

A Slice Of Life

AH, SWEET SLUMBER!

BY HIMANSHU KAMANI

One morning in 2008, as I was pulling myself out of bed with a groggy head and sleep swollen eyes, my wife Bindi walked into the bedroom bearing my first cup of tea for the day and a litany of complaints: "When the kids were small, it was their wailing that kept me up all night. Now it's your loud snoring. The difference is I could get them to shut up. With you I am just helpless!"

Bindi was sleep deprived and rightfully upset because I was the primary cause of her malaise. What I did not know then was that even though I appeared to be dead to the world, snoring my head off, my sleep too was fitful. But more of that later.

My chief concern at that time was my synthetic rubber trading business, which was taking off at a pace that left me with little time to devote on anything else, be it my family, my fitness or my health. I was on the road 10 to 15 days of the month, sleeping in hotels and surviving on greasy unhealthy food sourced from less-than-desirable places.

I had no idea all these minor upheavals were taking a toll on my well being, apart from finding that my weight had shot up from a healthy 68 kg to 87 kg in one year and experiencing a general sense of malaise.

Bindi's complaints became a daily affair, but since there was nothing I could do about it (sleeping in separate rooms in a small Mumbai apartment is not always an option available) I simply turned a deaf ear to her nagging. Actually I was too tired to even respond.

In Jan 2009 I was flying back home from Delhi and, as was my practice, using the 2 hours to catch up on some Zzzs when I felt someone nudging me awake. It was the air hostess. She informed me that the young lady sitting next to me was



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: SANJIT SEN

getting disturbed by my snoring. Not just her, apparently there had been complaints from the other passengers nearby too. I was shifted to a seat where my sawing wood wouldn't disturb fellow passengers and where I could hide my deep embarrassment. *So Bindi wasn't just nagging -- her complaints had basis!*

There were umpteen such incidents that I recollect now. Like that time when a bunch of friends and I were returning from a picnic in Mahabaleshwar. As usual I fell asleep in the back seat. But then my snoring caused such a racket in the small enclosed space that my pals begged me to either shut up (which I couldn't) or stay awake (which, too, I couldn't accomplish).

During field trips nobody was willing to share my hotel room and I became the butt of all jokes.

But while these incidents did have the effect of denting my ego, they hadn't put my life and limb at risk. That happened later. Some time in March 2010 I found myself dozing off behind the wheel and nearly crashed into a vehicle coming in from the opposite direction. It was only the repeated honking that jerked me awake and saved both our lives. After that hair raising episode I stopped driving altogether and hired a driver to get around and when he was not available, rode in a cab.

My mysterious malaise was costing me a packet.

PROBLEMS GALORE

My nights were becoming more and more erratic. Most times I would lie in bed tossing and turning, looking at my wife beside me blissfully asleep. And when I finally slipped into slumber nobody else could sleep. There would be immense lethargy the next day. I would be irritable and sleepy all day long. My eyes would be red, swollen; my throat dry and strangely, I suffered bouts of cough and breathlessness.

My family life took a backseat as I put in longer and longer hours at the office. And as soon as I reached home I would rush off to the bedroom and retire for the day. Some days I would wake up at 3AM and, unable to go back to sleep, sit up and watch TV till



sunrise. And on other days I would nod off by 10 PM in front of the TV.

No matter how long I stayed in bed I never seemed to get enough shuteye. I longed for the days when I could sleep like a baby – sound undisturbed slumber that allowed me to wake up feeling refreshed and energetic.

At the office I would get annoyed at the constant ringing of the phone (being a trading business a lot of work is done on the phone). Often I'd doze off during important meetings, causing the person sitting opposite to shake me and ask 'what's the matter?'

With my staff, and even clients at times, I snapped like an angry turtle at the least provocation. At every opportunity I tried to grab a 10- to 15-min nap, some times in the middle of the day, which did nothing to offset my sleep deprivation. I'd actually take the receiver of the hook and sometimes even switch off my mobile phone.

Like I mentioned earlier my malaise was costing me a packet. Now it was affecting my performance at work as well.

Clients, business associates, friends, family members and my own wife and children, tried to tell me, directly and indirectly, that my sleep problems were impacting my health, my business and the peace of everyone around. To no avail.

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REALISATION

Meanwhile my cough problem was increasing and nothing appeared to work. And it was making my throat feel really sore. So after a lot of pushing from family members and my wife Bindi, I decided to go for a checkup if only to put an end to their nagging. Dr. Narendra Ghathwani a general physician, who has been my family doctor for the last 30 years was already treating my high blood pressure. He noted down my symptoms and after a thorough examination advised me to consult a pulmonologist. However I felt that a mere cough hardly warranted a specialist.

Then one evening at a family gathering I casually mentioned my chronic health problems during a conversation with my elder sister. To my surprise I discovered that she too had the same problems. She instantly recognized the symptoms and insisted I visit a sleep specialist for the same. I still resisted, not believing there was anything seriously wrong with me. But the thought lingered at the back of my head.

