

BYU WELLNESS PROGRAM

HELPING You BUILD A HEALTHY FUTURE



Sleep Hygiene

By M. Gawain Wells, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology

One of my favorite aphorisms is the following: "If you think you are too busy to take time for adequate rest, exercise, and good nutrition, by and by you will have to take time for illness." While many of us still ignore what is best for us, the importance of exercise and diet are acknowledged, even if we only ruefully joke about it. On the other hand, we seem to take pride in lack of sleep, to envy those who reputedly get by on four hours a night, and vainly attempt to condition ourselves to a similar regimen. Sleep is a resented intruder in a busy person's life, a source of chagrin when one falls asleep in a meeting or can't stay awake to read a text. People are slightly embarrassed to admit to having taken a nap. They want to be able to work many hours a day without stopping. It is as if the modern American wants to conquer his or her body, not live within it, let alone work in harmony with it. Yet, respecting the body's rhythms, as well as utilizing what we know about sleep medicine, can help all of us live with more vitality and productivity, not less. The sheer insistence of the body's need for sleep is an indication of its physiological schedule that is influenced by behavior and environment, yes, but ultimately timed by individual genetics.

The body's demand for sleep and wakefulness is controlled by two opposing processes: (1) a clock-dependent alerting system which controls wakefulness and (2) a homeostatic sleep drive that strives to obtain the amount of sleep needed to provide a stable level of daytime alertness. One's body clock or circadian rhythm provides, in general, for wakefulness in the morning, a period of drowsiness in the early or mid-afternoon, and returning alertness in the evening. The sleep drive, on the other hand, is a simple additive process wherein every two hours of wakefulness creates one hour of sleep debt. Thus, a 16-hour waking day would require 8 hours of restful sleep to discharge the need.

To date, the best evidence available suggests that most people, on average, need about eight hours 15 minutes a night for fully adequate sleep. A small percentage of the population need only five to six hours per night, and a similarly small percentage of people require nine to ten hours of sleep. (The developmental stage of the individual, of course, has an impact. Newborn infants sleep about 20 hours a day. By middle age, most of us need closer to seven hours per night.) For those interested, in his excellent book, *The Promise of Sleep*, Dr. William C. Dement describes a procedure by which each of us can determine our own foundation level of need.

If at this point, however, you are already saying to yourself, "I can't afford even seven hours a night with my schedule!", you may be among the millions who are chronically sleep deprived. Involved in challenging, stimulating tasks, you may, in fact, feel alert and productive. Yet performance comparisons of individuals carrying a heavy sleep load at one time and then tested at another time when their debt has been discharged find that adequate sleep increases creativity and the ability to concentrate, remember and ana-

lyze information. It decreases irritability, anxiety, and lethargy as well. It appears that many of us have become so acclimated to lower levels of alertness that we don't know what it's like to be truly wide awake. Warm rooms, boring meetings, or hours spent staring at the highway over a steering wheel may unmask our physiological need for sleep with sometimes harmless and sometimes disastrous consequences. Moreover, the deep, non-REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which most of us enjoy in the first few hours of sleep, is integrally involved in restoring the body's health. When we are ill, in fact, the body appears to be geared to make us want to sleep in order for the body to fight infection effectively. There is a considerable difference between the effects of healthy sleep (usually consolidated, deep sleep) and fragmented, dozing, waking, I-don't-think-I-slept-at-all sleep. With that in mind, let's consider some sleep hygiene suggestions from Dr. Dement's *Promise of Sleep* and from Dr. James Maas' book, *Power Sleep*.

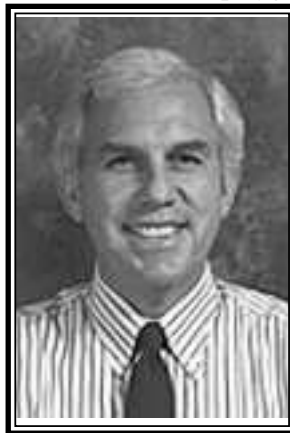
It is important to maintain a regular sleep schedule, not so much "early to bed and early to rise" as "consistently to bed, consistently to rise." To make up for lost sleep, it is much better to go to bed early than sleep in late. And it is better to catch up sleep in small increments, such as an additional 40 minutes according to one study. That way sleep time continues to correspond with the sleepy phase of the body clock. Indeed, shift workers, partly because they are so constantly out of synchrony with their body clocks, have been found to suffer more anxiety and depression, particularly during transitions.

As mentioned, it is important to get continuous sleep if possible. Fewer hours of continuous sleep are more restorative than fragmented, interrupted sleep. On the other hand, brief naps of even 15 minutes during the day

are surprisingly helpful. The body is truly geared for mid-day siestas; this is so much that NASA flight crews, given planned nap times, were 16% faster in reaction times and 34% less likely to have awareness lapses than were comparison crews.

Another important action is to make your bed and bedroom the most comfortable place in the world, a safe haven from worries and concerns of the day. It is so important that your bed be associated with pleasant anticipations. You can use other rooms in your home for planning or talking about concerns. If you can't get to sleep, don't stay in bed longer than 20 minutes. Get up, go to a couch and read something boring like this article until you are drowsy, then return to the most comfortable place in the world, your bed.

Things to avoid: caffeinated drinks, particularly late in the day; heavy meals within three hours of bedtime (you may be able to fall asleep fast, but sleep will be more restless); stimulating exercise, again within three hours of bedtime. Develop a bedtime ritual, a self-soothing process which allows drowsiness to sneak up on you—a warm bath, reading a few pages from a favorite book, or mild stretching exercises for relaxation, for instance. Good night, sweet dreams.



Dr. Gawain Wells

SLEEP.

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by M. Gawain Wells, Ph.D.
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For more information, contact the BYU Wellness Program at 8-5884

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