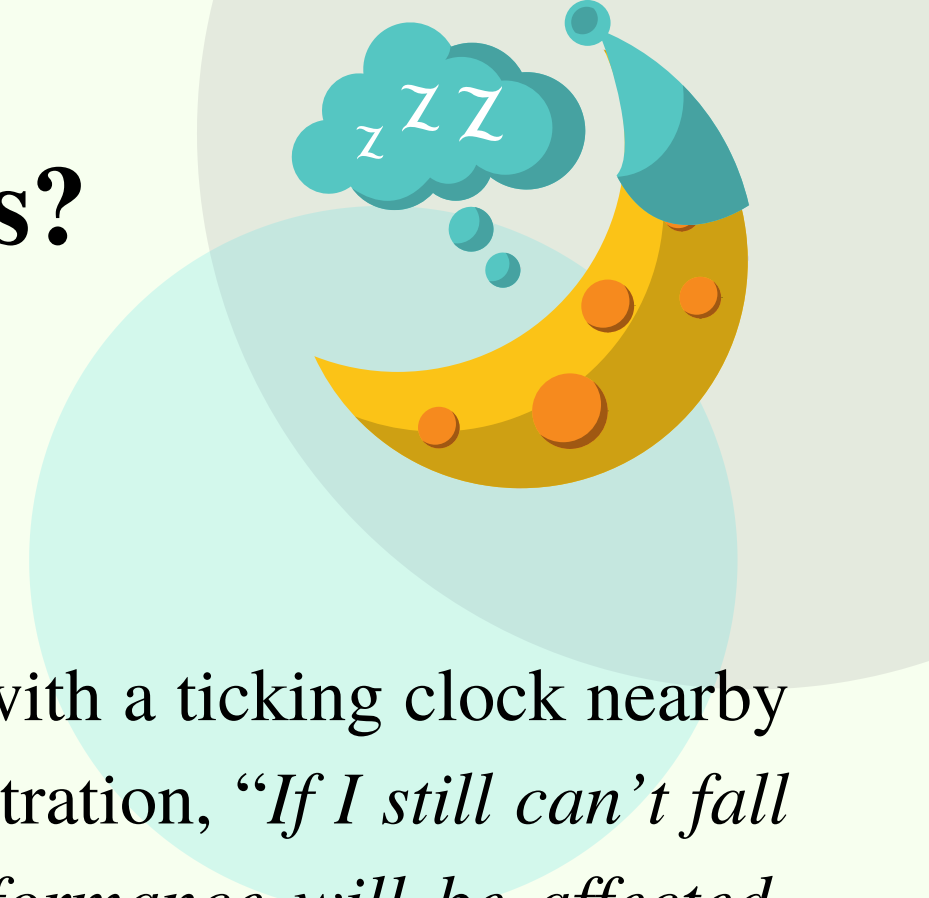




Who gives you sleepless nights?



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Have you ever suffered sleepless nights? Tossing and turning in bed with a ticking clock nearby is a rather torturing experience. You may keep asking yourself in frustration, *“If I still can’t fall asleep, I will be too tired to work tomorrow, by then my work performance will be affected. What should I do now? How can I force myself to sleep immediately?”*

Insomnia is a very common problem. Research shows that one in ten people suffers from chronic insomnia. Symptoms range from difficulty in sleep initiation or maintenance, early waking, having poor sleep quality, to unrefreshing sleep. Some of the causes of insomnia are related to body ailments, such as sleep apnea, asthma, acid reflux, chronic pain or urinary frequency at night. Victims of this type of insomnia generally need treatments targeted at resolving the body root-cause by medical doctors first. On the other hand, some insomnia cases are caused by mood issues or poor sleep habits. Will you or your friends who have insomnia have one or more of these issues?

