The state of the U.S. economy has many losing sleep. In fact, the 2009 National Sleep Foundation's annual poll found that one-third of Americans are losing sleep over personal finances, work, or the state of the economy. Although concern is understandable, sacrificing sleep is the wrong solution. Sleep is one of nature's best defenses against stress. With a good night's rest, we feel energized, refreshed, focused, and prepared to face life's challenges. We can solve problems and think more creatively after adequate sleep. On the other hand, insufficient sleep leaves us feeling tired, frazzled, and unable to concentrate. Sleep deprivation may be due to worry, lifestyle, or a sleep disorder. Regardless of the cause, chronic sleep deprivation reduces quality of life.

Self Help for Sleep: We can train ourselves to associate certain restful activities with sleep and make them part of our regular bedtime ritual. Establishing consistent, positive, sleep habits as a lifestyle strengthens the internal body clock and helps us to resist temporary stress. Fortunately, there are specific sleep-promoting behaviors that one can adopt and follow on their own. The acronym SLEEP cues the essential elements for healthy sleep practices: Schedule, Liquids, Environment, Exercise, and Peace.

Schedule a regular sleep-wake schedule that includes at least 7-8 hours in bed. Go to bed and wake up at the same times each day, including on the weekend. Avoid napping or dozing during the day. Sleeping only at night and maintaining a consistent bed and wake-up time reinforce the regular rhythm of your body clock.

Liquids should be limited to 3 hours before sleep, particularly beverages containing caffeine or alcohol. Liquids increase awakenings to urinate. Caffeine and alcohol are associated with poorer sleep quality.

Environment should be dark, quiet, cool and comfortable. Remove television, and other noise and light sources. These devices are stimulating to the human brain and are incompatible with sound sleep. Cool temperatures help induce sleep.

Exercise is known to increase the duration and depth of sleep. However, exercise can have a temporary alerting effect; so, working out too close to bedtime may interfere with sleep. For maximum benefit, exercise regularly but try to get your exercise at least five hours before going to bed.

Peace and relaxation invites sleep. Avoid worry, planning, and conflict with others during the evening hours before bed. Meditation, prayer and other mentally relaxing activities can occupy the mind while in bed and help keep worries at bay.

Sleep Disorders: Sometimes, our best efforts to maintain good sleep habits do not solve the problem. Poor sleep or daytime sleepiness that cannot be resolved by adopting healthy sleep habits raise suspicion of a sleep disorder. Although there are more than 80 sleep disorders, a few red flags signal the most common disorders (see Checklist). Breathing complaints (snoring, gasping, witnessed pauses in breathing), daytime sleepiness, persistent difficulty falling or staying asleep, and abnormal movements or behaviors during sleep should be discussed with one's primary healthcare professional. Consultation with a sleep specialist may be needed. Diagnoses are usually made based on pertinent history, physical examination, and sleep laboratory testing. Specialized overnight sleep tests are conducted in a sleep laboratory and measure brain waves, breathing, movement, blood oxygen levels, heartbeat and behavior. Sleep disorders are highly treatable with a wide variety of effective treatments depending on the nature and severity of the problem.

Sleep Checklist – Signs of Common Sleep Disorders

- Loud snoring
- You or others have observed that you appear to stop breathing or gasp for breath during sleep
- Feel sleepy or doze off while watching TV, reading, driving or engaged in daily activities
- Have difficulty sleeping 3 nights per week or more (e.g., trouble falling asleep, waking frequently during the night, waking too early and unable to return to sleep, wake unrefreshed)
- Feel unpleasant, tingling, creeping, or nervousness in legs when trying to sleep
- Interruptions to your sleep (e.g., bad dreams, teeth grinding, walking, pain, heartbeat)

“Suite” Dreams for Patients Undergoing Sleep Testing: Patients are often advised of the importance of environment in achieving a good night’s sleep. The Center for Sleep Evaluation has recently taken our own advice in improving the sleep environment for patients undergoing sleep laboratory testing. The Center now offers sleep laboratory testing in the comfortable home-like atmosphere of a hotel suite, designed for maximum comfort and privacy. Elliot Hospital offers a technologically-advanced sleep laboratory in a secure wing at Homewood Suites. The new location combines the comfort of a hotel suite with the quality testing process. Patients undergoing testing can enjoy meals and other hotel amenities while they are treated as a guest and cared for as a patient.

For more information about sleep disorders and sleep laboratory testing, please contact the Center for Sleep Evaluation at Elliot Hospital at 663-6680.