

Insomnia and the Modern World

by
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Sleep is a necessity for maintaining life as is air, food and water. In an average lifetime of seventy-five years, we spend over twenty years in sleeping, out of which one third is spent in dreaming. Sleep is common to all mammals, and birds, and even in many reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Science has demonstrated that regular sleep is essential for survival, although the purpose and mechanisms of sleep are only partially understood.

Sleep disturbances, in particular insomnia, have been steadily increasing in numbers, affecting almost 40% of the population and disturbingly a large proportion of children.

Although modern medical science has taken great steps in the study, analysis and understanding of sleep physiology, we still do not know exactly why we sleep, and why sleep is so important for physical and especially mental health. In general, in normal conditions, sleep time and depth is adapted to the daily physical activity. (Figure 1)

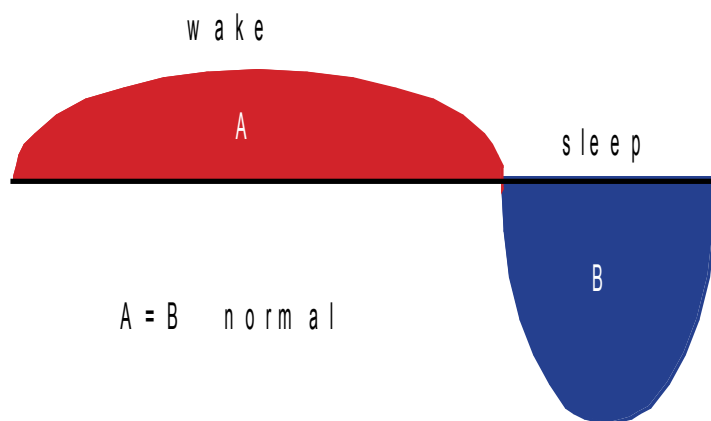


Figure 1: Sleep and wake balance: in a state of normal activity, the length (Time) and the depth (Space) of sleep is adapted to the length and intensity of daytime activity

If we define sleep as being a condition of rest for the body and the mind, in Traditional Chinese (TCM) medical terms this would mean a physical (somatic) stillness of the muscles and mental quietness.

Various studies on sleep deprivation have shown two stages of sleep to be most important for physical and mental regeneration: deep sleep, classified as N3 or slow wave sleep, helps restore the body, and REM or paradoxical sleep, which represents the dreaming stage and seems to be the necessary section of sleep for

the regeneration of the brain.

When analysing sleep, it is not the length, but the quality of sleep that is the most important factor and defines the efficiency of sleep. In fact studies have shown that although insomnia increases the incidence of cardio-vascular accidents, hypertension, obesity and various mental and emotional disturbances, and that short sleepers (less than 5.5 hours), have a shorter life span, long sleepers (more than 9 hours), strangely also have a shorter life expectancy. The ideal sleeping time would then be around 7 hours, providing that the sleep is of a good quality.