"Cognitive Behavioral Therapy" and Insomnia

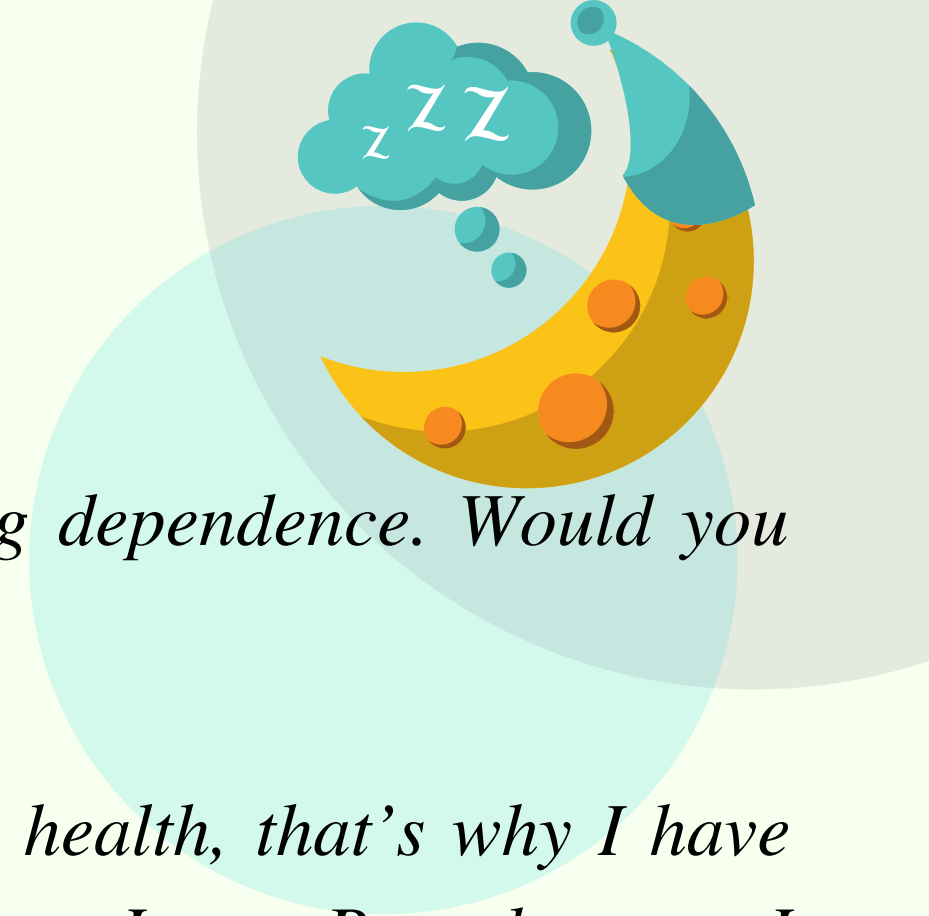
At present, there are two ways to treat insomnia with scientific evidence: taking sleeping pills and receiving Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, CBT. As long-term use of sleeping pills may cause side effects such as drug dependence, applying CBT to treat insomnia plays a significant role and is often advised by doctors. The techniques include sleep hygiene, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation exercise, etc.

Who makes Siu Kwan sleepless?

Siu Kwan has been one of my regular patients for years. I have witnessed this 32-year-old young lady managing her dual role as an accounting clerk and a mother of a 2-year-old kid. She is always busy and tired-looking. Each of the 15-minute medical consultation seems to be her very precious relaxation time.

Siu Kwan: *“Doctor, I’ve already taken your sleep hygiene advice (see Annex), no more coffee after 6pm, and no more checking office emails in bed. Although I can sleep a little bit better with daily practice of breathing and muscle relaxation exercise before sleep, I feel that my sleep quality isn’t really getting better. I’m still tired in the morning, but I really don’t want to rely on sleeping pills.”*





Doctor: *“Siu Kwan, I can see your concern about the potential drug dependence. Would you please tell me more about your thoughts on your sleep problem?”*

Siu Kwan frowned and said, *“I know that sleep is very important to health, that’s why I have done my best to close my eyes and make myself fall asleep as much as I can. But whenever I close my eyes, the unfinished office matters just flood my mind, making me so nervous. You know, my boss is so demanding. No matter how hardworking I am, I just can’t meet his unreasonable expectations!”*

Doctor: *“Siu Kwan, now recall your good old days in school. Under what situation would you doze off easily?”*

Siu Kwan smiled finally, *“Oh, it’s my History class; somehow the lessons quickly put me to sleep...”*

Doctor: *“So you see, sleep is so ironic. When you force yourself to fall asleep, you just can’t make it because you are creating your own anxiety! But if you are more relaxed, and do not force yourself to sleep for the sake of sleep, you just doze off without any difficulty, right? In fact, sleep is a basic need of our body. It should happen naturally.”*

