

health trends

Snooze news is good



Dreaming of a good night's sleep?
ANGIE KELLY reports on a new course that is so successful, students nod off in the classroom.

TO THOSE who don't get enough, sleep becomes an obsession, a longed-for commodity which consumes their all-too-frequent waking hours.

Among those who typically have trouble either getting to sleep in the first place or waking in the wee hours are the stressed, the sick, new parents, shiftworkers, working parents and partners of snorers.

For many, it's the task of turning the mind off which presents the biggest obstacle.

Though most people experience a few sleep problems during life's inevitable ups and downs, for some people, they're the norm.

And the problem with prolonged sleeplessness, according to University of NSW psychologist Peter Birrell, is that sufferers accumulate a sleep debt.

Unless the debt is regularly paid off, health and relationships inevitably suffer. "Ideally you must pay the debt off completely on the weekend and clear it with a 12-hour straight sleep," Dr Birrell said.

"Unless you at least partially pay off the sleep debt, you are going to show mild to moderate signs of stress including impaired concentration, emotional instability, irritability and impaired memory."

Enter Brenda Rae Doherty, a stress management consultant who is putting people to sleep all over Sydney with her drug-free technique for treating busy minds.

Her day-long SleepEasy seminars have been running for about a year and success stories abound.

Like Dr Birrell, Ms Doherty believes churning thoughts and ruminations are one of the biggest

factors which contribute to sleep struggles.

Her courses focus on breathing techniques to quieten the nervous system and relaxation techniques to calm the mind. She also details how the process of sleep works.

"This is about taking an active part in the sleep process as opposed to feeling like a victim and being awake all night," Ms Doherty said.

"The treatment awakens natural abilities which we all possess and gives insight into how to deal with the busy mind.

"A lot of people are fascinated to know about 24-hour sleep cycles and to understand how light and darkness affect sleep."

Work worries had kept Sydney company director Gerry O Sullivan, 39, awake at night for more than a year before he discovered the SleepEasy course. He said that after attending the course, it took only a week to start having better sleep.

Mr O'Sullivan, who said he fell asleep during the lessons, also found Ms Doherty's SleepEasy tapes helpful to use in bed at night.

"One of the most valuable things about the workshop is that people think that the solution comes externally whereas the solution is entirely internal," he said. "You come to

realise you can control the quality of your sleep."

Ms Doherty and Dr Birrell say that the human body needs darkness to produce the sleep-promoting hormone melatonin, which is why playing on the internet and watching TV late at night caused wakefulness.

Intense light sources such as computers and TVs inhibit the ability of the pineal gland to produce the hormone, as do reading lights. Some researchers also believe that light not only inhibits melatonin but at the same time triggers the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin, a substance which promotes wakefulness.

"Generally, you need to be in the dark to sleep," Dr Birrell said. "Once a person goes to bed they should be incapable of reading – after a page a book should fall from their hands and they should succumb to sleep.

"A lot of problems involve learning bad sleep habits and doing things that stimulate the brain before bed instead of responding to drowsiness when you first feel it. Lots of people are like six-year-olds and resist going to bed."

Ms Doherty admits some cases do not immediately respond, but most participants get a newfound control over their sleeplessness. ■

Upcoming SleepEasy courses

Next Sunday
City
WEA Sydney 02 9264 2781

Sunday, February 18
St Leonards
Royal North Shore Hospital
02 9926 8367

Saturday, February 24
Leichhardt
Sydney Community College
02 9555 8194

Sunday, March 11
Newcastle
WEA Hunter
02 4926 4066

Saturday, March 13
Manly
Manly Warringah
Community College
02 9971 1911

Individual appointments are also available. Call Brenda Rae Doherty on 02 9977 0213. The price for the course ranges between \$59 and \$85.