

SLEEPING WELL

An interview with Dr. Darek Dawda, psychologist and founder of DAVDA Psychology

BY MATHILDA WATERS

After the positive feedback received following our previous interview with psychotherapist and life coach Dr. Dawda, I have decided to revisit his comfortable clinic again, this time to ask for advice on sleep. Again, I was given a cup of rooibos tea and some words of wisdom.

Dr DD: It is interesting that around 50 percent of people report difficulties with sleep. Yet, it is the most natural of functions, regulated by robust old brain mechanisms. All we need to do to sleep well is not to interfere with those mechanisms.

MW: *How do we interfere?*

Dr DD: There are a number of possible reasons. Aside from some medical and psychological conditions (such as chronic pain, anxiety, depression, trauma, or a sleep disorder), lifestyle or sleep environment may also contribute to insomnia. Examples include an irregular sleep schedule, taking long daytime naps, using alcohol or other substances or medications (paradoxically, including sleep medications), eating late, engaging in over-stimulating activities before bedtime, an uncomfortable bed or pillow, noise at night, or watching the clock when you can't drift off. People troubled by insomnia are welcome to visit the DAVDA Psychology website at www.davda.ca for a comprehensive checklist of possible reasons for particular sleep problems, and a personalized printout of possible solutions to these difficulties.

MW: *I filled out your interactive questionnaire, and found the feedback very specific and most helpful. When we spoke earlier you mentioned that one factor might be more important than others in creating this current epidemic of sleeplessness.*

Dr DD: During my clinical experience, I noticed that the most common reason for insomnia is that people are unable to turn off their brains at night. Again, I call this common syndrome Frontal Lobe Over-activation (FLO). Sleep is regulated by lower parts of the brain, and when we think too much, the activity in our frontal lobes interferes with the lower brain's natural regulatory processes that would otherwise bring sleep on automatically, whenever the body needs it. Many people form a habit of thinking at night, so that after a while, whether they like it or not, the moment they go to bed and try to fall asleep, their brains go 'All right, thinking time, problems, planning, etc.' Now imagine what happens when more stressful times come about.

MW: *What can people do about their Frontal Lobe Over-activation?*

Dr DD: Slow it down! Slow the FLO! I suggest to my clients a two-step approach to achieve this. First, one has to learn to 'close the file of the day' before going to bed. One of the most effective techniques to do this is to hold a worry/planning session some time before going to bed. Take a sheet of paper and write down the issues you are dealing with. Make a map of all the main issues in your life. Think about possible solutions to problems, about possible courses of action. Plan for tomorrow and long-term. Your first worry/planning session might be a long one, but it is really worth giving yourself the time to reflect on where you are at. Writing it all down is like uploading the information from

your brain onto the page where it gets organized, so that you can clearly see it all in front of you instead of mulling it over in your head ad nauseam. By the end of your worry/planning session, you should have a sense that there is nothing else you need to think about today, and that unresolved problems can wait until your next session. Do it on regular basis and you should see the difference.

MW: *Sounds good. What is the second step in 'slowing the FLO' at night?*

Dr DD: There is a host of techniques one can learn to shift the attention away from the frontal lobes, which automatically slows the FLO. The bad news is that it's usually difficult to learn these techniques on your own. Using a sleep relaxation CD might help, but it is usually most effective to have someone guide you in developing techniques that work best for you. After some initial coaching and practice, you will be able to do it on your own.

MW: *Where can one find help for sleep problems?*

Dr DD: A psychologist might be able to help you with sleep difficulties. For example, here at DAVDA Psychology, in addition to individual psychotherapy or coaching, we offer a five-week 'Insomnia Module,' which is focused on helping people improve their sleep through the application of psychological methods. The easiest way to find a private psychologist is to look in the Yellow Pages, or on the website of Manitoba Psychological Society at www.mps.mb.ca. Most extended health care plans cover private psychological services. Psychologists are also available through the public system. For information, phone the Psychology Department at your local hospital. Other counsellors might also be helpful. Finally, personal development practices, such as meditation or relaxation, might also be helpful in restoring good sleep.

MW: *Thank you Dr. Dawda, I am looking forward to my worry/planning session this evening, and then a night of deep refreshing sleep ...*

Visit DAVDA Psychology website at www.davda.ca for a comprehensive check-list of possible reasons for sleep problems and a personalized print-out of possible solutions, as well as information on the five week Insomnia Module.

