

Hotel Earns Five Stars For Sleep Awareness



ANYA ORLANSKA HELPS

people find a place for a juicy steak, score tickets to the hottest shows in town and navigate the local tourist spots. Pretty standard questions for

most concierges.

But you see, this 37-year-old's job description far exceeds the usual stuff.

At the posh New York City hotel, the Benjamin, Orlandka also is an ambassador for weary folks to the land of nod. She's a sleep concierge.

Orlandka educates guests, mostly business travelers, about ways to maximize their time under the covers.

"I always try to put myself in their shoes," she told me. "You have jet lag. It's not your bed. It's not a familiar environment."

Some common tips she dishes out: Don't bring the laptop into the bed. Leave the cell phone in the living room. (All rooms are two-room suites.) Pull down the shades. Turn off the TV. Nudge up the thermostat.

She has been at the Benjamin for only six months, but the position of sleep concierge goes back seven years. It's just one part of the hotel's plan to encourage sleep.

Guests receive an e-mail or phone call three days prior to arrival about their choice of 12 different pillows. Among the selections: "Snore-No-More" elevates the chin from the chest, helping to keep the airway open; "Lullaby" features built-in speakers so guests can plug in an MP3 player; and "Swedish Memory," a customer favorite, is made from foam designed by NASA.

As other insomnia remedies, Orlandka recommends massages in the spa or something off the special comfort food-heavy room service menu—peanut butter sandwiches, banana bread or chamomile tea.

The Benjamin has a money back guarantee if a guest doesn't have a good night of sleep. Thanks to some untimely jackhammering outside the hotel, only one red-eyed

person has redeemed the offer, she said.

For the most part, the hotel receives five stars for its service. "When a guest comes down and says, 'I had an amazing night of sleep, thank you so much,' that makes you feel good," Orlandka said.

A sleep physician even wrote her a "beautiful" letter, complimenting her work.

I wholeheartedly agree the Benjamin's sleep awareness efforts should be applauded, considering the seriousness of the issue.

Adults in the U.S. average 6.9 hours of sleep each night, less than the recommended seven to nine hours, according to the National Sleep Foundation. The organization's 2005 Sleep in America poll indicates 16 percent of people sleep fewer than six hours on weekdays; and 10 percent barely scrape in that amount on weekends.

Plus, half of those polled said they experienced at least one symptom of insomnia a few nights a week or more in the past year.

Maybe the steps taken by the Benjamin and Orlandka can make a small dent in those stats. More definite, though, is the fact sleep concerns have cracked beyond the hard work of advocacy groups and advice from health care providers.

"Second-tier" venues, like hotels, have an excellent opportunity to reach out to their captive audience. Trains, truck stops and airplanes are some others. Really, any place where a person will likely catch a few winks could be a perfect location to have someone share tips about proper sleep hygiene.

Nothing complicated, of course. It doesn't have to be.

Orlandka never earned her RRT, MD or RPSGT, but she understands the basic principals and does her best to communicate them to others.

"If you don't have a good night's sleep," she said, "you're not going to perform your job well." ■

Mike Bederka, managing editor, can be reached at mbederka@merion.com.