

Insomnia Coach

Category: Getting Motivated

written by Colleen T. Fogarty | November 23, 2024

My mother, in her seventies, was struggling with insomnia, due to a combination of stress and medical problems. As a physician daughter, I've avoided giving my family specific medical advice, especially unsolicited.

Yet I know cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment for insomnia. Years ago, a conference speaker emphasized the primacy of CBT for sleep issues and recommended a free app developed by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The VA website (https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/insomnia_coach.asp) notes that "the app was created for everyone, including Veterans and Service members, to help manage insomnia. The app is based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)." Over the years, I'd recommended it to patients though hadn't tried it myself.

When my mom mentioned her sleep troubles, I blurted out, "Try Insomnia Coach, a free app that might help!" Within days, I was delighted to hear that Mom had downloaded the app and started using it.

There was *my* motivation: if Mom could do it, so could I! Most days I arrived home exhausted and fell into bed between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m. While I hadn't thought my sleep was affecting my ability to function, I'd fallen into a 3:00 a.m. waking-and-worrying cycle. I'd attributed my exhaustion to work stress and sleep deprivation. While I hadn't thought I had true insomnia, I figured trying the app wouldn't hurt.

The app contains educational materials, tips for staying awake when it's not bedtime, and a sleep diary. The "coach" reminds the user to complete the daily sleep diary. After four weeks of data, the "coach" calculates a time-in-bed recommendation and a target awakening time.

During the first few weeks, my mother and I frequently conferred about the app, joking, "I have to go to bed after midnight so the guy in my iPad doesn't get mad at me!" and "So, I cleaned out my junk drawer last night so I could stay awake until my assigned bedtime!"

The app helped us both improve our sleep habits. We were shocked that the app recommended later bedtimes than we preferred, convinced we wouldn't get enough sleep. After moving my bedtime, I stopped waking up at 3:00 a.m. and felt refreshed in the morning. Mom's sleep has also improved. As a bonus, we had fun commiserating about our coach, "the guy in the iPad!"

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