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Elusive Sleep

ORLANDO, Fla. (Ivanhoe Broadcast News) -- Fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer and cancer treatment. Add to that, that these individuals often struggle to sleep at night, and it's understandable how miserable life can be for some patients. Meet two women who have dedicated their lives to helping patients feel refreshed.

Ultra marathoner Dee Parsons used to run 62 miles. Now, breast cancer has made just getting out of bed exhausting. "I could get to the office in time to take a nap to rest and try to get back up and struggle through the rest of the day."

Then it gets worse. "You have these night thoughts that agitate you in the night, so you're not sleeping well at night, which then lends to the fatigue," Parsons tells Ivanhoe.

That's why Gina Graci, Ph.D., a sleep medicine specialist, has dedicated her life to helping cancer patients sleep better. "My interest and my passion is working with cancer patients, but they had all these sleep complaints. No one knows how to do it, so I learned how to do it," Graci says.

She says it's hard to tell cancer patients dealing with fatigue not to nap. So she advises them to stay busy. Graci says: "It might be going through bills, helping getting dinner ready. It's small things but just making sure that they're awake."

As a psychiatric nurse researcher Debra Lyon, R.N., Ph.D., focuses her work on the depression that can cause fatigue. She says, "Symptom management in the past was considered as something that might be nice, but the focus was almost totally on eradication of the cancer." Lyon is studying cranial electrical stimulation as a way to overcome symptoms including depression, anxiety, and sleep problems.

Graci says, "That first night of good sleep they are so overjoyed, it just brings a smile to your face, and you say to yourself, 'That's why I did all this.'"

The cranial electrical stimulation is FDA approved for treating insomnia, depression and anxiety. In the United States, it requires a prescription.

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