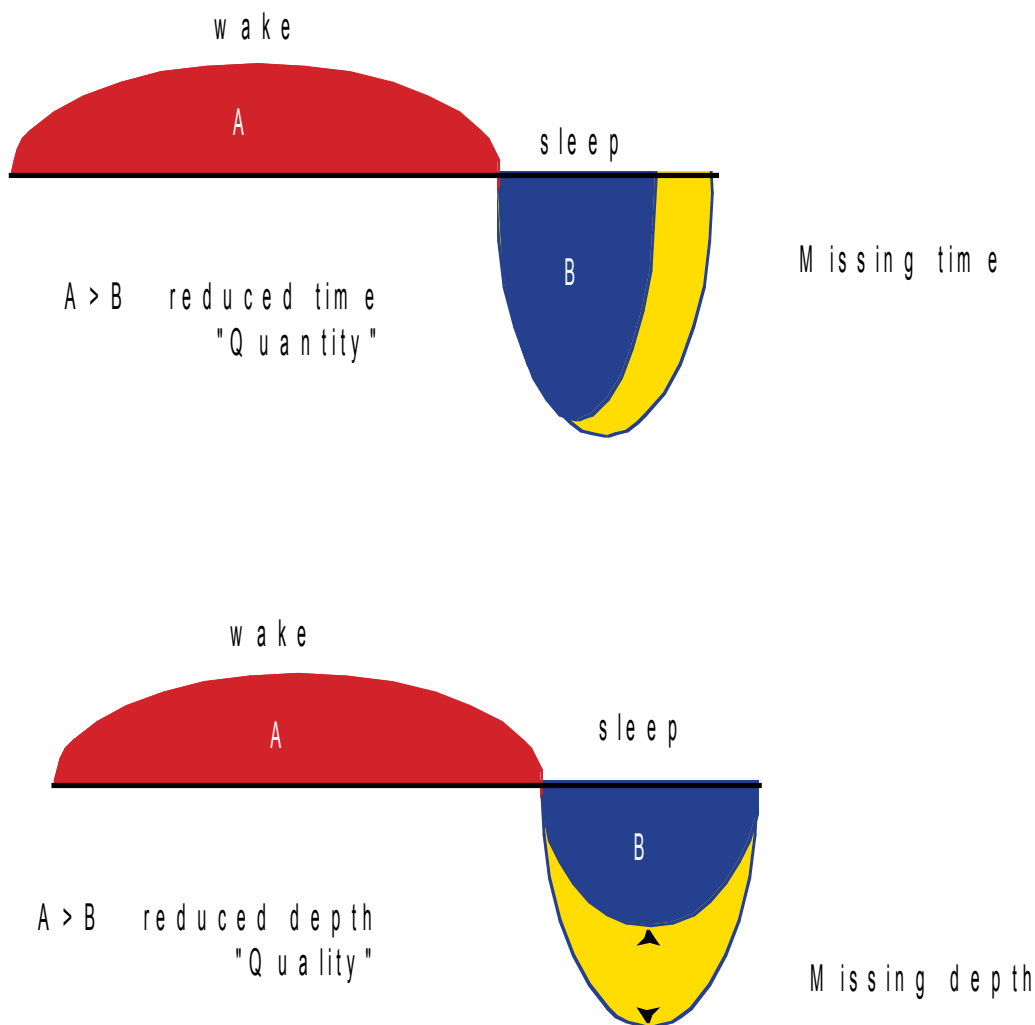


Figure 2: Two types of Insomnia, reduced length of sleep, or reduced depth (poor quality sleep)

In Traditional Chinese medical (TCM) terms, sleep is considered *yin* in relation to activity, which is termed *Yang*. All disturbances of *yin*, in particular the ones involving the Chinese concept of blood*, will have strong affects on the mind and therefore the sleep. (*Please note that in TCM, *xue*-Blood does not have

quite the same significance as in Western medical physiology).

The alarming increase in sleeping problems is certainly partly due to our modern day life-style. The increase in general stress which is greatly taxing the *yin*, with the ever-increasing “burn-out” conditions; the constant increase in the use of relaxing and sleeping aids that deplete the *yin*. The constant weakening of the inherited essence due to the quality of food, as well as immunisations, and the use of drugs and medicines, all have a deep impact on the quality of Blood. The light and sound pollutions as well as excessive *yang* type foods at night (red meat), Damp and Phlegm-producing foods (dairy), tardy intake of coffee (after midday) and excessive stimulation (sugar, caffeine, tobacco), all contribute to an abnormal increase in *yang*, further disturbing the balance of the *yin* and especially of Blood.

As sleep is the most representative of the body’s circadian (day-night) rhythms, it constitutes an excellent indicator of the inner equilibrium of *yin-yang* and of the Chinese physiological concept of the “Five substances” (energy, blood, fluids, essence and mental-emotional functions).

In the energetic structure of the body, besides the “Primary” channels, there are eight “Extraordinary vessels” that act as inner regulators, maintaining this inner balance and the adaptation to external changes. Hence these vessels could be very useful in diagnosing and treating sleep problems. Unfortunately, these inner regulators, responsible for our adaptation to outer changes, including night and day and the seasonal changes, are constantly being challenged by our modern life style. The invention of artificial light has proven to be the most detrimental factor, with the ever-increasing exposure of the brain and the stimulation of the eyes by light sources, such as Television and computer screens. In fact, the replacement of natural daylight by artificial light sources has the effect of totally disrupting the day-night and seasonal rhythms, confusing the brain’s production of Melatonin, a crucial factor in the sleep and wake rhythms. Artificial sleeping patterns, in shift-workers, or in changing the hours (day-light saving time), or even worse, the fast changing of times zones as in jet-lag, have further catastrophic effects on our inner clocks. As the societies get more affluent, people desire to visit foreign countries, and therefore travel across continents at least once a year for holidays! Of course the solution is not to move back to the caves, but to find some measures of adaptation and of compensation, especially for young children. In young children, the growth process requires a delicate balance and coordination of the neuro-endocrine system, this makes them much more susceptible to the abnormal stimulation of outer light sources, as evidenced in the alarming increase in hyperactivity and attention deficit in the younger population. The interdisciplinary field of chronobiology, interacting with neuroendocrinology and sleep medicine is, now studying the effects of these disturbances.

