The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/well/an-underappreciated-key-to-college-success-sleep.html

PERSONAL HEALTH

An Underappreciated Key to College Success: Sleep

Many college-bound students start out with dreadful sleep habits that are likely to get worse once the rigorous demands of courses and competing social and athletic activities kick in.



By Jane E. Brody

Aug. 13, 2018

Attention all you happy high school graduates about to go off to college, as well as the many others returning for another year of higher education. Grandsons Stefan and Tomas, that includes you.

Whatever you may think can get in the way of a successful college experience, chances are you won't think of one of the most important factors: how long and how well you sleep. And not just on weekends, but every day, Monday through Sunday.

Studies have shown that sleep quantity and sleep quality equal or outrank such popular campus concerns as alcohol and drug use in predicting student grades and a student's chances of graduating.

Although in one survey 60 percent of students said they wanted information from their colleges on how to manage sleep problems, few institutions of higher learning do anything to counter the devastating effects of sleep deprivation on academic success and physical and emotional well-being. Some, in fact, do just the opposite, for example, providing 24-hour library hours that encourage students to pull all-nighters.

(I did that only once, to study for an exam in freshman year, and fell asleep in the middle of the test. Lesson well learned!)

An all-nighter may help if all you have to do is memorize a list, but if you have to do something complex with the information, you'll do worse by staying up all night, J. Roxanne Prichard, an expert on college sleep issues, told me. After being awake 16 hours in a row, brain function starts to decline, and after 20 hours awake, you perform as if legally drunk, she said.

Many college-bound kids start out with dreadful sleep habits that are likely to get worse once the rigorous demands of college courses and competing social and athletic activities kick in.

I've yet to meet a parent whose teenage child, especially if male, doesn't sleep until 11 a.m. or later on weekends, throwing their circadian clock out of whack in a perpetual struggle to make up for a serious midweek sleep debt. It's as if they travel across three or more time zones every weekend, then spend Monday through Friday recovering from performance-robbing jet lag.

In the process, they knock out of whack one in 20 genes governed by a circadian rhythm. The substances produced by those genes are not released at the right times and the body fails to perform at its best. Both cognitive and physical

abilities are likely to suffer. In a study at Stanford University, when men's varsity basketball players got an optimal amount of sleep, their free-throw and three-point field goal percentages increased significantly.

College students who fail to adopt more wholesome sleep habits are more likely to find themselves unable to handle their chosen course load and less likely to reach their academic potential, according to a national study of more than 55,000 college students.

The study, by Monica E. Hartmann and Dr. Prichard of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., found that for each additional day of sleep disturbance a college student experienced each week, the likelihood of dropping a course rose by 10 percent and grade point average fell by 0.02, even when most other factors known to influence academic success were taken into account.

"One in every three or four students nationally fails to graduate," Dr. Prichard said in an interview. "If their sleep were improved, their likelihood of graduating would too. Nothing gets worse with better sleep, and a lot of things get better."

Dr. Prichard, a professor of psychology and neuroscience and scientific director of the university's Center for College Sleep, said the sleep habits of college students represent "a major public health crisis" that institutions of higher learning pay little attention to. Of 26 risks to well-being that colleges consider important to inform students about, sleep ranks second to last, just above internet addiction, she said.

"There's definitely room for improvement in educating students about sleep," Dr. Prichard said in an interview. "If all you do is ask students how they're sleeping, chances are they'll say 'great' because they're so chronically sleep-deprived, they can fall asleep anywhere!"

When Dr. Prichard, who had been studying rats, began teaching college full time, she said she witnessed firsthand the “delirium and exhaustion of students struggling to stay awake” and switched her research attention to college students, looking to identify the factors that most influenced their lack of good quality sleep.

“I was surprised to discover that feeling stressed was the main reason for poor student sleep, while consumption of alcohol and caffeine were not significant predictors of sleep quality,” she said based on a study of 1,125 college students she and co-authors published in 2010 in the Journal of Adolescent Health. “Lots of students are suffering from depression, anxiety and A.D.H.D., all of which can be symptoms of sleep deprivation or worsened by it.”

Knowing this prompted her to find ways to help students better manage their stress and anxiety. Working with the St. Thomas Student Wellness Center, she organized a freshman morning get-together with a healthy breakfast and conversation about issues that were causing student stress, testing this intervention against emailed information. Those who attended the morning sessions reported feeling much less stressed and got more sleep and were less sleep-deprived at finals time, Dr. Prichard said.

Also critically important, Dr. Prichard said, is practicing good “sleep hygiene” — the behavioral measures that can help to assure a full and restful night’s sleep. She and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine offer these suggestions:

- Go to bed and get up every day at approximately the same time, weekends included.

- Create a relaxing bedroom setting and follow a consistent bedtime routine.

- Avoid foods and drinks that contain caffeine and any medication with stimulant effects at least three hours before bedtime.

- Don’t stay up late to cram for an exam or finish homework. If your outside activities are too time-consuming, try to cut back on those that are expendable.

- If possible, keep all electronics — computer, TV, cellphone, etc. — outside the bedroom, and avoid using them just before bedtime.

- Don’t go to bed hungry, but avoid eating a big meal before bed.

- Avoid vigorous exercise close to bedtime. Instead, do a calming activity like light reading or meditation.

- Keep the bedroom quiet, dark and cool for sleeping. If outside light or noise is disturbing, consider using light-blocking shades or a white noise machine.

Jane Brody is the personal health columnist, a position she has held since 1976. She has written more than a dozen books including the best sellers “Jane Brody’s Nutrition Book” and “Jane Brody’s Good Food Book.” More about Jane E. Brody