

What step am I on in this journey?

The thing about a journey is that once in awhile you have to stop and see where you are. It's important to reflect on where you've been and to anticipate where you might be heading, but at times, those considerations are not as important as where you are.



JULIE HARRIS

ing my life in a superficial, robotic sort of way. My life had no heart for five years, and I had no desire to make it any different.

But something is different. I suppose the change has been gradual, but my realization of its happening has been much more sudden.

I have found my gusto for life again. I feel a depth of involvement in my life that's no longer just superficial human existence.

It doesn't mean that I haven't been dealing with the emotional issues dredged to the surface by grief. I am. It doesn't mean I am not changed. I am. And it doesn't mean that I don't think about Jim and miss his presence every day of my life. I do.

But I'm seeing true worth in my own life again. I'm more engaged with family and friends. I feel happiness and contentment. I can see myself as an individual. I care that I am alive.

This new-found freedom of spirit has been hard-won. I still have issues with coming home to an empty house and eating alone. I know I am not whole anymore in the way I was when Jim was alive. I have been through all of the various emotions and experiences I have written about thus far in my blog, and I am changed.

Some people think such experiences might weaken a person's resolve for living.

It has all made me stronger.

I have more confidence to handle life's everyday inconveniences. I'm able to laugh at myself and what happens to me more readily, rather than let it throw me way off course. I'm better able to identify and be accepting of situations that are typical of the human condition and not see them all as specific to widowhood.

Although I'll always be "different" because of my experiences, I feel more integrated into life's mainstream again, rather than watching it flow by me without desire or ability to be part of it.

That doesn't mean I won't have bad spells, whether they are hours-long, days-long or more, but it does mean I have a firm frame for my new "normal" to come back to now. My vision of normal is much more solid, does not keep shifting shakily to and fro, and has become a new "safe" place for me.

Now that I know where I am, I will set my sights on the future, fully aware that I will not be able to keep myself from looking over my shoulder to touch base with my past, even as I move toward my Plan B unfolding before me.

However that happens, I feel sure I'll be OK.

I hope you'll continue to walk with me on my journey, as we never know what's at the top of the next hill or around the next bend.

So many of you have reached out to share your own experiences and wisdoms, and concerns about my well-being, and each of you has gifted me with something special I carry with me. I thank you for that and count you among the many blessings God has given me.

So, let's see ... what's that in the road ahead?

As a longtime employee of the Bangor Daily News, Julie Harris has served many roles over the years, but she now has her dream job as community editor. She lives in Hermon with her four Brittany dogs: Sassy, Bullet, Thistle and Quincy, who keep her busy in various dog sports. She was widowed at age 51 when her husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer. Follow her blog at curves.bangordailynews.com.



Corky Potter of Orono sits with electrodes attached to his head that will monitor his brain activity while undergoing a sleep study at St. Joseph Healthcare Center for Sleep Medicine in Bangor recently.

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How insomnia can make us sick

The likelihood of sleep disorders increases with age

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

There's nothing like a good night's rest to get you off to a fresh start on a new day. But for many people, especially those in middle age and older, that sweet sleep is an elusive dream.

Jann Jones, 62, of Glenburn remembers clearly the last solid night of sleep she got.

"It was in 1986," she said. "I was visiting a friend's mother in New York, and I slept right through the night." Jones, a registered nurse, said people who suffer from insomnia hold on to the memory of a sound sleep.

"Because they're so unusual, we remember them for a long time," she said.

Insomnia — defined as a persistent inability to fall asleep, stay asleep or both — can strike at any age, including, rarely, in early childhood. But the likelihood of insomnia increases with age, in association with changes in health status and activity levels, as well as the influence of medications, emotional stress and the normal processes of advancing age.

Watch the video
bangordailynews.com

Jones' thinks her insomnia took root during a time of acute anxiety, long ago, over the well-being of her aging parents, who lived across the country.

"Finally, I told myself I could lie here and worry all I want and it wouldn't change anything," she said. "Eventually I was able to just shut the door on that anxiety." Her mind has quieted on that issue, but her sleep habits have never returned to normal.

