

Military OneSource Podcast — How to Get Better Sleep

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

Today, we're talking about sleep, something we can all relate to. We don't get enough. We struggle to fall asleep. We struggle to stay asleep. We stress over sleep. And then there are the commercials with the sleep products, and they all have the obligatory scene, the same scene, the person waking up in the morning, the morning sun, the chirping birds. They've got the sleep that we all crave.

So, we're going to talk about sleep today, and we're going to talk about sleep in our stress-filled lives, particularly our military lives, and how we can fit sleep into it. Our guest today is Corin Smith. Corin is with the Prevention and Education Program at Marine Corps Camp New River in North Carolina. Corin, it is great to have you with us today.

Corin Smith:

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

Bruce:

We are excited because we've been wanting to do an episode on sleep. Specifically, how we talk (about) sleep to a military audience. With that, what I'd like you to do is kind of describe your background and what's your cred on this topic.

Corin:

Absolutely. Well, like you said, I'm a licensed clinical social worker and for the past 10 years I have been working here on Camp Lejeune New River with Marines and sailors. And one of my specialties has been working with them when it comes to their sleep issues.

My husband is a retired Marine, so I have been with this community for more than 20 years. Working with Marines and sailors has always been near and dear to my heart. I have received extensive training through the Center for Deployment Psychology in cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia, and that's a treatment that focuses specifically on sleep hygiene, sleep restriction and healthy sleep habits, as well as

focusing on thoughts around sleep and increasing rest and relaxation when it comes to sleep.

Bruce:

OK. See, this is why we have you on the podcast today. Let's just jump right into it. Real general basic question: Why do we need sleep? What's its value? How is sleep important to an individual's daily functioning?

Corin:

Sleep is so important. I think it's just as important as eating. It's just as important as any kind of diet and exercise. It's a biological function that plays a very critical role in our brain function and our physiological symptoms. It really is a process that's essential for life and optimal health. It's so important in our emotional regulation, in our decision-making skills, that if we're getting poor sleep or disrupted sleep, we're getting insufficient sleep or poor quality sleep, all of those processes can be affected.

Some of those short-term consequences that we might experience would be an increased stress response or decreased performance at work or at home. We could experience some memory issues or emotional distress and just kind of a general overall reduced quality of life.

And then, some long-term consequences that we might experience due to disrupted sleep could be increased risk of hypertension, increased cholesterol issues, BMI could be increased, type two diabetes and heart disease. There have been several studies done, and consistently those results keep coming back with all of those long-term health issues.

So, basically the short-term and long-term consequences are decreased immune responses as well.

Bruce:

So, it's obviously really important. And so, I get, obviously sleep is one of those things where it's quality and quantity, but roughly how much sleep do we really need?

Corin:

That varies depending on your age. Now typically, every adult needs between seven and nine hours of sleep, but that can vary again, like I said, for your age. Most teenagers probably need nine to 10. A school-aged child might need 10 or more. And then once we get younger than that, we could see 10 to 18 hours of sleep.

But for adults, we typically are looking for and shooting for seven to nine hours. But now, what I have seen is even though we're saying we'd like seven to nine hours per adult, what I've seen with the Marine Corps population here and other service members that I've worked with, their bodies are conditioned for a lot less, most likely due to bootcamp or basic training, just kind of demands of their jobs, up-tempo, those types of

things. I think that accounts for a lot of some of the sleep issues that we are seeing here among the military members.

Bruce:

We're going to talk specifically about military life, things like really demanding watch schedules, but just a couple more questions about sleep and its effect on our health. To what degree does sleep affect our immune system?

Corin:

Well, it can definitely take a toll on our immune system. What we have found is that if we're not getting sufficient sleep, there could be some short-term consequences, such as increased stress responses, decreased performance at work, memory issues, emotional distress and just kind of an overall reduced quality of life.

And when it comes to long-term consequences, what we see is multiple studies have been done and consistently the results come back showing an increased risk of hypertension, increased blood pressure, higher numbers of cholesterol, increased BMI, increased risk of type two diabetes and heart disease.

So overall, both short- and long-term consequences will kind of give us a reduced immune response. So short- and long-term consequences really will take a toll on your health in general.

Bruce:

So, you sit down and you meet with service members and their partners and you talk to them about getting better sleep. Is there a difference in the way that you approach strategies for somebody in uniform versus a partner?

