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Sleep? Too busy in bed

Many of us are using our innersprings for everything but slumber, scientists say, and that makes it hard to catch enough ZZZZs.

By Paul Jablow

For The Inquirer

Mike McGilvery, a Georgetown University sophomore from Radnor, never uses his computer in bed. He works - or texts or e-mails - in a chair, at his desk, or elsewhere in the world.

"I like to get away from technology at times," said McGilvery as he paused outside the Apple Store in Suburban Square in Ardmore.

But McGilvery is the exception. More and more people are staying in bed to do all of their work. They Facebook, e-mail and do a lot more than watch TV.

Physicians, psychologists and researchers, scientists who make up the growing field of sleep study, say that the Mike McGilverys are starting to be outnumbered, and these experts aren't happy about it.

They say that while some people can make their beds the center of their work and social lives without hurting their sleep, most of us can't. And if we can now, we won't be able to for all that long.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends that the bedroom be used for sleep and sex. Period.

That may not be practical if you live in a studio apartment, said Meir Kryger, director of sleep research and education at Gaylord Hospital in Wallingford, Conn., "but for the other 300 million of us, it's good advice."

Kryger, a physician who has been involved in sleep research for some 35 years, has watched with growing chagrin as the growth of consumer electronics invades the bedroom. He and

others in the field say this harms sleep for two reasons: It breaks down mental associations between beds and sleep and it can be distracting in itself.

"All these gadgets and things are interfering with people's sleep," Kryger said. "You have people texting at all hours of the night. I had one patient whose problem was e-mail. He thought if he got an e-mail at 2 a.m., he should respond at 2 a.m. I gave him the same advice I give 90 percent of my patients: 'Turn off the stupid computer.'"

"Then there are the people with exercise equipment in their bedroom. They exercise and then they try to sleep."

James C. Findley, a psychologist with the Penn Sleep Center, tells of treating a woman in her mid-50s who would sometimes get into bed when she got home on Friday night and stay there virtually the entire weekend.

"She did everything there," Findley said. "She watched movies. She watched TV. She played games. She talked on the phone. And she was wondering why she was having such a hard time sleeping."

"It's classical conditioning," said Philip Gerhman, a psychologist and Findley's colleague at the Sleep Center. "You get into your bed, you go to sleep and the brain makes that association. The more non-sleep activities you do, the more that association is weakened. They start to think the bedroom is the place for other activities."

"I've had people tell me they do their financial work in bed and that can be really stressful. . . . And now you have people in chat rooms all hours of the night."

Findley says that unlike sleep problems caused by such obvious things as emotional upsets, a snoring partner or noisy neighbors, the issues caused by non-sleep activities are "insidious. They may not be a problem now, but they could turn into a problem."

The concern has been heightened by research indicating that poor sleeping habits lead to more than just feeling out of sorts but to poor eating habits and a decline in overall health.

"We're finding more and more of a connection between quantity and quality of sleep and the ultimate development of obesity," Kryger said. He said that sleep deprivation raises the levels of hormones that stimulate the appetite and lowers the levels of those that help you push the plate away.

While multitask-ready cellphones and portable computers have multiplied the number of bedroom distractions, plenty of the old ones are still there and still misunderstood.

Take television, for example. Many people fall asleep with the TV on, thinking of it as white noise. Actually, Kryger said, the rising and falling sound levels of almost any program plus the commercials are more disruptive than we realize. If you want white noise, he says, buy the readily available sound machines that generate it.

Two other bedroom habits from the pre-electronic era also concern the experts: pillow talk and pets.

In the case of couples, Gehrman recommends that serious discussions be avoided close to bedtime. But if you have to hold them, he says, go into the living room.

Findley also puts pets in the insidious category, along with TV: The pet may be disturbing you without your realizing it by moving around at all hours.

"Cats and dogs just have a different sleep cycle," he says. "It's not compatible with ours."

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