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THE STUDENT SLEEP STRUGGLE

By Robert S. Rosenberg, DO, FCCP

A few months ago, I was asked to see Michael by his pediatrician about a sleep related problem. Michael had just started middle school. He is 12-years-old and his parents said he was having trouble waking up for school. They related to me that during the summer before starting school he had been going to bed at progressively later times. It had gotten to the point, where he was unable to fall asleep before one to two o'clock in the morning. As a result, Michael was having a hard time arising for school at 6:30 a.m. He was falling asleep in class and doing poorly with his school work. Interestingly, on weekends Michael slept until noon

and felt fine. The parents wanted to know what was wrong and what to do.

It sounded like Michael had developed a Circadian Disorder called Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome, which is not uncommon in adolescence. Our sleep/wake time keeper is located in a part of the brain referred to as the Suprachiasmatic Nucleus. When active it tends to keep us awake. It usually hits its peak about two hours before our usual bedtime. In adolescents like Michael, it may move to a latter time. In sleep medicine, we refer to this as a "phase delay". The consequences are that these people are wide awake at times, when they should be asleep. It leads to social and academic difficulties and if un-

treated can persist well into adult life.

Now, before I could assume this was Michael's problem, I had to rule out other disorders that might delay his ability to fall asleep. Things such as Restless Leg Syndrome or poor sleep hygiene, such as late night caffeine use, had to be ruled out. Certain mood disorders, especially anxiety disorders can present in a similar fashion. However, it did not appear that any of these were present in Michael's case.

So it seemed that Michael was suffering from Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome. The best treatment for this condition is Photo Therapy. Properly timed light exposure can rearrange our Circadian Pacemaker.

Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome is a very common problem in adolescents and teenagers.

By exposing these patients to bright light for approximately one hour in the morning, one can begin to achieve an earlier bedtime. The key is to get the exposure at the right time. Too early and you make matters worse. So we monitored Michael's real wake-up time using his weekend sleep/wake schedule. We had him go out into the sunlight for an hour after he awoke. Each day we had him go to bed one half an hour earlier and awaken one half an hour earlier and continued with the light exposure upon awakening. At the end of one week, we had achieved a bed time of 10 p.m. Now to sustain this newly established sleep/wake cycle, Michael was advised that he could not nap during the day. Most importantly, he had to maintain this schedule on the weekends. If he returned to his prior schedule all gains would be lost.

Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome is a very common problem in adolescents and teenagers. Although Photo Therapy has been the most successful treatment, some studies using Melatonin at night have also shown promise. If you do not have sufficient sunlight available in the morning there are light boxes and light visors now available on the internet. School-aged children of all ages need to obtain enough sleep if we expect them to behave properly and perform at their best in the academic environments.

For more information, please call The Sleep Disorders Center of Prescott Valley at (928) 772-6422, or visit www.pvsleep.com.



L. to R., Nikki, Megan, Marrett, Audrey, Jenny, Karen, Heidi, Jaymie & Stephanie

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