Corin:

Well, I think definitely there are different challenges experienced by the service member and the spouse. Mostly, some of this is due to the schedules that the service member and the spouse are both managing.

What you see with the service member is their schedules tend to be a little bit more erratic. They don't typically have a 9-to-5 job. If they have a consistent schedule, it might mean waking up at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning to muster and then have PT. But then sometimes that might change, because they have to go to the field or have a training exercise. So then that kind of throws off their consistent schedule quite a bit, and that might mean going to bed earlier or later. Then, they've got just some typical work stressors that might be keeping them awake at night. Then, they are often dealing with going on duty, 24-hour duty.

So that will also disrupt their normal patterns of sleep. Those are things that typically a civilian spouse would not be managing. But on the other hand, a spouse would be dealing with some challenges with some stress and anxiety being at home with the bills and the children, kind of managing that household. I think that comes with some

increased stressors as well. And then some of those stressors that are unique to the military life, worrying about the spouse that is deployed or on ship with little to no contact. I think that that can increase some anxiety, which then also leads to some sleep disruptions as well.

Bruce:

OK. So, let's talk about some of the things we do immediately before we hit the pillow, those pre-bedtime habits and I want to go through a couple of them. And first, you mentioned about stress and crazy changing schedules and I will admit to having those kinds of experiences and then turning to melatonin. Talk to us about melatonin as a supplement.

Corin:

The first thing I want people to understand is that melatonin is a natural hormone that's already found in our bodies and it's very responsive to sunlight. When the sun comes up, our brains are signaled to stop producing that hormone and when the sun goes down, our brains are signaled to start producing that hormone. That's a natural process that already occurs in our bodies. And the concern is when we start to buy a hormone supplement over the counter to kind of help with that process, none of these supplements are checked by the FDA and some of these supplements are only checked by the United States Pharmacopeia. So, some of these supplements may not even contain what they say they contain. So that can be very concerning. And then, I think there's also kind of a question as to the validity to buying a hormone over the counter.

Plus, if you become dependent on taking melatonin, then you might be undoing what your body should be doing naturally. And then, in addition to that, you should only be taking a certain milligram of melatonin a night. And I think some people might not know that and they might be kind of going over the recommended dose of melatonin per night, and then they kind of wake up feeling groggy the next day. And that can also interfere with their performance throughout the day.

And then we kind of find ourselves in this endless cycle of feeling tired throughout the day and maybe drinking some caffeine to get us through, and then that's disruptive to our sleep, so we take more melatonin and then we kind of get caught in this nasty cycle of melatonin and caffeine just trying to achieve sleep that probably isn't going to come if we're taking all these artificial substances to try to help our sleep.

Bruce:

All right. So, on the topic of substances and the endless cycle of trying to correct what we did wrong last time, let's talk about alcohol and smoking.

Corin:

Right. Yeah. So, I love to go over the subject with the Marines because this is a very common issue with these guys. There's no secret that alcohol will make us feel sleepy and helps us fall asleep. But the problem there is that as our body starts to metabolize

that alcohol, it does become disruptive to our sleep cycles, and it does interfere with the ability to move through those sleep cycles properly. So, we don't necessarily move through those deeper levels of sleep that we need, and we kind of stay in a shallow level of sleep. And we have to remember that there are a lot of restorative qualities to sleep both physically and cognitively. If we are drinking to excess and then going to sleep, and then as our body tries to metabolize that and it disrupts our sleep cycles, we're not going to get that restorative process.

And then the next day, we're going to feel a little foggy and our bodies might be a little achy because we didn't get all that restorative properties that come from sleep. And that in turn, while a lot of us feel hungover might not be the only reason, but it is part of the reason.

And then when it comes to smoking, so the recommendation when it comes to alcohol is that you really should cut that off by dinnertime and with smoking, you should be cutting that off two hours before bedtime. The reason for that is nicotine is a stimulant. It does stimulate your nervous system. I always try to remind these guys that if you're out in the field, if you're on duty, if you're on a long road trip, you tend to smoke more because you want to stay awake. So why would we want to do that right before bed?

And then the pushback I get from a lot of guys as well because it relaxes me and helps them fall asleep faster, which I understand. But then, what I try to explain to them is really the act of smoking nowadays, no one really smokes in their homes or their cars, everybody goes outside to the smoke pit or to their front porch. So really, what you're doing there is you're doing a deep-breathing exercise, you're removing yourself from the people or things that are stressing you out, and you're taking a deep inhale and a deep exhale. And that, in fact, is a deep-breathing exercise, and that's really relaxing you, not the actual nicotine or the smoking or vaping.

