

Insomnia could add to SA's economic woes

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16 Mar 2009

South Africa is no longer immune to the world's economic woes, and as the global recession continues to deepen and broaden, so too is South Africa's growth performance expected to falter.

With the prospect of job losses and company closures becoming more real, many businessmen today face the added stress of developing insomnia. And, once plagued by insomnia, a businessman's decision-making ability becomes impaired, as sleep expert Dr Irshaad Ebrahim explains: "Insomnia can have significant effects as the frontal lobe of the brain - the part of the brain responsible for memory and decision-making - is affected by lack of sleep. Sleeplessness can lower work productivity and lead to an increase in accidents, thereby negatively impacting on a company's economy."

One's quality of sleep has a significant influence not only on your own quality of life, but also on that of the people around you, particularly in the corporate world. Some of the most significant industrial accidents in human history - the Exxon Valdez incident, the Chernobyl disaster, the Three Mile Island accident and the Challenger Space Shuttle crash - have been attributed to fatigue. It has also been proven that the level of consciousness of a person awake for a full 24 hours is equivalent to the illegal level of 0.1 percent blood alcohol concentration. In fact, in the US, a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report revealed that about 100,000 road accidents and 1,500 deaths can be traced back to insomnia-related causes.

The primary reason for this is that, with the traffic light inside your brain perpetually flashing green, the body is not given a chance to rest. Sleep is essential to a person's health and wellbeing: sleep slows down the body's systems enough to re-energise the body and to repair cells. Rats deprived of sleep die within two to three weeks.

People suffering from insomnia either have problems falling asleep (known as sleep-onset insomnia), staying asleep (known as sleep-maintaining insomnia), or they may wake up intermittently during the night or too early the next morning, and they generally wake up feeling unrefreshed. People suffering from insomnia become handicapped in their everyday life due to an impaired ability to concentrate, forgetfulness, lack of energy, lethargy, irritability, and it has been reported they even have lower pain thresholds. Consistently tired people are generally less productive at work, less patient with others, and more prone to accidents.

Unfortunately stress is a major trigger of insomnia, and stress generally cannot simply be switched off. But there are a few simple changes that can be made to help break insomnia's hold and restore sleep. Following a balanced diet, carrying out regular moderate exercise, avoiding excessive alcohol or caffeine, and reducing tension can help improve sleep quality. Practicing better sleep hygiene (for example, ensuring your bed is comfortable, using the bed only for sleeping or intimacy - not reading, etc) is a holistic approach to improving sleeping habits.

If daily efficiency and quality of life are seriously impaired by sleeplessness, or when lack of sleep becomes an ongoing problem, treatment must be sought because sleep is vital to one's emotional wellbeing and physical restoration. To minimise the impact of insomnia, patients can be treated with sleep medication for the short-term. Cognitive-behavioural therapies such as relaxation therapy, a sleep restriction programme that initially permits only a few hours of sleep per night, then gradually increased the nightly sleeping time, and reconditioning therapy which teaches a person to associate the bed with sleeping may also be used to treat insomnia.

To conclude, be comforted to know that insomnia is not incurable, nor is it a modern-day recession-triggered phenomenon, as this quote from William Shakespeare (in Henry IV) testifies: "O sleep, O gentle sleep; Nature's soft nurse; How have I frightened thee; That thou no more wilt weight my eyelids down; And steep my sense in forgetfulness?"

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