In spite of the great incidence of insomnia and its importance in health, the TCM

text-books and literature have very little to offer in terms of diagnosis, pattern identification and individualization of treatments.

In chronic sleep problems, often several TCM patterns are present, making the treatment that much more complex. Whereas in recent sleep disturbance, there are very few symptoms suggestive of an organic (*zang-fu*) disharmony pattern, leading most often to a vague label of “mental (*shen*) unrest” and to a treatment with a few standard and over rated symptomatic points.

Therefore, a detailed assessment of sleep patterns and dreams, can supply an accurate evaluation of a person’s overall psycho-energetic state.

In the management of sleep disturbances, especially those having lasted for many years and having been excessively treated by sleeping pills, several strategies need to be implemented.

The internal organic (*zang-fu*) patterns have to be identified and corrected. The movements of the “defensive energy” (*wei qi*) have to be regulated, as this has an important impact on the relaxation of the body and of the mind, necessary for the initiation and maintenance of sleep. The disturbance of the movement of this defensive energy is often responsible for a number of “parasomnia’s” such as restless legs, grinding of the teeth, sleepwalking, sleep-talking, night terrors or even some types of sleep apnoea. The *yin* and blood have to be supplemented to allow for the *shen*-mind and the *hun*-ethereal soul to settle during the night. The latter is responsible for dreaming, which constitutes a very important stage of sleep.

The disturbances of blood would cause problems of superficial sleep or frequent waking, restless sleep and dream disturbed sleep. Concerning the mental activity, the appropriate strategy has to be deployed to help calm, quiet or settle the mind. And finally the internal synchronisers, the Extraordinary Vessels have to be re-set, to help maintain the inner equilibrium in relation to the outer changes.

Another important stage of sleep is the REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, better known as dreaming, which seems crucial to the mental health according to modern studies. The Chinese classics, *suwen* and the *lingshu*, both have descriptions of dreams and their diagnostic significance in relation to retained *xie qi*-pathogenic factors. Since Freud and Jung, we are well aware of the importance of dreams in revealing the subconscious and the suppressed aspects of the psyche and helping resolve many psychological issues. The analysis and interpretation of dreams will not only help diagnose the affected *zang-fu*, but also help discover and determine the nature of a psychological disturbance and it’s impact on the *shen*-mind.

According to Daoistic beliefs dreams not only help release accumulated emotions and retained pathogenic factors, but they can also reveal one’s life path and even help in processing one’s life challenges.

With aging, as the body's capacity to adapt to outer changes diminishes, the reduced *yin* and *jing*-essence immediately affect the sleep quality and depth. Furthermore, the unresolved emotional and psychological issues, surface in the form of disturbing dreams or even nightmares. It is imperative to be able to supply some tools to these patients to help reduce or resolve these suppressed psychological factors. According to the Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, how we sleep would be a reflection of how the passage in-to and after death would be.

In conclusion, sleep is an excellent mirror of the inner balance of the energies, and it is crucial to physical, and especially to psychological health. In the west, more effort is put into stimulating people complaining of tiredness or depression, rather than treating the root of the problem, which is the poor quality of rest.

A peaceful sleep, is not only generating health for the body, but is also salutary for the soul.

About the author:

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Graduated from the Medical School of Paris, did his residency in surgery and completed a 3-year education in acupuncture and further clinical training in China, followed by 2 years in exploring the local healing in the Philippines and India. He practiced for 5 years in America, obtaining the NCCA certification and a degree in Chinese Herbalism.

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Hamid was commissioned by the Swiss National Science Foundation to conduct a research study on Acupuncture and Insomnia. In 1995 he was the co-founder and president of the Swiss Professional Organization for TCM (SPO-TCM).

Currently he practices in Savièse and lectures in Winterthur-Switzerland and in other European countries.

Publications:

- Treatment of Acute ankle sprains with Acupuncture (thesis 77)
- Stresskrankheiten: co-author 2006 (Elsevier)
- Acupuncture and Insomnia/ Sleep and Dreams in Chinese Medicine 2011 (Thieme)
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