Sleeping to Succeed

Ernest Hemingway is said to have once remarked, "I love sleep. My life has a tendency to fall apart when I'm awake." Whether you have it all together during the day or feel more like Hemingway, we all benefit from healthy sleep habits. Sleep promotes cognition and memory, facilitates learning, recharges our mental and physical batteries, and generally helps us make the most out of our days. With plentiful sleep, we improve our mental and physical health, reduce stress, and maintain the routine that is critical to healthy daily functioning.

Within the busy schedules of high school students, sleep is often the first thing to go when trying to squeeze in all of the academic, social, and extracurricular activities that are often part high school. This handout discusses why it is important to maintain healthy sleep habits and provides tips and tricks on how to do it!

Why is sleep so important?

Sleep plays a critical role in helping our bodies and minds recover and rejuvenate. As a result, sleep contributes to improvements in learning and promotes regulatory functions such as emotional and behavioral control that are important for each and every day. Some examples of physiological and behavioral benefits of sleep include:

- Improving our ability to learn new information and form memories
- Restoring neural connections
- Assisting in optimal emotional control, decision making, and social interaction

How much sleep do you need?

The optimal amount of sleep for each person may vary, but generally research suggests 8-10 hours per night for high school-aged populations.

How much sleep are high school students getting?

As you might guess, most high school students do not get the recommended amount of sleep necessary to maximize its benefits. Sleep is particularly important for high school students because sufficient sleep has been linked to increases in GPA! Research has found:

- 50% of high school students report daytime sleepiness, and 70% report insufficient sleep.
- The GPAS of students receiving 9+ hours of sleep per night were significantly higher (3.24) than those of students receiving 6 or fewer hours of sleep per night (2.74).

What if you're not getting enough sleep?

Because sleep plays such a crucial role in human functioning, lack of sleep can lead to a number of consequences affecting behavior, memory, emotions, and learning when we are awake. These consequences can include:

- Inattention, irritability, hyperactivity, poor impulse control and difficulty multi-tasking
- Impaired memory
- Impaired math calculation skills

In extreme sleep deprivation, consequences can even include mood swings and hallucinations.

When we do not get the sleep we need, our bodies do not forget; we go into sleep debt. Our bodies continue to pay back this debt by trying to get sleep whenever possible, which can result in microsleeps.

- You may not notice inadvertent sleeping during the day (even in class or when studying!) that can last just seconds. These microsleeps impede concentration and negatively impact retention of information.

Additionally, individuals often use caffeine or others stimulants to stay awake. This not only puts them at risk for the consequences of poor sleep, but also the negative health effects of increased stimulant consumption.

What types of things affect falling and staying asleep?

Sleep can be affected by a number of things including how we treat our bodies, what we put in our bodies, and how we interact with our environment:

- Caffeine
- Screen light
- Sleep routines (regular bedtime)
- Exercise
- Diet
- Decongestant stimulants and/or diet pills
- Nicotine
- Alcohol

How to optimize your sleep

Given what we know about sleep, there are a number of things you can do and avoid to improve your sleep cycle. This list is not exhaustive, but it includes many suggestions that help in falling and staying asleep so you can get the 8 - 10 hours your body and mind need.

THINGS YOU MAY WANT TO TRY

- Allow yourself enough time to sleep.
- Gradually set earlier bedtimes when attempting to adjust your sleep cycle.

- Expose yourself to bright light in the morning to help wake up.
- Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet to help fall asleep.
- Exercise regularly but not right before bed.
- Maintain a regular sleep routine on weekdays and weekends.
- Relax yourself as much as possible before bed. This can include taking a warm bath, meditating, or reading something that is not cognitively taxing.
- Re-evaluate your daily schedule and make time for 9 - 10 hours of sleep every night.
- Prioritize and protect your sleep time. Find a friend who can help keep you accountable for going to sleep at your goal bedtime each night.
- Structure your day and plan ahead on your exams, assignments, due dates, and activities so that you don't have to end up cramming or working late into the night. Use a weekly calendar and/or a priorities list to help take control of your to do lists and better manage your time to prioritize sleep.

THINGS YOU MIGHT WANT TO CUT OUT

- Don't eat large meals right before bed.
- Don't engage in rigorous exercise before bed.
- Don't drink caffeine within 8hrs of your intended bedtime.
- Don't expose yourself to bright lights before going to bed.
- Don't use electronic devices that give off light such as TV, computer, phones, etc. before bed. This light inhibits the secretion of melatonin making it more difficult to fall asleep.

Works consulted

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