

Time, Energy and Priorities: Sleep On It!

By Arleta James, PCC

When going about our day, most of us probably wonder how we will get the kids to all of their activities, make it to the bank and grocery store, finish a work project, clean up the yard, arrange for a repairman or a doctor's appointment and squeeze dinner between homework and bath time. Then, in adoptive families there are also therapies and IEP meetings! Most of us likely don't think about spending one third of our day sleeping!



Many people view sleep as merely a “down time” when their brain shuts off and their body rests. But research reveals that a number of vital tasks carried out during sleep help to maintain good health and enable us to function at our best. Despite the mounting support for the notion that adequate sleep, like adequate physical nutrition and physical activity, is vital to our well-being, we are sleeping less. The nonstop “24/7” nature of the world today encourages longer or nighttime work hours and offers continual access to entertainment and other activities. To keep up, people cut back on sleep. A common myth is that people can learn to get by on little sleep with no adverse consequences. However, adults really do need at least 7-8 hours of sleep per night. At present, it is clear that the average adult now sleeps less than 7 hours per night. Sleep has distinct stages that cycle through the night in predictable patterns. How well rested you are and how well you function depend not just on your total sleep time but on how much of the various stages of sleep you get each night. While a sleep disorder or other medical condition accounts for some of American adult lack of sleep, again, personal obligations—caring for a family member with a chronic medical or mental health issue and work obligations underlie a significant portion of the sleep deprivation of U.S. men, women, adolescents and children.

The risks of sleep deprivation are many:

- Poor memory (memory is 40% poorer with one night of sleep that is less than 7 hours)
- Decreased productivity/Increased errors
- Attentional deficits and/or distractibility
- Longer reaction times (greater chance of auto accident)
- Fatigue
- Lack of motivation
- Irritability
- Depression and/or anxiety
- Metabolic and hormonal problems —hyperglycemia, insulin-resistant diabetes, increased appetite, obesity
- High blood pressure, heart attack
- Impaired immune system functioning (increased risk of colds, flu, etc.)

- In particular, night-shift workers have increased risk for—heart attack (40-50% higher), obesity (50% higher), miscarriage, pre-term birth, low birth-weight, breast (50%) and colon (35%) cancers, car accidents

Any of the above can certainly affect the ability to parent typical or traumatized children adequately. Really, there are no benefits to any family member when parents are worn out, exhausted, frustrated, over-worked, stressed out, rushing from one place to the next, distraught, nervous and in general just run down.

So, here are some tips to help parents get a good night's sleep because taking care of your physical health and emotional well-being are two main ingredients in the recipe for a healthy family:

Stick to a sleep schedule: Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Sleeping later on weekends won't fully make up for the lack of sleep during the week and will make it harder to wake up early on Monday morning.

Exercise is great but not too late in the day: Try to exercise at least 30 minutes on most days but not later than 5 or 6 hours before your bedtime.

Avoid caffeine and nicotine: Coffee, colas, certain teas and chocolate contain caffeine, and its effects can take as long as 8 hours to wear off fully. Therefore, a cup of coffee in the late afternoon can make it hard for you to fall asleep at night. Nicotine is also a stimulant, often causing smokers to sleep only very lightly. In addition, smokers often wake up too early in the morning because of nicotine withdrawal.

Avoid alcoholic drinks before bed: You may think having a "nightcap" will help you sleep, but alcohol robs you of deep sleep and REM sleep. You also tend to wake up in the middle of the night when the effects of alcohol have worn off.

Avoid large meals and beverages late at night: A light snack is okay, but a large meal can cause indigestion that interferes with sleep. Drinking too many fluids at night can cause frequent awakenings to urinate.

If possible, avoid medicines that delay or disrupt your sleep: Some commonly prescribed heart, blood pressure or asthma medications, as well as some over-the-counter and herbal remedies for coughs, colds or allergies can disrupt sleep patterns. ***Speak with your doctor or pharmacist to see if any drugs you are taking might be contributing to any insomnia.***

Don't take naps after 3 p.m.: Late afternoon naps can make it harder to fall asleep at night.

Relax before bed: Don't over schedule your day so that no time is left for unwinding. A relaxing activity, such as reading or listening to music should be a part of your bedtime ritual.

Take a hot bath before bed: The drop in body temperature after getting out of the bath may help you feel sleepy, and the bath can help you relax and slow down so you're more ready to sleep.

Have a good sleeping environment: Get rid of anything that might distract you from sleep, such as noises, bright lights, an uncomfortable bed, or warm temperatures. You sleep better if the temperature in your bedroom is kept on the cool side. A TV or computer in the bedroom can be a distraction and deprive you of needed sleep. Having a comfortable mattress and pillow can help promote a good night's sleep.

Have the right sunlight exposure: Daylight is key to regulating daily sleep patterns. Try to get outside in natural sunlight at least 30 minutes each day. If possible, wake up with the sun or use very bright lights in the morning. Sleep experts recommend that, if you have problems falling asleep, you should get an hour of exposure to morning sunlight.

Don't lie in bed awake: If you find yourself still awake after staying in bed for more than 20 minutes, get up and do some relaxing activity until you feel sleepy. The anxiety of not being able to fall asleep can make it harder to fall asleep.

See a doctor if you continue to have trouble sleeping: If you consistently find yourself feeling tired or not well rested during the day despite spending enough time in bed at night, you may have a sleep disorder. Your family doctor or a sleep specialist should be able to help you.

In conclusion, sleep tight and don't let the bed bugs bite!