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Ann Rosen Spector: Sleep

By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D

If you think the biggest deficit Americans are facing today has to do with the credit default swaps, you're wrong. We are a cranky, road-rage yelling, highly caffeinated group in large part because we don't get nearly enough good sleep. And that's whether you measure it by quality, quantity, or both.

Most of us are accruing a Sleep Debt that is making the individual bank of energy, concentration, memory, and, of course, the ability to be calm and reasoned so far in the red that it's hard to see how we'll ever get in the black.

We fool ourselves if we think a short nap here or there or a little extra sleep on the weekend (or unfortunately, during meetings or driving) helps us to catch up. Sleep research demonstrates that it's a lot harder and takes a lot longer than you think; it's actually a better plan to get extra sleep in advance if you know you're going to be sleep deprived in the future. Sleep now and fly later.

The body does not adjust easily to disruptions in sleep schedules; they ought to be consistent. Day and night matter. We need to wind down at least 30 minutes before we plan to fall asleep, without alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, or heavy meals. Try reading something boring; I'm a big fan of Wuthering Heights. Noise and light matter, too. Why is that the person who snores the loudest always falls asleep first?

Many people brag about how little sleep they need; it's become a badge of (ersatz) power to show we are not like the ordinary people who need eight hours. See the time of my e-mail? I'm still working at 2 AM and then posting new missives at 5:30 AM (while I'm multitasking on the treadmill, of course).

Like our iPhones and Blackberries, we run our batteries down to the danger zone. We then fool ourselves that caffeine is a good power source. Like most drugs for mood regulation, it's a temporary fix but we make it permanent by establishing a regular cycle of poor sleep, caffeine to jolt us awake, feel fatigue, and, again, experience the inability to sleep.

What's the harm? First of all, most of us are lying to ourselves when we say we need less

sleep. In truth, we are often too afraid of missing some thing to go “off duty.” What if the world ended and we weren’t there to save it? Or we didn’t know the tagline of Letterman’s Top Ten List to use at the next day’s shmooze fest in the office?

No one can be at high alert for very long periods; that’s why guards, whether in the military or at swimming pools, have relatively short stretches before they are relieved of duty and take their next shift. Hyper-vigilance is exhausting and leads to substantive mistakes. Students who pull all-nighters for papers or exams do less well than students who have had a good night’s sleep. But convince anyone with a good supply of Adderall of that.

Good sleep habits have to start early. Infants have to learn to sleep at night, be up more during the day…and they can’t tell time. Studies now show that children with erratic sleep during by one-and-a-half years of age will have long-term trouble with “executive functioning” skills. [This does not mean running a huge corporation like GE (and maybe given their mishandling of everything at NBC, they need better sleep, too)], but the ability to plan, organize, focus, and control impulses. All of these skills, as we know, predict and ensure success in school, work, and life.

While humorist Fran Lebowitz said “Life is something you do when you can’t get to sleep,” it’s not something you do well if you haven’t.

Adults and children perform poorly with sleep deprivation whether we measure it by cognitive abilities, memory, motor abilities, or mood regulation. In the 1950s, all children napped after lunch. Kindergarten was half-day. Now you hear parents proclaiming that their children won’t nap. Is that because children are less tired now? The Flintstone vitamins are infused with Red Bull?

No. Children don’t nap today because parents and caregivers don’t adequately structure the day for a regular nap schedule. I was so intent on creating that for my daughters when they were young (and, perhaps, too well, as they are marathon nappers still today in their twenties!) that I actually composed the “Nap Song” which they sang as they willingly walked up the stairs. “We love to take our nap, nap, nap/ Makes us want to clap, clap, clap.” And the song doesn’t really get better but my husband still sings it.

Sleep is not an optional activity. The National Institute for Mental Health emphasizes how necessary it is for survival; rats deprived of sleep will die within 2-3 weeks (although if your alternative is running through endless psychology study mazes, it might not be a bad alternative). It also takes 2-3 weeks to die by starvation.

Tired of reading this column? Good…pre-read it again at about 10 PM. Then turn over and Sweet Dreams.

Ann Rosen Spector is a clinical psychologist in Philadelphia and an Adjunct member of the Department of Psychology at Rutgers-Camden.