

The Power of Sleep

The cultural myth that more work is better work can sometimes lead us to sacrifice sleep in an effort to accomplish more. However, there is wisdom in the maxim, “early to bed, early to rise.” Imagine receiving a bonus for sleeping. I suspect more than a few readers would be interested in learning how this can be done. First, let’s begin by determining whether you are getting the recommended amount of sleep. The National Sleep Foundation recommends the average adult should sleep between seven and nine hours a night. Are you there yet? This article explores the perils of running a deficit in your sleep bank, and how being well-rested can result in bonuses in the workplace, and in your personal life.

The Dangers of Sleep Deprivation

Who has time for sleep? This is often the question that arises when we are pressed for time. However, if we want to bring our best thinking and energy to any problem we should be asking, who has time to be tired? Just one week of insufficient sleep alters the activity of our genes, which control our responses to stress, immunity, inflammation, and overall physical and mental health. The following is a list of some of the hidden health hazards caused by sleep deprivation.

1. Higher levels of anxiety: Lack of sleep amplifies the brain’s anticipatory reactions, raising overall anxiety levels. Sleep helps us cope better with stress and anxiety.
2. Higher levels of depression: Lack of sleep causes a decrease in neurotransmitters which regulate mood. We can improve our mood with sleep because we are better able to manage stress, frustration and anger, leaving us feel brighter and more optimistic.
3. Impaired cognition: Excessive sleepiness impairs memory, and the ability to think and process information. Your brain is actually preparing for the next day as you sleep, because it is integrating information by helping you learn and remember information. In this way, sleep helps improve productivity and efficiency.
4. Higher risk of hypertension: Sleeping between five and six hours a night increases the risk of having high blood pressure.
5. Higher risk of heart disease: Our blood pressure drops when we sleep. Not experiencing this nightly drop in blood pressure is a risk factor for heart disease. Sleep is also involved in the healing and repair of your heart and blood vessels, and triggers the body to release the hormone that promotes normal growth in children and teens.
6. Higher risk of diabetes: Lack of sleep triggers our stress response, leading to the release of the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine, which are associated with insulin resistance. Sleep also affects our glucose levels which influence how our body reacts to insulin.
7. Higher risk of stroke: Lack of sleep negatively affects cardiovascular health, increasing the risk of restricting blood flow to the brain.
8. Compromised sex life: Quality sleep keeps testosterone levels high, prevents erection problems, and ensures you are not too tired for sex.
9. Disruption of circadian rhythm (natural time clock): Lack of sleep leads to poor white blood cell health, which weakens our physical stress response. Sleep strengthens our immune system which helps our bodies defend against foreign or harmful substances.
10. Increased risk of breast cancer: Late night exposure to light is linked to reduced melatonin production, which disrupts estrogen production. Too much estrogen can promote the growth of breast cancer.

11. Unhealthy cravings: Sleep helps maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry (ghrelin) or full (leptin). Lack of sleep causes ghrelin levels to increase and leptin to decrease. Good sleep habits are associated with higher weight loss rates, and people who sleep well are more likely to keep the pounds they shed off.¹

Great, so now we have a multitude of reasons to improve our sleep habits, but that can be more easily said than done. At the Lawyers Assistance Program, we recognize change can be difficult, and what may work for one person, may not work for another. Below is a list of suggestions that some people have found helpful in banking a better sleep.

How to Sleep Better

1. Naturally regulate your sleep-wake cycle: You can do this by increasing your exposure to light during the day, and decreasing your exposure to artificial light at night. Our bodies are lulled to sleep by the relaxing hormone, melatonin. You won't feel sleepy while exposed to bright light because light suppresses melatonin production. Surround yourself with darkness if you want to improve your sleep.
2. Reduce noise: Consider a white noise machine or ear plugs.
3. Avoid heavy meals close to bedtime: Many of us crave a bedtime snack or eat dinner late in the evening. A large amount of food consumed shortly before bedtime means your digestive system is working in overdrive, which means your sleep pattern will be disrupted.
4. A full bladder: Too many liquids before bed will keep you up during the night, and running to the washroom.
5. Avoid electronics: While catching up on emails and social media may satisfy the fear of missing out, doing so keeps us stimulated. Each time we check our email or social media we receive a shot of dopamine, a chemical that our brain releases to stimulate pleasure. Moreover, the artificial light from your computer screen, iPad, phone or television will keep your body and mind stimulated, and unable to sleep. The artificial light emitted from screens will also suppress melatonin production.
6. Maintain a regular sleep schedule: Going to bed and waking up at the same time, even on weekends, helps to regulate your body clock. You can also let your body know it is time to prepare for bed by following a bedtime routine that you repeat nightly. For example, make your lunch, lay out your clothes, wash your face and brush your teeth.
7. Cold toes: Lack of circulation in your feet, especially during cold months, can keep you awake. Slipping on a pair of warm socks can improve circulation in your extremities, and help you fall asleep faster.
8. Avoid stimulants: Nicotine, soda, caffeinated tea and coffee, alcohol, and chocolate, are all stimulants that accelerate your heart rate and interfere with sleep.

