



Promoting Healthy Sleep: Recognising, Responding to and Treating Common Sleep Disorders in Veterans

Sally's story

Sally (48 years old) is a registered nurse and a nursing officer with the Army Reserve. She joined the Army Reserve following in the footsteps of her father, grandfather and great uncle all of whom were Reservists. Sally is an only child and often says to her Reservist mates *"... I was the son that Dad never had. He loved that I was in the army. I miss him lots. Being in the Reserves helps me feel connected to him"*. Over her 20 plus years as a Reservist, Sally has been on various deployments in the Middle East, as well as undertaken local disaster relief work. She has valued the work and opportunity to do something that is not only worthwhile, but also outside of her comfort zone.

Sally has been married to Cameron (51 years old) for ten years. Sally and Cameron met on a dating site and married shortly after. They do not have children *"... we tried but it just didn't happen for us. I did get sad about it a couple of years back, but you know what? It's ok now. I got some professional help and worked through it. I'm just ever so grateful for having what I have with Cam. Some people don't even have that"*.

After graduating, Sally secured a permanent nursing position in the orthopaedic ward of a major metropolitan hospital where she stayed for about ten years, leaving to undertake casual agency work. She enjoyed the variety of this new employment arrangement, valuing in particular the flexibility to attend her regular Pilates classes. She'd never been one for physical activity, but a couple of years ago, while on deployment in the Middle East, she sustained a minor back injury which resulted in a niggling back pain that would not go away. She's not entirely sure the Pilates is

effective, as the pain still niggles, but she enjoys the coffee dates after the class with her fellow class mates.

Sleep has never come easy to Sally; she's not ever felt she needed much, *"I've got a fast metabolism. Don't need much sleep, thin as a whippet, always positive, always busy"* she used to say, but not anymore.

Since her return from disaster relief work in the 2009 Victorian bushfires she has seemed to need more sleep or has been more tired than usual. Sally puts her newfound tiredness down to her sleep now being characterised by disturbing dreams and strange awakenings.

Her sleep patterns were always a tad random but now they are more predictable. She has difficulty getting off to sleep and is restless through the night (although often seems to fall more deeply asleep near morning). Recurring nightmares have become a feature with a couple that happen regularly, once or twice a week. The first takes her back to a particular day in the 2009 bushfires when she unexpectedly came across a very distressing scene that she has never shared with anyone, not even Cameron. The nightmare replays exactly what happened in vivid detail. The second nightmare is not as vivid, but just as disturbing, even though it is not something that actually happened to Sally. In this nightmare Cameron is seriously injured in a terrible accident of some kind and needs Sally's help, which she is unable to provide. Each time she'll wake at the point of the 'story' when she feels most helpless, confident that Cameron will die. Some nights she'll just wake up startled, gasping for breath with her heart racing, not sure why she has woken or whether she has even been dreaming.

About eighteen months ago, impacted by Sally's restlessness at night, Cameron moved into the spare room where he now sleeps.

The new sleep arrangements haven't helped Sally's sleep quality or patterns. She is spending more time in the bedroom but less time sleeping. She has moved the TV into the master bedroom, both bed side tables are cluttered with coffee cups, her iPad, books and old magazines with copies of cryptic crosswords, a long held habit of Sally's for which she has her father to thank "*he was the cryptic crossword master! If nothing else, not sleeping helps me hone my crossword skills!*" She tends to go to sleep later now and if she's had a bad night, sleeps in till late in the morning.

Sally, who rarely drank alcohol, now finds herself having a couple of wines with her evening meal. Cameron is a teetotaler and isn't happy with this new routine and lets Sally know. Sally tells him "*it helps me get to sleep. It's nothing to worry about ... don't go making a mountain out of a molehill*".

Despite the frequency of the nightmares increasing over the years, Sally feels the best technique to deal with them is to not give them too much attention. Her father always said "*don't sweat the small stuff*" and that has been her mantra in life.

Her irritability, constant tiredness, low self-esteem, all new to Sally, she attributes to peri-menopause. A woman in her Pilates class who is a bit older than her keeps warning her about "*... the ravages that menopause does to your body, your energy and your self-esteem*".

Recently Sally had a minor car accident "*... it wasn't serious, I just scraped some parked cars. I think I just lost concentration for a moment. You know usually I'm a good driver. I was just so tired today*". Sally is surprised that Cameron seems to care more about her state of mind than the car. He shares with her his concerns about her functioning and the impact this is having on their relationship "*... you are not the same bubbly woman I married ... you pick on me, you're grumpy and tired all the time. Where is our old spark? I wonder if you, or in fact we, are happy anymore. We hardly see each other. More often than not you're still asleep when I leave in the morning ...*"

A couple of days later her boss at the agency tells her that the hospital where she did her last nursing shift lodged a

complaint claiming that Sally had made significant errors in her handover notes "*... it's not like you Sally. Frankly your attention to detail hasn't been great of late. Why don't you take some time off and have a rest?*"

Sally finally decides that she needs to do something about her sleep problems and makes an appointment with her GP to get a referral to a psychologist.

"OK, maybe I am a little under par. If I could just get a good night's sleep. Problem is, I don't know how to ..."