So, I try to remind the guys that if we can try to cut smoking out at least one to two hours before bed to let your nervous system calm down a little bit and do some deep breathing instead, and see how that helps with rest and relaxation prior to falling asleep.

Bruce:

All right. So, the other thing that keeps us occupied during the day is our devices, our digital devices. We don't have down time anymore. We shift from one device to the next. And sometimes, the last thing we do before we turn out the light is, take that device, turn it off and put it on the bed stand. How are these devices interrupting our sleep?

Corin:

Yes, these devices are so brutal to our sleep, which is unfortunate because you're right: They are everywhere. The thing with blue lights, our cellphones, that backlight is a blue light, and the issue there is that it's on the same UV spectrum as sunlight. So, our brains will literally interpret it as daytime. As you are on your phone scrolling through TikTok or

Instagram to unwind, as many people say they do, they're really sending a signal to their brain that it's daytime and they will stop that melatonin production. And then not only is that happening, but it's also kind of keeping your brain active and alert. So that's one challenge.

Something that they can do is, if they have an iPhone, they can put night shift mode on their phone. If they have an Android, they can put blue light filter on their phone. It will turn more of an amber color, which it's not a cure-all. But it does help reduce some of that light pollution. So that's one thing to kind of help with that. But we really need to put those phones away, the tablets, the computers, everything about an hour before bed, kind of let our brains calm down from that stimulation.

And then I also know that it can be a problem because our cellphones are now our alarm clocks many times. So, even as you're setting that alarm clock, that blue light is still signaling your brain to not produce that melatonin, which is an issue. So, try to do that earlier in the evening.

One of the other issues that I commonly encounter, is a lot of Marines that I work with, they really have an aversion to silencing their phone because they know that if a text message comes through, if there's some kind of call to command, then they have to respond to that.

They're always kind of on alert. What I try to suggest to them is to silence their phones, but maybe enable some push notifications for specific people. That way they can rest easy knowing that they're not going to be bothered with that phone buzzing all night, unless it is an important message coming through.

Bruce:

All right, so we've covered melatonin, smoking, alcohol and our digital devices, and so we have that locked down, no problem. Now, food, what we eat, how much and when is going to directly impact the sleep that we have? Talk to us about that, please.

Corin:

Absolutely. Yeah, so certain foods and drinks can make it easier or harder to get the sleep that you need. And in addition to that, maintaining a healthier body weight is associated with getting enough sleep. Studies have shown us that a lack of key nutrients like calcium or magnesium, vitamins, A, C, D, E and K are all associated with sleep problems.

People who commonly have high-carb diets, that will affect their energy levels throughout the day and increase their drowsiness. It could possibly affect their deep sleep or increase the number of sleep disruptions. Your diet throughout the day can directly affect your sleep at night. So that's something to definitely be aware of. Some of the recommendations may be engaging in the Mediterranean diet or the DASH diet, which is a lot more lean meats, more vegetables, those types of things. But there are some foods that you can actually eat before bed that might actually help you sleep a little bit easier or fall asleep a little bit faster.

Some of those foods, for example, would be walnuts and almonds. Those help produce melatonin or tryptophan and magnesium, or cheese and lettuce. You could even make a small little salad with walnuts, almonds, cheese and lettuce, just kind of avoid that high-fat dressing that all of those things together might kind of help produce all those chemicals that you need to fall asleep faster and easier. Some other things, like bananas or cherries, those will also kind of help produce that melatonin that you need. And then, of course, chamomile tea. Those herbs, they have a mild tranquil property to them, which can help you fall asleep faster. In addition, they've been shown to reduce inflammation, muscle pain, arthritis, which pain is also a common issue when it comes to sleep issues.

Bruce:

You mentioned the tea and some of the various foods, and you make a nice reference to the Mediterranean diet. And when I think of the Mediterranean diet, I think of a lot of European cultures really work an afternoon nap or rest some sort of down time into their afternoon. And then we say, well, here in America, we don't do that, maybe we should. So, where do you stand on naps as a strategy for good sleep?