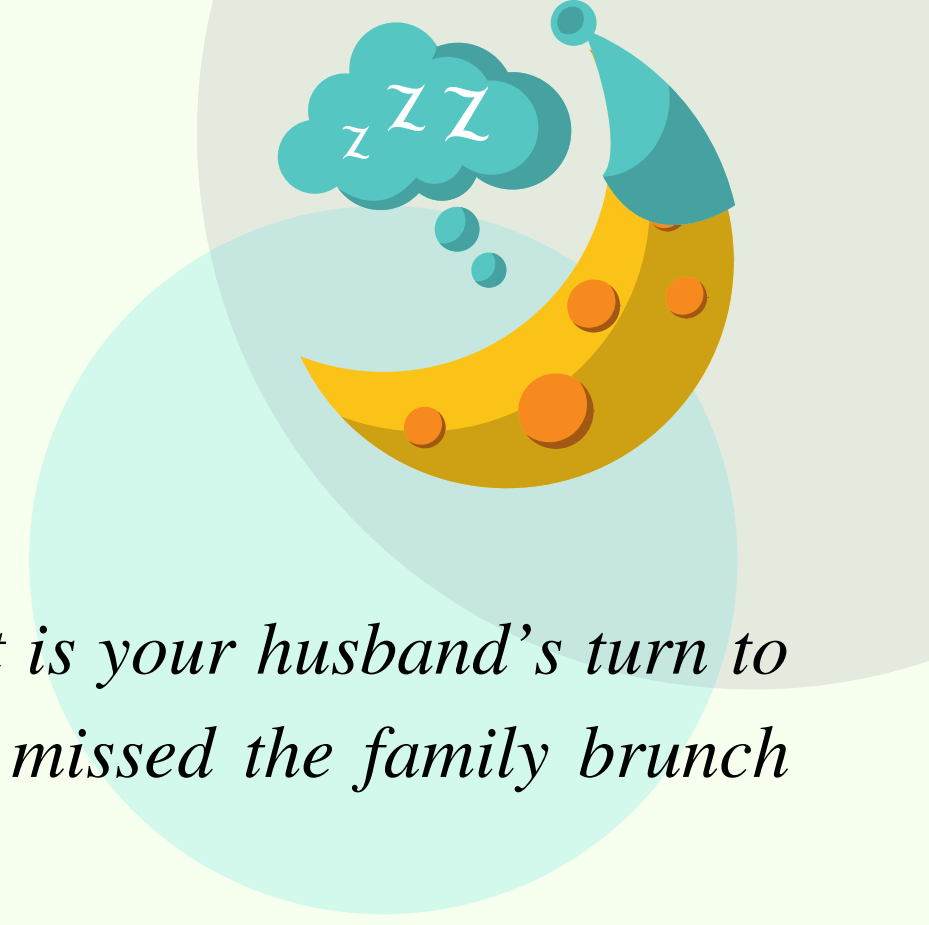
Doctor continued: *“As for the office matters, you may consider making a to-do list before going to bed, so you won’t be worried that you will forget or miss anything the next morning. Siu Kwan, have you ever thought about the aim of your job? Is it only to satisfy your “demanding” boss every day? Or, do you have any other job aspiration?”*

Siu Kwan: *“I have been a responsible accounting clerk all these years and work well with most of my colleagues. Of course, not simply meeting the unreasonable demands from an individual supervisor.”*

After a few seconds of silence, Siu Kwan’s eyes swelling with tears, *“I feel that I’m very useless, just can’t do anything well, not only in office, but also at home. I’m an incompetent wife and mom. You know, as I can’t sleep well during weekdays, I have to sleep day and night over the weekends. As a result, I often sleep in and miss the family brunch every Sunday morning with my mother-in-law.”*

Doctor passed her a tissue, *“I see that you feel very guilty; it must be a hard feeling.”*





Siu Kwan was further down in the dumps.

Doctor: *“Imagine suddenly you and your husband swap roles. Now it is your husband’s turn to suffer from work stress and insomnia. He overslept on Sunday and missed the family brunch with your mom last week. What would you say?”*

Siu Kwan: *“Of course I will ask him not to be upset, because health is the most important. I’ll reassure him that my mom is fine; I can manage.”*

Doctor: *“Siu Kwan, are you aware that you treat others much better than treating yourself? If you accept that others can’t be perfect, can you be kind to yourself as well? Don’t you feel that you have been too harsh to yourself all these years?”*

With a sob of relief Siu Kwan dropped her tears and responded, *“Doctor, thanks for understanding my sufferings. You know, I have been blaming myself all these years, so painful. You’re right. Perhaps I should be much nicer to myself.”*

Doctor: *“There is an old Chinese idiom – ‘Be strict with oneself. Be lenient with others’. Perhaps this is a traditional Chinese virtue deeply rooted in our minds. There is no absolute right or wrong. But if the two principles become imbalanced, some negative emotions will appear and affect us.”*

Cognitive restructuring - counseling at a deeper level

CBT has been shown to be effective in treating insomnia. Some techniques such as sleep hygiene or relaxation exercise, which modifies one’s behavior, may be easily self-learned from internet resources. Among all these techniques, cognitive restructuring facilitates self-reflection on one’s belief is the most challenging. It is not only targeted at solving the sleep problem, but it also attempts to facilitate the re-thinking of one’s life values. Perhaps the chronic insomnia of Siu Kwan cannot be solved dramatically like a miracle, but as a family doctor of Siu Kwan, we can deal with the problems bit by bit. She will never walk alone. I hope that she can feel empathy from our rapport, and this is the beautiful mission of being a family doctor.





Annex – Sleep hygiene

1. Maintain a regular sleep routine.
2. Avoid napping during the day.
3. Don't force yourself to sleep if you don't feel sleepy.
4. If you don't fall asleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed. Do some relaxing activities and go to sleep again when you feel sleepy.
5. Do not read, use the cellphone, watch television, or perform any activities unrelated to sleep in bed.
6. Do relaxing activities such as listening to soft music, doing relaxation exercises or having a warm bath an hour before sleep.
7. Keep regular exercise during the day.
8. Avoid stimulants such as coffee or tea six hours before bedtime.
9. Avoid excessive drinking.
10. Keep the sleeping environment comfortable, which includes using a comfortable bed sheet and a suitable pillow, a quiet and dim environment, and an appropriate room temperature.

(Annex reference: Central Health Education Unit, Department of Health and the Institute of Mental Health, Castle Peak Hospital)

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