

Sleep Well, Rest Well, Be Well

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When Barak Obama was coming to the end of his Presidency, a good natured reporter asked him what he planned to do when his term ended. “The first thing I’m probably going to do is catch up on my sleep,” he answered. “I’ll probably do that for a couple of months.”

No kidding.

The rest of us may not be world leaders but as people living with an abundance of daily stresses and demands, we too should be thinking about getting plenty of sleep. But how much is enough and just how do we go about getting it?

A rigorous study done by the National Sleep Foundation revealed that adults ages 26-64 need at least seven to nine hours a night,. For people 65 and over that number falls slightly to seven to eight hours a night. Many people live in a state of chronic “sleep debt” meaning that the amount of sleep they are getting is less than the amount they need. To rectify this, some sleep experts believe it is possible to make up for things by sleeping a lot, and “banking” hours of sleep. Other experts don’t believe this is true. The best thing to know is that you are your own best expert. Try experimenting with your sleep habits and see how you feel.

Not getting enough sleep can invite a host of mental and physical problems. Chronically sleep deprived people run a greater risk of developing chronic health problems, such as high blood pressure or heart disease. Depression, lack of mental sharpness, memory problems even weight gain are all possible results of needing more sleep. And perhaps most simply, when you look tired, you look older.

For many, getting to sleep is a real problem. Throughout history insomnia has challenged the likes of Napoleon, Judy Garland, Madonna and even George Clooney. In the United States, statistics show that 30% of all people struggle with insomnia and that number rises as people age – between 40 to 60% of people over 60 have trouble getting to sleep. Women are twice as likely as men to have trouble getting to sleep. Periods of stress and anxiety are a lead cause of this problem but also illness, surgery or an injury that causes pain can wreak havoc with our ability to fall asleep.

Given these facts then how can we help ourselves? How can we make sure that we will fall asleep and then get enough sleep often enough to keep us functioning at our best? Happily, there are a number of simple steps to take which will increase the likelihood that you will nod off easily and enjoy a thorough night's sleep.

The advice that has been around for ages is still true and still helpful: get sunlight in the morning to stimulate your body's production of melatonin; limit caffeine late in the day; unplug all of your devices an hour or two before bedtime and sleep in a cool, completely dark environment.

Additionally, here are some super helpful ideas....

Eat Lightly in the Evening

One of the best ways to send yourself snoozing with ease, is to have a light meal in the evening. This runs counter to most American eating patterns, where we have our main meal at the end of the day. But eating lightly will allow your digestive system to slow down and quiet, which, in turn, will allow your whole system to release into sleep with greater ease. It is a simple change to make yet it can make all the difference to a good night's sleep.

Sleep with Your Mouth Closed

This might sound like strange advice but in the book "The Oxygen Advantage", author Patrick McKeown advises breathing only through your nose at night. Breathing through your mouth actually reduces the amount of oxygen your system receives, and you are more likely to wake up feeling tired, even if you have slept a long time. Breathing through your nose however, creates the beneficial intake of oxygen into the system, allowing the body to rest deeply. How do you know if you are sleeping with your mouth closed or not? Simple. If you wake up with dry mouth, you are sleeping with your mouth open. Take a moment to notice this when you wake up during the next couple of days.

Get the Right Pillow

Whether you are a back, stomach or side sleeper or even someone who does a bit of each, the importance of having the right pillow cannot be overstated. What people look for in a pillow is a highly personal affair, all you need to know is what feels right to you. But take the time to find that pillow and if necessary, invest in it. A good pillow can last a long time. The right pillow can literally change the way you sleep through the night. You will wrestle less, toss and turn less and rest more.

If You Wake Up, Get Up

If you awaken in the middle of the night, it is better to get up and become involved in a relaxing activity, than to lie there hoping you will fall back to sleep. Don't turn on a computer or device – the blue light that gets emitted will stir up your brain's sleep/wake cycle. Try reading or knitting or doodling instead. When you feel tired again, hop back into bed. Works everytime.

Sleep with a Weighted Blanket

New on the scene and growing in popularity are weighted blankets. These blankets work by providing information to the touch receptors in the body. Deep pressure touch, like a good hug, helps people to feel secure, grounded and safe. Weighted blankets offer exactly this kind of touch and are incredibly effective in helping the body relax and ease into sleep. These blankets are readily available online and are affordable as well.

Sleep is an essential element to living a life of good health. Getting a good night's sleep is crucial to every aspect of daily living – from energy to concentration, from memory to social engagement. So, indulge. Let yourself sleep for as long as you can as often as you can. Your whole system will be grateful for it.