In February 2011 with a reference from Dr. Ghathwani, I finally consulted Dr. Prashant Chhajed (right), MD, DETRD, DNB, FCCP (USA), consultant chest physician and specialist in interventional pulmonology and sleep disordered breathing (Kohinoor Hospital), at his clinic in Santacruz, Mumbai.



In the preliminary exam itself Dr. Chhajed noted that my lung functioning was below par. That, together with my other symptoms – snoring, breathlessness, daytime snoozing and the fact that I got up 2 to 3 times in the night for visits to the john – warranted a full blown sleep test, he said, and added “I think you have Sleep Apnea. This test will confirm it.”

DIAGNOSIS AT LAST

Sleep apnea, explained Dr. Chhajed, is a condition characterized by abnormal pauses in breathing or abnormally low breathing, during sleep. A person who has sleep apnea also snores, but with a difference.

Dr. Chhajed explained, “People with obstructive sleep apnea stop breathing repeatedly during sleep

because the airway collapses. As a result air is prevented from getting into the lungs and reduces the oxygen level in the blood. That signals the brain to wake you up to get your breathing going again. You may not even be aware of these mini-awakenings, but your body is. As a result, most people with this disorder are sleepy during the day, leading to lack of energy, chronic fatigue.

“All this stresses the heart, the body and raises the blood pressure. This condition may worsen glucose control and insulin resistance and lead to blood sugar imbalance.”

Indeed sleep apnea has been linked to a higher risk of high blood pressure (a condition I already had!), stroke, heart disease, and diabetes.

I was displaying all the classic symptoms of sleep apnea. What was unusual in my case, the doctor said, was that I was very young (32) to develop this condition which usually hits older people.

TESTING TIMES

Apprehensive as I was, after some thinking, I agreed to spend a night in Dr. Chhajed’s sleep centre for a polysomnography test.

Dr. Chhajed helped me understand all that was going to be done. The room was outfitted with monitors, machines, cameras and wires that were going to be attached to my body. All this would record details of the quality and quantity of my sleep, how often I woke up, the air pressure in lungs and, yes, my sound effects.

Initially I felt suffocated by the alien surroundings and thought I wouldn’t sleep a wink. But ironically, for the first time in months, I slept well and got up only twice for trips to the loo. When I woke up the next morning I was fresh and relaxed. I was eager to know what the test would reveal. My anticipation was rewarded a week later. The report stated that at certain points during the night my sleep was disturbed no less 60 times per hour! In other words in that period, every minute that I was “asleep” I was being woken by gasps for oxygen. The machine recorded that from 2AM to 5 AM I required more airflow and this often lead to frequent awakening in the midst of what

Are You At Risk?

Typical signs/ symptoms of sleep apnea include:

- Overweight/obesity
- Short neck with a collar size of >17”
- Receding jawline
- An extra large tongue
- A BMI of >30kg/m2
- Early morning headaches
- Lack of concentration
- Daytime fatigue
- Snoring

should have been my deepest phase of sleep, viz. during REM (Rapid Eye Movement). Now I understood why I was never able to get complete sleep!

SLEEPING WITH A MACHINE

Now for the solution. Regretfully there are no pills and potions to cure sleep apnea, said Dr. Chhajed. Lifestyle measures like dropping the extra pounds that I’d gained would help. But those would take time to deliver results. The most important item on the agenda was to improve my sleep quality immediately. The doctor suggested CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) therapy in which a machine supplies oxygen to the patient while he sleeps.

I’d have to buy this machine and go to bed wearing a mask and a tube. I felt like an alien from outer space that first night. And the contraption was definitely uncomfortable in the beginning. I required the most air pressure between 2AM and 4AM as per my sleep test, so the machine was set at that pressure. However this felt

suffocating, as if I was getting too much air, and I would remove the mask at intervals. This went on for the first 2-3 months till I found my comfort zone. It is also difficult to turn over when you’re attached to a wire and just the feeling of wearing something on your face while you’re asleep makes you feel weird.

My daughters, who are very young (7 and 9 years) would ask inquisitively, “Why do you have to wear this mask every day? What does it do?” I explained to them that it’s an instrument that helps me sleep well so they are happy.

THAT WELL SLEPT FEELING

Today the CPAP machine has become as important as my night wear. May be the fact that it gave me a good night’s sleep was incentive enough but after using it for over a year I’ve got habituated to the gizmo. I even take it along when I’m traveling as it’s compact, handy and easy to use and just needs to be attached to an electric socket.

The positive impact it has had on my health is tremendous. Now I sleep only once a day for an unfragmented stretch of 8 hours with no snoring at all!

I can concentrate better at work, my irritability has reduced. My eating habits are more disciplined – no more mindless munching of junk food – just 4 proper low fat home cooked meals a day and plenty of fruits. And I walk 45mins daily so my weight is now a healthy 70kg. And, with the help of drugs, my BP is kept under control. All this keeps me fresh and energetic, which gives me enough leisure time to indulge in a few games and activities with my daughters, my family and friends. I’ve even gone back to driving.

In short the overall quality of my life has improved drastically. Who would have thought that a good night’s sleep – which most people take for granted – can offer so much!

As told to

ZAHRA Z. MOTORWALA

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