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Creating a sublime sanctuary

By **Brianna Horan**
FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Saturday, February 16, 2008

A bedroom is the first and last thing the eyes see each day, no matter how long they're closed before the alarm clock goes off.

Only a quarter of American adults get the recommended eight hours of sleep on weeknights, according to a 2005 "Sleep in America" poll by the National Sleep Foundation. Designating the bedroom as a sleep sanctuary could help satisfy the needs of the sleep-starved.

"Paying attention to and working on your sleep environment is very important. There are clearly some things that are very individual when you talk about creating a calming space," says Dr. Helene Emsellem, medical director of The Center for Sleep & Wake Disorders in Chevy Chase, Md.

But one thing that most adults have in common is a need for cues to help them close their eyes at bedtime. "There are so many ways to stay connected late at night that it makes it really hard, even when we're doing our best, to ward off the distractions and get ready for sleep," says Emsellem, author of "Snooze ... or Lose!" (Joseph Henry Press, \$24.95).

story continues below

Between work, making dinner, keeping up with the kids, getting ready for the next day and watching the nightly news, Americans often stay busy until the moment they hit the sheets, Emsellem says. Bedrooms are wired with computers, televisions, treadmills and cell phones, and sometimes sleeping is difficult to fit on the agenda.

"We don't get any downtime until we go to sleep. We sacrifice transitional time, which we really need to clear our minds and level ourselves and prepare for sleep," Emsellem says.

Photo Gallery



Typical bedroom
Photo courtesy LuAnn Cibik



Clutter is removed
Photo courtesy LuAnn Cibik

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The bedroom should be an environment where all senses are soothed -- from a worried mind, a rumbling stomach, worn-out eyes or tired bones. Dimmed lights, a warm bath, stretching routines, an inspiring book or calming playlist on an MP3 player are all ways to help the body welcome sleep. "The first and most important thing is separating your day time from your night time," Emsellem says. Sorting out the daily "crud list" long before bedtime, and creating a room that's free of distractions is a gateway between a busy day and a good night's sleep. "You really want to take the irritants out of the bedroom, for sure," Emsellem says.

But the colors, pillows and lighting that lull one person to sleep might be jarring to another.

"A bedroom is the most personal space in the home," says Craig McDonald, an interior designer at Perloria in the South Side. "I would start with trying to define for that customer what would be serene for them. Some people are looking to gain more storage, some individuals are looking for a more dramatic impact, and again some people want to have something that's very soothing and calm."

Re-creating the feel of a luxury hotel in their master bedroom suite, complete with various lighting effects and window treatments, can help some sleep better. For others, a simplistic room is all it takes to escape to dreamland. Whatever the motif, sleep should be the sole function of the room.

"A room of disruption or chaos is not able to put your mind at ease," McDonald says. "Whereas walking into something that is put together properly, then you can walk in there and free your mind of any worries you've been having."

The ancient Chinese system of feng shui attempts to create such favorable environments.

"This ancient art of placement helps you to arrange your home, office, indoor and outdoor environments so that your life is harmonious and your dreams are realized to their fullest," says Jayme Barrett, author of "Feng Shui Your Life" (Sterling Publishing, 2003).

General principles of the study can be used to help people of all different lifestyles create a bedroom that brings on the Z's.

"You need a calm room," says Barrett, who lives in Santa Monica, Calif. "You want to make sure that clutter is nonexistent in the bedroom. It creates overwhelm and anxiety and frustration -- and that's the last thing you need before you go to sleep. You want to only be looking at the things that make you happy."

Shoes, kid's toys, dirty laundry, a stack of unpaid bills, an exercise ball and other daily reminders should be put in their proper place -- and out of sight -- before bedtime. If a computer desk or television must be in the bedroom, Barrett recommends "putting them to sleep at night" by draping a pretty piece of fabric over them.

Draping the walls of a room in color also can have a relaxing effect. "You want to look at using colors in the blue or the green color scheme," says LuAnn Cibik, owner of Inner Harmony in Leechburg, a feng shui consultation and soul coaching service. These colors are most calming and healing, she says, and have been proven to slow a person's breathing.

Taking deep breaths of certain aromas also can induce a relaxed state of mind. Lavender and rose essential oils are especially calming scents. "When you're breathing that in, it automatically relaxes your body and helps your breath to slow down. You're programming your bedroom to be very relaxing," Cibik says.

According to feng shui logistics, the positioning of a bed can make its sleeper more prone to shut-eye.

"You want the bed to be placed so that you can see someone approaching the room," says Joan L.

Weber, a feng shui consultant in Mt. Lebanon. While aligning the bed as though it is heading out the door can be disconcerting, placing it in the rear corner of the room with the head against a solid wall -- not a window -- provides a sense of security and support.

There's no scientific equation of room dimensions or color samples that can make the Sandman magically appear in a bedroom, but creating an environment that's comfortable to lie in while awaiting his arrival is key.

"The most challenging obstacle can be giving yourself permission that, if you don't fall asleep, you can lay in bed and make peace with it. As soon as you start to judge yourself for not sleeping, you start to make it harder," Weber says.

But taking steps to invite sleep into a bedroom can make it easier to recognize the space as a stress-free zone.

"If you change your environment, you're ready to make your world change," Weber says. "Sometimes by changing your environment and just doing it, you're letting down your defenses."

A HAPPY BED

When it's cold outside, we tend to spend more time snuggled in bed. So give some thought to whether your bed is the comfortable haven it deserves to be.

The February issue of Real Simple has the following suggestions:

Rotate and vacuum your mattress several times a year. Air it out annually by stripping off the sheets and opening the bedroom windows for a few hours.

When washing down coverlets (which you should do twice a year, or every three to five years if they're concealed inside a duvet), throw a few tennis balls in the dryer to keep the down from clumping as it tumbles.

To find out whether your bed pillow has seen better days, give it the squeeze test. Fold it in half and squeeze. If the pillow springs back, it's fine. If not, consider replacing it.

-- McClatchy-Tribune

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