

Do Not Disturb

I have been watching “Victorian Slum House” on PBS. A mother and father sleep in one bed. In the same room, a brother and sister sleep in a single bed. His head is at the foot of the bed and her head is at the head of the bed. On last night’s episode, immediately upon waking, the brother and sister were discussing how they slept. She said that she got about two hours of sleep since her brother moving around, her father snoring, and noises from inside and outside of the slum house disturbed her.

Sleeping conditions have improved since Victorian times, but there are still plenty of disturbances to our sleep. If we sleep with another person, odds are that we disrupt one another’s sleep through our movements or snoring or other means. Noises from the environment are more frequent and more diverse today. Light from many sources is another environmental cue that can disturb our sleep.

These disturbances can delay the onset of sleep, can awaken us earlier than we wish or at times during the night, and can affect our sleep stages. As we know, we need a sufficient quantity and quality of sleep. That young girl in the slum house probably did not function too well on two hours of sleep. Neither do we.

One way to reduce sleep disturbances might be to sleep alone. A controller in one of our classroom fatigue training sessions said he gets better sleep on night shift because he sleeps alone. He can keep the room cooler, and his wife is not talking to him while he is trying to go to sleep. I suggested that he didn’t need to share this information with his wife or he would be sleeping alone all the time. If you disturb your partner while trying to sleep or if your partner disturbs your sleep, it warrants a discussion about the benefits of sleeping alone. I have read statistics that 25% of couples sleep separately. It might be worth a try if you need sleep.

Another way to reduce sleep disturbances is to determine if sleep disorders are disturbing your sleep. Sleep disturbances may be caused by sleep apnea, insomnia, restless legs syndrome, and shift work disorder. Fortunately, most sleep disorders are treatable. Sleep disorders make us more susceptible to disturbances from noise and light. Here’s the reason. If we are awakened by a sleep disorder, the effects of noise and light make it difficult to return to sleep.

All of us need to block the noise and the light. Get a comfortable bed and a good mattress. Keep the room cool, clean, and uncluttered. Address any sleep disorders that are disturbing your sleep or the sleep of your partner.

Many years ago, I was working night shift and we were having a new roof installed on our home. I still remember bolting upright when the roofer began hammering over the bedroom. I called a friend and went to their home and slept a few hours. It always seemed that the days when I needed sleep the most were the days when I got the least amount of sleep. Back in those days, pipeliners were not provided any fatigue training or education. I was too dumb to take steps to improve my sleep environment or habits. So I suffered in ignorance and with sleep deprivation.

Pipeliners know better now and there are practical steps anyone who needs to sleep in the daytime can take:

- Avoid bright light on the way home from work
- Do not use caffeine or have a heavy meal after night shift
- Take a warm shower before getting in bed
- Get a comfortable bed with an excellent mattress
- Install light blocking shades over windows and/or an eye mask
- Take appropriate steps to reduce or eliminate outside noises, this might require soundproofing the bedroom.
- Turn off phones and other electronic devices that might awaken you
- Keep the bedroom cool
- Plan with your family and friends to minimize disruptions
- **Don’t get a roof installed when you are on night shift!**