Corin:

Typically, naps are not recommended if you are already experiencing issues with sleep. But I also work with a population where I recognize there are times where naps are necessary. What I try to teach these Marines and other service members is how to nap effectively. What I try to teach them is that, if you're going to take a nap, I want you to keep your nap to 30 minutes or less so you're staying in stage one sleep, which is very easy to come out of, or, if you're like me, and you're more of a sleeper than a napper, then I want you to nap for 90 minutes, nothing in between that 30 or 90 minute mark. If you nap for the full 90 minutes, then at that point you're able to complete an entire sleep cycle and then you get all of the benefits that come from sleep.

I think every one of us knows what I'm talking about when we've all taken that nap and we've woken up and we have felt way worse than we did before we went to sleep. And we're much grumpier and it's just harder to function. And the reason for that is we probably woke up in about stage two or three, which is that deep level of sleep, and then it's just at that point, you really didn't get any of the benefits that come from napping.

I want people to just really remember that, if you're going to nap, if you have to nap 30 minutes or 90 minutes, and it's really important that if you're going to nap throughout the day to really complete that nap by 3 o'clock, so then you can fall asleep earlier at night and you can fall asleep a little bit easier and stay asleep throughout the night. But then again, I also know that if you're on duty or on watch, the 3 o'clock timeframe isn't going to really apply, but the 30 to 90 minutes absolutely does.

Bruce:

Yeah. And so being on duty, standing on watch, this is one of the things that I was really wanting to get into because I've got to say, when I was in uniform, I had some crazy watch schedules. I was standing duty during the day, during night. I had a very, very limited time between watch where basically I had to come home, immediately fall asleep and then be awake on duty just a short number of hours later. So, getting into the practicalities and the realism, the realistic demands of military life of watch standing, of demanding duties, how are you counseling service members to fit sleep into that?

Corin:

Right. Yeah. And that can be one of the biggest challenges that we deal with. Swing shifts and standing watch, those kinds of duties really do make sleep challenging for these service members. We try to problem solve what some of the issues could be. I would say first and foremost, probably one of the biggest issues would be caffeine. Energy drinks are everywhere these days, and I know that these guys they will load up their pockets with energy drinks going into one of these shifts, and I really try to educate them on how caffeine affects their bodies as adults. We are very tolerant to those effects, but I want them to understand that even though you are tolerant and you may not feel those effects right away, they do affect your ability to sleep. So, although I'm not trying to discourage them from caffeine because they probably very well do need it for that shift or for that duty, I just want them to be aware of when and how much they're taking or drinking.

Absolutely you can have an energy drink at the beginning of the shift because it takes about six hours for half of that caffeine content to make its way through your body. So, if you started shift at 6 a.m. and at noon, half of that caffeine is still coursing through your body, it'll take another six hours for the rest of it to leave. So, if you are drinking caffeine throughout that entire shift, it's going to be much more difficult to fall asleep. So, kind of be aware of that.

Then once you are off shift, if you need to immediately go to bed, there are some things that you can try to put into place. I think about creating a comfortable bedroom environment, as comfortable as you can be depending on where you are, but doing things like putting out blackout curtains or blackout shades, if you can't do that, wear an eye mask. Bring in something to block out the noise that might be around you.

Bringing in a fan is really helpful to create some white noise, as well as reducing the room temperature. The ideal sleep temperature is 68 degrees, so the more you can cool that room, the better and faster you're going to fall asleep. It is important to create a little bit of a buffer in between duty and sleeping.

I know the instinct is to go to that phone, but really try to do something else, try to write in a journal, do a relaxation exercise, do something different than scrolling on your phone because all that will do, like we talked about earlier, will keep your brain active and alert your brain to stay awake. And then, if you need to eat a carb-heavy snack, not

a meal, but a snack because that will kind of increase some of that drowsiness to help you fall asleep quickly.

And then some of the other tips that we talked about earlier, try to avoid that nicotine right before bed. Try not to have an alcoholic drink right before bed. Those kinds of things because all that's going to do is just continue to disrupt that sleep cycle and if we need to get to sleep, I think the key there is finding something that is restful and relaxing to help you get to sleep. We cannot sleep if our body and our mind are not relaxed.

Bruce:

Yeah. No matter how tired we are. There's a difference between being tired and being able to sleep. So, yeah. And we're covering a lot of ideas, tips, things to consider, and you've got to try different things. So, the idea of a sleep diary, how do you try all of these different approaches to sleep and incorporate a sleep diary to track what you're doing, and how do you benefit from keeping a sleep diary?

