

Sleep more, get better grades
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Sleep is considered by many to simply be a waste of time, after all, there are other things one could be doing. Parents and students generally believe that to achieve academic success sleep should be sacrificed in favour of homework and study. The role of sleep is usually discounted but our brain performs important functions while we sleep, such as repairing existing cells and growing new ones. Sleep deprivation for very long periods of time is destructive and has been linked to serious health problems including diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

The brain is a complex machine still not yet fully understood. Recently, neuroscientists have shown the brain actually works harder while sleeping rather than when awake. A good night's sleep literally clears the mind by draining away harmful toxins and facilitates the strengthening of our memory.

Students that are sleep deprived learn slower and forget easily. They tend to make poor choices, get flustered quickly and may display behavioral problems. They become moody and are very often tired and inattentive in classes. Although studying for longer hours, they usually do not obtain the desired results.

Learning and memory go hand in hand; the average amount of sleep a student gets is a strong predictor of academic performance. We learn new material and then we study or practice what is taught so that we can recall and analyze information at a later date. Learning and memory can be described in terms of three functions:

Acquisition: new information is introduced to the brain.

Consolidation: the processes by which memory is retained over the long term.

Recall: stored information is accessed.

These three steps are vital to the proper functioning of memory. Acquisition and recall occur when we are still awake but memory consolidation takes place while we are asleep. During this time, neural connections that form memories are strengthened and become more stable (long term memories). Sleep also prevents the decay of old memories.

With this in mind, it is crucial for students to get good, quality sleep to save and cement the new information learnt. The amount of sleep needed by each person varies. Infants generally require 16 hours, for teenagers, it's an average of 9 hours, and adults need between 7-8 hours' sleep.

Conversely, while adequate sleep is crucial too much sleep can be a sign of a problem. A healthy teenager should not require more than 10 hours' sleep on a regular basis. If they are sleeping beyond this timeframe frequently then you may want to see a medical practitioner.

To ensure a good night's rest, try out these basic steps:

Stick to a Routine

Routine is vital so you should implement a bedtime ritual at home. On school days and on weekends, ensure your child is going to bed and waking up at the same time. It is never a good idea to allow a child to 'sleep in' on the weekends to make up for time lost during the week. This disrupts the natural circadian rhythm and the child will most likely go to bed at a later time the next night and everything gets thrown off track.

Unwind Just Before Bed

It is a bad idea to study right up to bedtime. Students need to relax and unwind before retiring for the night. They may choose to go for a walk or chat with friends and family. However, TV watching immediately before bedtime should be discouraged as its stimulating effects can negatively impact a good night's sleep. Instead, encourage your child to read a book for relaxation before going to bed.

Get Your Body Moving

Daily exercise for 20-30 minutes will improve one's chances of falling asleep and experiencing deep sleep. Nonetheless, exercising too late in the day will likely make it difficult to fall asleep. Try exercising early in the morning or finish exercising at least three hours before bedtime.

Say No to Caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant found in sodas, coffee, energy drinks and some teas. It helps persons to stay awake but its effects can last up to 6 hours after it is ingested. Eliminate caffeine from your child's diet and encourage them to drink water instead.

Sleep should be seen to be a tool for academic success and as such must be utilized. Studying is important but so too is strong muscle memory, which is developed while we are asleep. If you're hoping to improve your child's grades then make their sleep a priority!