

Sleep - the final frontier

17th October 2017

You probably aren't getting enough.

I wonder how many hours a week you sleep? This flows nicely on from last month's question around how many hours you work. And of course, there is probably a link. More work, may mean less sleep, but does less sleep actually mean less (effective) work? We sometimes wear our lack of sleep like a badge of honour. You may have said it yourself at some time, "I can get by with only 5-6 hours of sleep a night. It's no problem." And, like many of us, what you meant was that even though your workload led to late nights and early mornings, you found that you were still clear-headed enough to drive, to do your job, and maybe even maintain patience and good humour – probably while bolstering yourself with a fair amount of caffeine.

However, our lack of sleep is killing us.

Dr Archibald Hart tells us that sleep-deprived people are more irritable and negative, less joyful, lighthearted and happy, and have more memory problems. Charming! They are also at higher risks for accidents and divorce and "disordered social relationships" and show a dramatic reduction in creativity and productivity. Hart says, "A major study reports that reduced sleep carries a greater mortality risk than smoking, high blood pressure and heart disease. Take a moment for that to sink in."

Matthew Walker works as a sleep scientist and I reckon there's going to be more of them around in the workplace. As the line between work and leisure grows ever more blurred, rare is the person who doesn't worry about their sleep. But even as we contemplate the shadows beneath our eyes, most of us don't know the half of it – it's his conviction that we are in the midst of a "catastrophic sleep-loss epidemic", the consequences of which are far graver than any of us could imagine.

I echo the thoughts of journalist Rachel Cooke who has written up Matthew Walker's work here. She says, "I am mostly immune to health advice. Inside my head, there is always a voice that says 'just enjoy life while it lasts'". The evidence Walker presents, however, is enough to send anyone early to bed. It's no kind of choice at all. Without sleep, there is low energy and disease. With sleep, there is vitality and health. More than 20 large scale epidemiological studies all report the same clear relationship: the shorter your sleep, the shorter your life. To take just one example, adults aged 45 years or older who sleep less than six hours a night are 200% more likely to have a heart attack or stroke in their lifetime, as compared with those sleeping seven or eight hours a night (part of the reason for this has to do with blood pressure: even just one night of modest sleep reduction will speed the rate of a person's heart, hour upon hour, and significantly increase their blood pressure).

Sleep deprivation, amazing as this sounds, constitutes anything less than seven hours a night, (according to Walker) and Dr Hart suggests that once you realise the powerful links between sleep loss and, among other things, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity and poor mental health, you will try harder to get the recommended eight hours a night. Why, exactly, are we so sleep-

deprived? In 1942, less than 8% of the (uk) population was trying to survive on six hours or less sleep a night; in 2017, almost one in two people is. The reasons are seemingly obvious. "First, we electrified the night," Walker says. "Light is a profound degrader of our sleep. Second, there is the issue of work: not only the porous borders between when you start and finish, but longer commuter times, too. No one wants to give up time with their family or entertainment, so they give up sleep instead. And anxiety plays a part. We're a lonelier, more depressed society. Alcohol and caffeine are more widely available. And all these are the enemies of sleep."

According to Oliver Burkeman, sleep studies show we constantly over estimate the amount of sleep we actually get - by nearly an hour (48 minutes). However, this is where things get complex, because researchers have also identified a "sleep placebo effect": you do better on cognitive tasks when you believe you've slept well, even if you haven't. So next time you are telling yourself you didn't sleep very well, you may need to re-frame your internal narrative - at least I got 6 hours you might say. The bottom line however, is that you aren't getting enough. Burkeman puts it bluntly: "The practical implications come down to this: above all, you probably need more sleep, even if you don't feel sleepy, and even if you're convinced you're getting plenty".

A decent night's sleep, says a study by Oxford Economics, "outweighs sex, chatting, going for a walk, eating with family" when it comes to measuring personal wellbeing. Gloss over the "science", says Nosheen Iqbal (commissioned as it was by Sainsbury's), and there's a nagging truth that the sleep complex is real. "The more you get, the more you crave, the more you become susceptible to the machinations of Big Sleep". "The successful and smug, of course, cottoned on to this ages ago: if you're rich and powerful enough to outsource what keeps most people awake – by and large, bills and babies – you can fine-tune your sleep to suit you and then spend your free time writing important works about slumber", explains Rachel Cooke. Matthew Walker asserts that humans are the only species on earth that deliberately deprive themselves of sleep for no apparent reason."

5 hours or less?

Of course, we probably think our own case is somewhat special and that we don't necessarily confirm to "what normal people need". In case you're wondering, the number of people who can survive on five hours of sleep or less without any impairment, expressed as a percent of the population and rounded to a whole number..... is zero.

So what can the individual do? First, they should avoid pulling "all-nighters", at their desks or on the dancefloor. After being awake for 19 hours, you're as cognitively impaired as someone who is drunk. Second, they should start thinking about sleep as a kind of work, like going to the gym (with the key difference that it is both free and, if you're me, enjoyable). "People use alarms to wake up," Walker says. "So why don't we have a bedtime alarm to tell us we've got half an hour, that we should start cycling down?" We should start thinking of midnight more in terms of its original meaning: as the middle of the night. Schools should consider later starts for students; such delays correlate with improved IQs. Companies should think about rewarding sleep. Productivity will rise, and motivation, creativity and even levels of honesty will be improved.

Hart's "Simple Sleep Test" asks whether you fall asleep within half an hour of going to bed, whether you can fall back asleep if disturbed, and whether you feel refreshed, not headachy, in the morning and not in need of a nap by noon. If you can't answer yes to those questions, then Hart suggests

there is room for improvement, and suggests we take small steps, adding 15 minutes of sleep time to our normal sleep, either in the evening or the morning. Even if you don't get more sleep, you are training your body and brain to adapt to the new schedule. "At the end of the week, evaluate your level of tiredness upon awakening, energy, efficiency, alertness, mental acuity, reduced daytime tiredness and your general feeling of well-being."

The bottom line seems to be "If you sleep well, you live well, and then you work well." I hope worrying about this doesn't keep you awake at night. If it does, you might want to put more sleep at the top of your professional development plan.

Sleep in numbers

- Two-thirds of adults in developed nations fail to obtain the nightly eight hours of sleep recommended by the World Health Organisation.
- An adult sleeping only 6.75 hours a night would be predicted to live only to their early 60s without medical intervention.
- If you drive a car having had only four hours sleep, you are 11.5 times more likely to be involved in an accident.
- To successfully initiate sleep, your core temperature needs to drop about 1C.
- There are now more than 100 diagnosed sleep disorders, of which insomnia is the most common.

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