

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

By Bill Hull, Haskell Senior Living Solutions

### *Habits of the Hearty*

Lately, I find myself sleeping on the couch a good many nights. No, I am not embattled by some domestic dispute that ends like a television sitcom with my pillow and blanket thrown in my face. No, I live alone. And sleeping is probably not the right word for it. It's more like dozing off in front of the tube until some blaring commercial startles me awake and I stumble back to the bedroom for a couple of exhausted hours. All too soon the alarm signals my return to the rat race. I have recently decided that it may not be a coincidence when I string together 5 or 6 of these nights in a work week and then find myself complaining in the afternoon that my eyelids simply won't cooperate.

I've heard seniors joke with one another about the sleep difficulties that often accompany getting older. Some accept with good humor the interruptions each night to make several trips to the bathroom; or the spontaneous alarm that seems to go off in their heads each morning at 4:30 a.m. I remember one long and hysterical night that I spent with a couple of buddies when I was just a teenager and we shared quarters with a gentleman who snored so loud we thought the walls would collapse. Of course back then, it was no big deal for us to miss a night's sleep. We were on a "college sleep cycle" where we often stayed up until dawn and slept until mid-afternoon. On a recent vacation with my sons I was informed that my snoring was a real riot. Hmmmm.

But for many seniors, the loss of sleep is no laughing matter. In a study by the National Institute on Aging, over half of the seniors (65 and older) reported at least one chronic sleep complaint. Falling asleep, staying asleep, waking up feeling rested, and feeling alert throughout the day are tremendously important to promote overall health and a meaningful lifestyle. I have always heard that one requires less sleep as one gets older; but this not the case according to the study. For optimal daytime alertness, adults generally require about 8 hours of sleep each day. Sleep difficulties for seniors contribute to falls and accidents, heart trouble, breathing difficulties, hypertension and central-nervous system effects. In a study by the Johns Hopkins Sleep Disorder Center, it was determined that "elderly persons have delayed sleep onset, fragmented sleep, early morning awakening, and overall less sleep than younger adults." There are several factors that can contribute to these issues including, medical illness, pain that can make it difficult to sleep, some medications that act as a stimulant, dementia, depression and other emotional and environmental factors. There are also primary sleep disorders such as sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome that have a direct bearing on the quality of sleep.

But the biggest single factor for most folks when it comes to sleeping complaints goes back to my recent nights on the couch. Poor sleep habits that develop over time are altogether common. The question is why? I know when I pull the afghan around my shoulders and turn down the volume on the television that I should instead be shutting everything off and heading for my comfortable bed. Most of us know the basics: With age, the sleep-wake cycle doesn't seem to work as well but we can improve this with regular exposure to sunlight and with exercise. We need to avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking; we need to create a dark, quiet environment for deep sleep; we need to try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day; we need to use a sleep medication only sparingly or it will turn against us. It is incontrovertible: According to The American Association of Family Physicians: "Implementation of good sleep habits and daily physical activity should help create an environment conducive to restorative sleep." We *know* it. We just don't *do* it.

People develop lots of bad habits for lots of reasons. In the words of Zig Ziglar, "It's not what you know, it's what you use that makes a difference." In the area of sleeping, as well as in many other areas that affect our health, relationships, longevity, finances, and quality of life, we

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must live with a hopeful discipline that chooses the best over the good, fair, or poor. Certainly it is that confident attitude that is driving more and more seniors to launch second careers, try new volunteer and travel adventures, explore great senior living options like Arbor Ridge and The Terraces and pursue creative and healthy lifestyle habits. We must heed the warning by Rob Gilbert, "First we form habits, then they form us. Conquer your bad habits or they will conquer you."

The truth is that living alone, when dusk gives way to evening and the dark curtains fall on another solitary day, we are enfolded by a deep and personal privacy where it can take effort for us to choose to be good to ourselves. Someone once said that "bad habits are like a comfortable bed, easy to get into, but hard to get out of." I guess for me that means I need to start actually using my own comfortable bed before I find myself wide awake in another. What does that mean for you?