

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

News & Views - Sleep & Sleep Disorders

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,
Medical Director**

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**
3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

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Sleep... Who Needs It?

The answer is that we all need sleep and, at least in this country and culture, we rarely get enough. Studies indicate that the average American gets approximately 7 1/2 hours of sleep per night, less than the 8 -8 1/2 that most individuals require and definitely less than the nine hours of our grandparents or great-grandparents. Perhaps part of Starbucks' reason for success is the fact that many of us walk around sleep deprived much of the time and not fully understanding why we need those double shot espressos to get by during the day.

Many people pride themselves on only "needing" a few hours' sleep at night, but for most this is an ill founded belief that can cause significant health problems. Besides the many accidents caused by distracted drivers talking on their cell phones (perhaps an issue for a totally different newsletter), over 100,000 accidents a year are caused by drivers falling asleep. Although the body can function on less sleep, it is a myth that it can function just as efficiently as one getting adequate sleep. One study indicated that women who slept five hours or less were almost 40% more likely to suffer from heart disease than those who regularly got their eight hours. For those who slept six hours, which is proximally that of one third of Americans, the incidence of their heart disease rose 18%. We also know that not getting adequate sleep can affect the regulation of blood sugar, the body's inflammatory reactions, and many other physiological functions necessary for our health and well-being.

So how much sleep does each individual really need? One way to determine this is to go to bed reasonably tired, do not set your alarm, and then see how long you need to sleep in order to wake up feeling reasonably refreshed and ready to go. This will generally approximate the amount of sleep that you require for optimal functioning. Foremost, this is between eight to eight and half hours of sleep per night. There will be a few who may require fewer than six hours per night and some that might require nine or ten hours, but these are in the minority. The strategy of depleting your "sleep bank" during the week and then making extra deposits on the weekend also does not work, and many researchers maintain that it may even make things worse.

Sleep Disorders

There are a number of disorders that may affect one's sleep. **Snoring** is perhaps the most common and affects 50% of men and approximate 25% of women. It occurs when tissues in the back of the throat relax and then vibrate as air passes over them. There are a number of treatments for this, although some of the first to be tried include losing weight or changing one's sleep position, particularly moving from one's back to one side. Occasionally laser surgery may help by eliminating extra tissue in the back of the throat. Somewhat related is sleep apnea in which the throat tends to collapse and the airflow is stopped. After approximately 15 to 30 seconds, the carbon dioxide builds up and signals the brain to breathe, which often results in a rather loud and somewhat explosive breath. Snoring is frequently an accompanying symptom, and often the one first recognizing this sleep pattern is one's partner. Untreated sleep apnea has been associated with hypertension and other forms of heart disease.

Bruxism, often known as teeth grinding or clenching, frequently is associated with headaches on waking or else a sore jaw which might be mistaken for TMJ (temporal mandibular joint disease). It affects approximately 20% of individuals and frequently responds to treatments utilizing mouth guards and/or medication. At times it may be first noticed by your dentist as he sees evidence of wearing away the enamel because of the teeth grinding. Restless legs syndrome is characterized by an individual who may experience feelings of aching or a feeling of needing to move their legs while sitting or often while lying

down trying to go to sleep. Again this is frequently noted by one's partner as one repeatedly is moving his legs throughout the night, although this may not awaken the individual who is moving. A final disorder of sleep is narcolepsy. This occurs when individuals while awake feel the overwhelming need to sleep at undesired times, such as in the middle of a conversation or even at a stoplight. This is caused by the individual going into REM sleep, which is frequently an early stage of sleep associated with dreaming in a normal sleep patterns. This is frequently treated by medication and certain changes in one's lifestyle.

Good Sleep Hygiene

The following are some tips for improving one's overall sleep patterns.

1. Try to maintain a set bedtime and stick with it, both during the week and on weekends. Try to have some type of "wind down" time as part of your bedtime routine and plan to get up at the same time each morning. For some, having a warm bath as part of their routine is helpful.
2. Develop a consistent routine for getting ready for bed, which serves as a "signal" to your brain that sleep is coming.
3. Keep the bedroom as dark and quiet as possible, but also remember that one tends to sleep better in a room cooler than one might find comfortable when awake. Some studies have indicated an optimal sleep temperature of 60-65°.
4. In light of the fact that you may spend almost one third of your life sleeping, invest in a good mattress. Whether this represents a conventional mattress, an adjustable air mattress, a water bed... is your choice, but make sure that it is comfortable and gives adequate support. And don't try to skimp and save money. You may think it's cool to drive a Ferrari , but most people will spend far more time in their bed than in their car.
5. Keep the bedroom reserved primarily for sleeping and not for watching television, reading, or eating. However, studies have shown that physical intimacy can be as effective as sleeping pills for many, so that would seem to be another acceptable bedroom activity.
6. Try to keep the bedroom as organized and clutter free as possible, as many studies have shown that this tends to create a greater sense of relaxation. I would add that this is true as long as one does not become "too obsessive" about the orderliness.
7. Try to avoid eating a significant amount within two or three hours before going to bed. Certainly limit your caffeine intake, and for many sugar or salt, as these may disrupt one's sleep patterns. The idea of having the "nightcap" is also mythical, as alcohol right before bed frequently disturbs sleep patterns during the night.
8. Regular physical exercise is often helpful in maintaining regular sleep patterns. However, the idea that one should not exercise in the evening or close to bedtime is now somewhat unclear. Some studies have indicated that exercise, even late in the day, may not interfere with one's sleep and particularly with those who tend to be physically fit. I'm sure that many would argue that it's better to exercise later in the evening before going to bed than to not exercise at all.
9. Many find it helpful to learn to relax using relaxation or various breathing techniques. Understand that these are tools and work well primarily when used on a regular basis.
10. For most, dressing in lightweight pajamas and avoiding heavy blankets helps one to sleep more restfully.

Remember, sleep is important and necessary for good health, and just as important as good nutrition, exercise, and your annual physical exam. It's not "macho" to get by on as little sleep as possible, it's just not very smart. For you ladies, it is important to keep in mind that "Superwoman" only exists in comic books. Everyone else is mortal and cannot keep running full speed twenty-four hours a day. Even Dale Earnhardt came in for a pit stop now and then.



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3550 Parkwood Blvd. Suite 705 Frisco, TX 75034

972-335-2430

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