

Healthy Living

How sleep benefits mind and body, and how you can get more of it

Waking up after a good night's sleep can prepare people to take on a new day and all the challenges it has to offer. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a poor night's sleep can contribute to physical and mental fatigue, and even have an adverse effect on the immune system, making people more vulnerable to illness. Perhaps that's one reason why the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke contends sleep is as important to a person's survival as food and water.

Anyone who has had a good night's rest and a bad night's sleep need not be reminded how differently their minds and bodies felt after each night. But they might not realize why their minds and bodies felt much better after a good night's rest than the night when they battled insomnia. According to the NINDS, sleep plays a vital role in brain function, including affecting how nerve cells communicate with one another. The NINDS also notes that recent research suggests a particularly important task is performed while a person is asleep, as it's during rest when toxins that build up in the brain while you're awake are removed. That could be one reason why the health-related effects of chronic lack of sleep are so profound. Such effects include an increased risk for a number

of health problems, including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, and obesity. If left untreated, each of those conditions can adversely affect quality of life and may even contribute to a reduction in life expectancy.

So now that some of the more notable effects of consistent and sufficient sleep have been noted, how can anyone go about ensuring a better night's rest? The NINDS recommends people looking to get better sleep take the following advice to heart.

- Establish a consistent sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day.

- Avoid a sedentary lifestyle. Make a concerted effort to exercise for at least 30 minutes most days of the week, but avoid doing so within a few hours of bedtime. Advice regarding when to exercise to ensure a good night's rest is mixed. The National Sleep Foundation notes that research indicates some people considered "night owls" sleep well after exercising at night, while "early birds" may struggle to fall asleep if they work out too close to bedtime. In addition, the NSF notes that research has found moderate-intensity exercise does not have a detrimental effect on sleep so long as a workout concludes at least 90 minutes before bedtime.

- Relax before bed. This tip is connected to the rule of thumb regarding exercising too closely to bedtime. Just like ramping up right before bed may adversely affect sleep, winding down with a warm bath, cuddling up with a good book, or engaging in another relaxing routine may set the body up to fall

asleep when a head hits the pillow.

- Avoid caffeine and nicotine late in the day and alcoholic drinks before bed. Even if a nightcap helps you fall asleep more quickly, alcohol may lead to interruptions in sleep shortly after it begins. And once awake, falling back asleep can be difficult.

How to recognize mental fatigue

Everyone feels tired at some point. The signs of physical fatigue are often easily recognizable. Slower movements, heavy eyes, achy muscles, and even frequent yawning are some telltale signs that a body is tired. But what about mental fatigue?

WebMD notes that mental fatigue affects the mind instead of the muscles. That can make mental fatigue difficult to spot. But identifying the presence of mental fatigue is important, as untreated mental fatigue can affect decision-making and performance at work and in the classroom. Anyone can develop mental fatigue, but those who find themselves frequently overwhelmed by work, school or personal obligations may be particularly

vulnerable. Recognition of the following signs of mental fatigue may compel those dealing with such exhaustion to take a break and seek help.

- Mood changes: People suffering from mental fatigue may experience mood changes that would otherwise be considered out of character. Increased irritability, a shortened temper, a lack of patience for others, and increased instances of snapping at people are some mood changes that indicate the presence of mental fatigue.

- Loss of productivity: A noticeable dip in productivity is another sign of mental fatigue. WebMD notes that a loss of productivity induced by mental fatigue occurs because the feeling of tired-

- Create a sound sleep environment. A good sleeping environment has no bright lights and loud sounds, is kept at a comfortable temperature, and is device-free (which includes televisions, tablets and smartphones).

- Don't lie in bed awake. If sleep proves elusive after your head

hits the pillow, try engaging in a relaxing routine, like reading a book or listening to calming music, until you feel tired.

A good night's rest is perhaps more beneficial than many people realize, which is why it can be so vital for people to establish and maintain a sound bedtime routine.

ness compromises a person's ability to concentrate. Mental fatigue also can drain a person's motivation. Distractions become harder to ignore when suffering from mental fatigue, which in turn diminishes productivity.

- Instances of zoning out: Mental fatigue can get in the way of a person's ability to focus on what he or she is doing. This sense of zoning out can be particularly dangerous, as it can strike even when driving a vehicle. In fact, WebMD notes a link between mental fatigue and car accidents.

- Inability to sleep: It may seem counterintuitive that mental fatigue would make it difficult to sleep, but it can. People with mental fatigue may struggle to wind down and stop thinking about work- or school-related tasks come bedtime. That can trigger insomnia. One of the dangers associated with this side effect of mental fatigue is that lack of sleep can worsen feelings of exhaustion.

- Increased anxiety: WebMD notes that mental fatigue

triggers the sympathetic nervous system, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and panic. These feelings may be ever-present.

- Physical side effects: Some people find it harder to exercise when their minds are fatigued. A 2017 study published in the journal Sports Medicine found that the duration and intensity of a physical task are important variables when considering the potential effects of mental fatigue on physical performance. Researchers identified a decreased time to physical exhaustion, and a resulting decline in endurance performance, as a side effect of mental fatigue.

Mental fatigue can take a serious toll. Anyone who suspects they are suffering from mental fatigue is urged to contact a health care provider.

Welcome

MICHAEL FIGART, DO

INTERNIST AND PULMONARY MEDICINE SPECIALIST

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Whether it's a routine check-up or managing a long-term condition, Dr. Figart believes in listening to his patients and working together to create a plan that fits their unique needs. With a focus on accessible, high-quality healthcare, he's here to help you and your family stay healthy and thrive.

Dr. Figart, born and raised in Hollidaysburg and educated at Juniata College, is proud to serve the community he has always called home. He says: "My goal is to deliver the highest level of care while maintaining a personal connection that helps patients feel heard and understood."

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