A Good Night’s Sleep: The Impossible Dream?

Sleep. You crave it, but it may seem that you’ll have to wait until you complete your residency before you get a decent night’s sleep again. What risks do you take when you are sleep-deprived? You might be surprised at what researchers are discovering about how sleep loss affects us, and what you can do to minimize the risks.

A sleep-deprived doctor runs the risk of serious consequences, not only on the job but after work as well.

“Some tasks appear to be much more difficult to perform with a sleep deficit, and our studies show that there can be variability in the performance of nearly any task in the sleep-deprived,” says David Dinges, Ph.D., professor of Psychology in Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and director of the Division of Sleep and Chronobiology. “It may be difficult to pay attention over prolonged periods, such as when watching blood gas monitors. Even short duration tasks can be affected. This may include tasks that involve memory, executive function and complex decisions.”

The problem of sleep deprivation is made worse by time pressure, Dinges explains. “When you are tired, your brain will try to go slower to get an answer correct. So when you are doing something that requires a fast response, or have too many things going on at once, you can make mistakes.”

For some doctors, the lack of sleep doesn’t begin to affect performance until they are off the job. “You may have a situation in which a physician is able to remain alert and work while in a hospital setting, but then falls asleep at a traffic light on the drive home,” Dinges notes. “Driving after a long shift is especially risky, because paying attention becomes more difficult.”

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania continue to explore the complex links between sleep deprivation and performance. “Some of our recent findings are somewhat surprising, as we had assumed that chronic sleep deprivation affects everyone’s performance in the same way,” Dinges says. “Our discoveries seem counterintuitive. As our research subjects were deprived of sleep over time, the differences in performance became larger and larger. Some people had very rapid rates of performance degradation, some were in the middle range, and still others showed few or no effects.”

Regardless of how lack of sleep affects you, there are some things you can do to minimize the risks that accompany it. “Know your limits and vulnerabilities. Try to get sleep before you know you will be deprived,” Dinges recommends. “Then make sure you allow a period of recovery sleep.”

Seriously consider moving closer to work. Think about how many hours a year you could have available for sleep if you cut even 30 minutes a day off your commute time.

“Sleep is the golden chain that ties health and our bodies together.”

- Thomas Dekker (1572—1632)
A Good Night’s Sleep continued

Changes like eliminating ‘vegetative’ activities in favor of friendships, intimacy and personal care can counterbalance periods of sleep deprivation. Dinges also suggests taking naps when possible. “When you have to sleep in the daytime, turn off your cell phone, TV and radio, blacken windows and wear earplugs to maximize the sleep environment.”

These are all fairly easy solutions, but effective for establishing patterns of behavior in which you can recharge your batteries. If you suspect insomnia or apnea—even if you think it’s induced by your work schedule—it’s important to be evaluated at a sleep disorder center to identify a treatable disorder now, before it becomes a chronic problem.

Prioritizing sleep in your lifestyle can have long-term benefits, Dinges says. “It should be part of your schedule, not just what is left over after everything else.”

Giving Yourself the Gift of Time

You deserve some time just for yourself, your family and your friends. Yet you have so little time to spend on anything besides your professional responsibilities. Organization expert Denise Landers, author of Destination Organization, offers these tips for carving out time for yourself:

- Take an honest look at all the tasks that must be done, and delegate what you don’t love doing.
- Block out periods of uninterrupted time. Every time you are interrupted, it takes about 20 minutes to get back into the flow of what you were doing.
- Skip the multitasking. You will be far more focused if you don’t task your brain with doing two things at once.
- Keep an interruption log for two weeks. Once you identify what is getting you off track, you can start making changes.
- Schedule it. Include everything that is important to you in your weekly schedule—work, key events, time with family and friends, meals, exercise, and sleep. Some days you may only have a window of 20 minutes here and there, but if it’s in your schedule you can make the most of it. Take notes about what didn’t work and adjust the next week’s schedule.
- Don’t put accomplishing tasks over your relationships with other people.

Resources

National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
Sleep Research Society: www.sleepresearchsociety.org
Key Organization: www.keyorganization.com
Denise Landers’ Blog: www.keyorganization.com/blog/5-ways-to-save-time-this-holiday-season