"You learn to live with it," she said. "But those of us on the quest [for a cure] leave no stone unturned."

While individuals differ, most adults need at least seven hours of sleep every 24 hours to be at our healthiest and most alert. Missing a night's sleep once in a while or even a few weeks of choppy sleep because of real-life stress or anxiety is unlikely to cause serious problems, according to Dr. Ganesha Santhyadka, a board-certified sleep medicine specialist at St. Joseph Healthcare in Bangor.

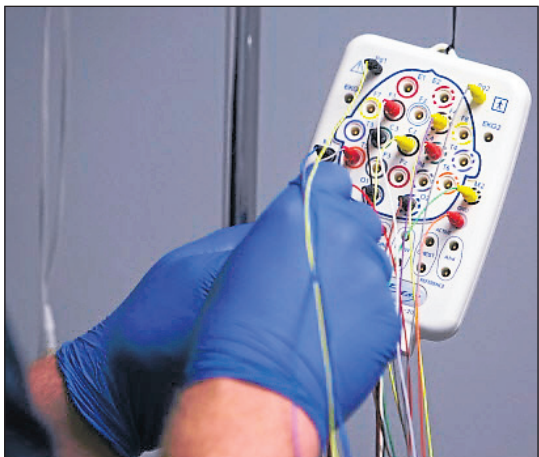
"Situational insomnia can result from the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, worries about children, parents or finances," Santhyadka said. "That's actually normal. But if it lasts for more than a couple of months, we label it chronic insomnia." And that's another story.

Chronic insomnia, especially in older individuals, can lead to debilitating fatigue; a dangerous decrease in cognitive functions, such as judgment, memory and problem-solving; and an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, depression and other illnesses.

Prime suspect: Sleep apnea

When older adult patients with chronic insomnia consult him for help in re-establishing healthy sleep patterns, Santhyadka said, he first rules out medical causes. Chief among these is obstructive sleep apnea. In sleep apnea, often characterized by loud snoring interrupted by episodes of not breathing at all, muscles at the back of the throat relax to the point that the airway is completely blocked. Breathing may stop 30 or 40 times an hour or more for several seconds or even minutes at a time. Decreasing blood-oxygen levels jolt the brain back to activity to open the airway and resume breathing — and snoring.

Sleep is broken many times a night by these repeated apneic episodes, preventing the deep, restful slumber needed to refresh the body and brain. While bed partners and other members of the household may be kept awake by the snoring, the person with sleep apnea is most often unaware of the disruptions. The biggest tip-off is typically chronic fatigue and waking up exhausted every morning. Sleep apnea becomes more likely as we age, especially — but not exclusively — among individuals who are overweight or obese. It is also associated with underlying



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Sleep technician Jordan Qualey hooks up wires to a board that will monitor the brain activity of Gerald "Corky" Potter during his recent sleep study at St. Joseph Healthcare Center for Sleep Medicine in Bangor.

health conditions such as congestive heart failure and the use of alcohol and certain pain medications.

Diagnosing sleep apnea is best done through a monitored overnight sleep study performed in a clinical setting. A positive diagnosis likely will result in the patient being outfitted with an all-night sleeping mask that delivers continuous positive air pressure, or CPAP. The masks range in size from bulky "Darth Vader" models that completely cover the nose and mouth to less cumbersome ones that seal neatly around each nostril. An air hose provides pressurized room air from a quiet tableside compressor.

Gerald "Corky" Potter of Orono reported one recent evening to the St. Joseph Healthcare Center for Sleep Medicine in Bangor. Generally active and fit, the 71-year-old sea kayak guide and business consultant suffered some recent health problems and hasn't bounced back.

"I've always been a physical person, a worker," he said, waiting for the sleep technician to wire him up for the study. "But recently, I've just been really fatigued and low energy."

While he wasn't looking forward to the possibility of having to use a CPAP machine, Potter acknowledged the quality of his sleep has been poor lately, impacting his mood and his ability to work, garden and enjoy outdoor activities.

