleep as it is from waking life. It is an important process all by itself that needs to be integrated with wakefulness and sleep

Night dreaming and daydreaming are devalued in modern life. Children in our society are taught as they grow up that waking imagination, daydreams, and nighttime dreams are of limited value in the "real" world.

When dreams are suppressed by alcohol, drugs (prescription and non-prescription) and sleep deprivation, dream rebound can occur with a vengeance, pressurized dreaming, more intense, more frequent, and earlier in the night, and can displace deep sleep. Then dream-onset insomnia can occur because the dreaming is unwelcome and often unpleasant. The pressure to dream is correlated with depression. Depressed people frequently have increased dreaming and earlier in the sleep cycle. Nearly all the antidepressant drugs suppress dreaming, yet it appears that increased dreaming is exactly what depressed people need.

The loss of dreaming leaves our minds numbed. Our minds then naturally crave more imaging and imagination and dreamlike activity and play. Enter entertainment. Entertainment should not be substituted for imagination. Vicarious imagination in our culture is mostly mass-produced, purchased, and consumed, as TV, movies, theme parks, etc. "Observing the artistic expression of others certainly can be inspirational and

motivating, but it is about as nourishing as watching someone else eat.” “We watch movies about others’ lives rather than “moving watchfully” through our own.”

To restore nighttime dreaming, the author recommends recalling the nighttime dreams and recording them if practical, and talking about them with someone. It is not important to interpret the dreams but just to recognize that our awareness of them is important. He also recommends exploring the dreams of the day. “At night, sleep is our rest, and dreaming is activity. By day, waking is activity, and dream is our rest.” He recommends keeping a journal, and recording and reflecting on daytime experiences as if they were dreams. Notice things such as coincidences, synchronicities, oddities, exceptions to the rules, and unusual occurrences. These things we usually filter out of our awareness and direct our attention away from, when we are looking only for utility in our driven, industrial lifestyle. Develop more of an expansive consciousness to perceive and experience objects, thoughts, feelings, and events as images, symbols, more as an artist might look at them, giving experiences more depth, meaning, and mystery. Then we can practice learning to dream while awake. A waking dream is not daydreaming, which is a form of escape. The waking dream is receptivity to what is and exploring it symbolically, non-judgmentally, and non-interpretively, allowing the image to come to mind, with expansive consciousness, “intentionally unintentional.” Practicing that can help our nighttime dreaming.

Practicing waking dreams should not be done without professional help, if someone has severe emotional instability, is having drug reactions, or is recovering from severe trauma, as it may worsen emotional instability, but for the average person, it can be very enriching.

This book is an amazingly fresh look at sleep, dreams, and waking consciousness. I have just begun to understand the complexity of all this and how to take on the practical methods to make my nights and days more natural and healing, while maintaining a professional and family life, living in this culture, but not taking on all the aspects of the culture that militates against good sleep. I have developed a more welcoming attitude toward the night as a healing oasis. The book has much more to be explored beyond this article, and I highly recommend that people read it thoroughly to explore in depth the mysteries and poetry of sleep, dreaming, and waking, and how they work together as an integrated whole, a truly masterful presentation. I attended Dr. Naimin’s workshop at Yogaville, VA, and I was very impressed with his brilliant insights and his authenticity. He walks the talk. He sleeps well.