¹ Sleep: A Business Case for Bedtime. The Hidden Global Health Issue Impacting Employee Performance. Maxis Global Benefits Network - Whitepaper; <http://www.healthcentral.com/sleep-disorders/cf/slideshows/5-health-issues-that-arise-from-sleep-deprivation/hypertension-risk-increases/>; <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/sdd/howmuch>; <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/sdd/signs>; <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/256912.php>.

9. Stress: Work stress, financial stress, and marital discord all put the neurotransmitters in your brain on alert, which means your brain will be stimulated. You may have difficulty sleeping until you can reduce the stress in your life.
10. Pain: Physical pain can be a significant sleep disruptor, whether caused by an injury, a physical condition, or a lack of proper ergonomics at work. Talk to your doctor and/or learn proper ergonomics to help prevent pain from interfering with your sleep.
11. Snoring: You may have difficulty falling and staying asleep if your partner snores. Moreover, if you suffer from sleep apnea, a condition linked to heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke, it is unlikely you are achieving a restful sleep.²

What does all of this mean for business and productivity? Research shows that sleep deprived employees are vulnerable to gaps in safety, and lower productivity. In other words, sleep deprivation is a threat to the bottom line. Poor sleep is a major risk factor for injuries and mistakes at work, and absenteeism. Sleep deprived employees have poor short-term memories, perform poorly on new tasks, and are at greater risk for mood disorders.³

Low or No-Cost Employer Strategies to Remedy the Problem

More hours at work does not translate into more work done. The importance of establishing a healthy work/life balance is slowly being embraced by corporations and governments. For instance, Germany has banned after hours emails to government workers. France has banned work emails and telephone calls outside business hours. And in Brazil, employees who are required to respond to after-hours work emails or calls can charge their employers overtime. These measures are in recognition that employees will be more productive and efficient when they have boundaries with work, and that they may burn out if they do not have the opportunity to fully disconnect from work. While such initiatives may be unrealistic in the practice of law, there are still steps one can take to address the problem.

1. Education: Educate staff on the importance of sleep. Begin by sharing with your employees what you have learned from this article. Consider offering seminars, circulating information bulletins or inviting speakers to inform employees on the negative effects of sleep loss, how to recognize sleep debt, and offer tips on how to improve sleep hygiene, all of which can be found on the Canadian Sleep Society and American Sleep Association websites.
2. Ergonomics: Learning proper ergonomic principles and how to reduce pain, particularly back pain from spending long hours sitting at a computer, can help prevent chronic pain from interfering with sleep.
3. Wellness programs: Include a focus on the importance of sleep in your wellness program. Offer tips on how to improve sleep and why it is important, not just to the bottom line, but for employee health and well-being.
4. Normalize naps: Call it a break or a mini vacation, but more and more businesses, including Google, Ben & Jerry's, Time Warner, and Nike, are promoting on-the-job napping to improve productivity. The ideal nap length is no longer than 20 minutes, and ought to occur between approximately 1:00 – 3:00pm. Some notable nappers include, Albert Einstein, John F. Kennedy, Leonardo DaVinci, Napoleon Bonaparte, Thomas Edison, and Winston Churchill.

² <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/sleepapnea>.

³ Connolly, C., & Ruderman, M. et al. Sleep Well, Lead Well. How Better Sleep Can Improve Leadership, Boost Productivity, and Spark Innovation. Centre for Creative Leadership Whitepaper, 2012.

5. Predictable schedules: Working long hours can disturb sleep. Restructuring workloads and schedules can sometimes have a positive impact. The top three ways to do this include, taking longer or more frequent breaks, flex-time, and telecommuting.

Many lawyers work long and hard, deal with complex issues, and face unknown challenges. You want your brain to be on your side, so you can bring your best thinking and energy to any activity, problem, or relationship. If 30 minutes of extra sleep each night leads to better focus and decision-making ability, you will surely regain that 30 minutes back in productivity.

Sleep on it.