In Bucksport, 73-year-old Jack Corrigan started using a CPAP about two years ago. He was reluctant at first to strap the big mask on, even though his wife had been using one for a couple of months to good effect.

"It's just not normal to sleep with something like that on your face," he said. But he went with it, and after just a few nights he noticed that a longstanding pain in his legs was gone. "I had been cutting off the flow of oxygen to my legs at night," he said.

Now, he said, he feels better rested in the mornings and more alert and energetic during the day. "I don't feel like I'm pushing a rope uphill any more," he said. "I'm committed to it now. I think everyone should be tested for sleep apnea."

Other causes and treatments

While sleep apnea is one common, age-related cause of chronic insomnia, there are many others. Untreated depression, anxiety and pain; gastric reflux; frequent nighttime trips to the bathroom; and many medications are all culprits.

Santhyadka said it's important to address these issues. Light therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and careful medication management can help. Pharmaceutical sleeping aids, including over-the-counter and prescription drugs, come with so many side effects and negative interactions with other drugs that they should be used only occasionally, he said. The hormone melatonin offers an alternative that is relatively free of side effects, he added.

But, he said, there are some basic "best practices" that can help almost anyone sleep more

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The best Father's Day gift is your presence

Seriously, who needs more neckties?

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

The ads have been everywhere in the weeks leading up to Father's Day. Shaving accessories. Expensive whiskey. Diamond pinky rings. Novelty keychains. Deluxe underpants. Wristwatches. And, yes, neckties.

Seriously? Do our dads want this stuff?

No, said Cliff Singer, a geriatric psychiatrist based in Bangor. Singer, 62, has two daughters, ages 6 and 32, as well as a 23-year-old stepdaughter and an 18-year-old stepson.

He said most fathers deeply value their parental roles, work hard to support their families financially and want, more than anything, to feel they've raised healthy, happy, responsible children to maturity. They welcome recognition, respect and affection on Father's Day, and throughout the year.

"But we don't want presents," he said firmly. "Although we do appreciate the sentiment."

Rather than searching for a material expression of that sentiment, Singer suggests adult children find meaningful ways to spend time with their dads on Father's Day, or connect personally in other ways. And they should keep it simple: a low-key family cookout, a trip to a nearby museum, breakfast at a favorite diner, even just a quick drop-in visit or a phone call.

"I know that on Father's Day I'll get some phone calls and a card, and if we all lived closer there would be some kind of get-together," Singer said.

And, for him, that would be exactly right.

"There may be a man out there somewhere who wants a pinky ring for Father's Day," Singer said. "But if there is, I don't know him."

Rooted in sentiment and sales

As most of us know, or at least suspect, Mother's Day and Father's Day both generate a lot of economic activity. That's not a bad thing. But even a cursory Googling of the histories of these two holidays turns up some important differences.

Mother's Day grew out of a daughter's recognition of the tremendous personal sacrifices made by her mother and other mothers during the Civil War. It was first celebrated in 1908, in West Virginia. In 1911, it was observed in all 46 states, and in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared it a national holiday. Though it has become one of the top sales days for retailers and restaurants, its roots are deep in a groundswell of post-war sentiment.

Father's Day, while inspired by Mother's Day, didn't get off the ground until the late 1930s. That's when founder Sonora Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington, started promoting her home-grown, local observance at the national level — with backing from the New York Associated Men's Wear Retailers.

Even so, the idea didn't really gain popular acceptance or official status for decades. Consumers resisted the evident marketing behind the observance, and newspaper editorials and cartoons often poked fun at the commercialized celebration. Efforts to have Congress declare it a national holiday were repeatedly shot down because of its growing and transparent materialism.

In 1957, though, Maine's own Sen. Margaret Chase Smith faulted Congress for its inaction, for ignoring fathers while venerating mothers. At last, in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson issued a proclamation designating the third Sunday in June as Father's Day. But it wasn't until 1972 that President Richard Nixon signed a law making it a permanent national holiday.

Honor change and individuality

In some ways, the delayed federal designation of Father's Day, along with the predictable lineup

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