Corin:

Well, I love a sleep diary, as well as a sleep tracker. I think they're great to be used together. A sleep diary is really just a piece of paper that you can find online and it's a good way to just track yourself manually to keep record of your sleep.

How long is it taking you to fall asleep? How often are you waking up throughout the night? And a good way to just track any habits that you might be engaging in. When do you drink? How much do you drink? Are you exercising? When do you exercise? Do you take any medications? Do you have any caffeine? It's a good way to track those things that maybe a wearable sleep track tracker might not track for you. This can generally be a little bit more reliable recollection of your sleep habits than maybe a tracker. A good way to think about a sleep diary is it's a good way to track your sleep on a daily basis rather than just trying to recall from memory.

There's no way we could recall everything we ate last week just off the top of our heads. So, it's a good way to kind of track that through paper and pen. It's also a good way to kind of see it on black and white. Sometimes our sleep is worse than we thought, or sometimes it's better than we thought. And then when you are working with someone who is trying to help you improve your sleep, they're able to take that sleep diary and calculate some numbers, such as your total sleep time, something called your "sleep efficiency," which means the amount of time you're in bed versus the amount of time you're actually asleep and something else called your "sleep onset latency," which means how much time does it take you to actually fall asleep on average.

Now as far as sleep trackers go, those are great because they give you a lot of data that a paper diary wouldn't necessarily give you. They give you information on sleep cycles and more insight into some potential sleep problems that you might be experiencing. But, on the other hand, sometimes if you're not wearing it correctly, it may not track accurately, which is why I suggest using both at the same time.

Using both and if you're working with someone, it is a really great tool to really kind of hammer down what exactly might be going on with your sleep. And from there, people can really figure out how to start to improve your sleep through the CBTI, the cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia that I was talking about. There's a treatment that's called sleep restriction where they take a look at how much sleep you're actually sleeping and then adjust your schedule according to that.

Bruce:

Corin, this has been such a great conversation. This is just one of those topics that we all want to get better at. So, do you have any final do's and don'ts?

Corin:

I do. I would say, if at all possible, try to maintain a consistent sleep schedule. Try to make sure that you are creating a little bit of time between your day and bedtime. I always tell people that bedtime is the first time that we really get to catch up with ourselves and then that seems to be when we have difficulty falling asleep because that's when our mind starts to race. Start to learn how much your body actually needs to sleep.

Don't spend too much time in bed if you are not sleeping. Particularly service members, if you live in the barracks, that bed is for sleep only. So, what happens a lot is that that bed is used as a couch. It's where they eat. They play video games, sit and talk on their phone, but that bed should only be used for sleep. So, please get a chair, sit on the floor, do anything else, but sit in that bed because your brain will start to associate that bed with everything else.

So, that's a really key factor in trying to improve your sleep. Invest in quality bedding. We spend a third of our lives in bed, make it comfortable, make it good, really find a relaxation technique that works for you. Rest and relaxation are not a one size fits all, so it might take a little bit of practice or trying out a few different apps to find out what works for you, but there are so many different apps out there now that you can definitely explore to see what really works for you to help you rest and relax and fall asleep a little bit faster.

Bruce:

And without listing off any particular products, if you go to your app store and you're searching on terms like "white noise" or "noise generators," there's a whole world of apps, and I use them, that just shuts out the world and creates a little pocket of place to sleep. So, there is that. Also, in the program notes for this episode, we've got a number of resources, and Corin, if you could talk about the cognitive behavioral therapy insomnia coach.

Corin:

Yeah. There is an app. It's called the CBTI coach, and it goes right in line with a lot of things that I spoke about today. It partners up with the training that I have taken

through the Center for Deployment Psychology, and in that app, there is a sleep diary so you can track your sleep. There are relaxation exercises in there. There are tips and tricks when it comes to sleep hygiene. It's kind of an overview of what we talked about today and a good starting point if you really want to kind of pinpoint what might be going on with your sleep and to kind of help you get started on improving your sleep tonight.

Bruce:

Corin Smith is with the Prevention and Education Program at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune New River in North Carolina. Corin, this has been a great conversation. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Corin:

Thank you so much for having me.

Bruce:

I absolutely want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, a call center, we're all over social media and we are a podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. So go ahead and subscribe to us. We cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.