

The Impact of Poor Sleep and How To Improve Sleeping Habits

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It is no surprise that first responders, such as police officers, firefighters, dispatchers, and emergency medical personnel, often feel like they don't get restful sleep. Frequently changing schedules, which often include night and swing shifts, work in direct opposition to our naturally occurring sleep cycles. The high stress levels, potential exposure to trauma, and on-call status inherent in the work of first responders can also have a major impact on sleep. In addition, with balancing work and home life, it may often seem like sleeping well, or enough, is the last priority. Yet, neglecting your sleep health can have a major impact on your overall health, your work performance and your relationships. After discussing some of the detrimental side effects of poor sleep, I will provide a list of recommendations that will help you get to sleep faster and stay asleep longer.

After only one night of sleep deprivation (about 6 hours of sleep), your body experiences significant changes. Loss of sleep compromises your immune system, making it about three times more likely that you will catch a cold (Schocker, 2014). Losing sleep, even for a short period of time, can lead to difficulty focusing and paying attention, as well as becoming more forgetful, and can make it more difficult to learn and retain new information (Schocker, 2014). Not surprisingly, being drowsy can also increase the risk of driving accidents, and make you less coordinated and clumsy in general, whether you are driving or not (Schocker, 2014). In addition, you are more likely to be emotionally reactive and have difficulty managing your feelings, which can lead to conflict at home and on the job (Schocker, 2014). There are also long-term consequences after losing merely one night of sleep. Some research suggests that one night of sleep loss can lead to loss of brain tissue. The risks become even more pronounced when poor sleeping habits continue over prolonged periods of time. The risk for stroke, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and even certain types of cancers can increase dramatically (Schocker, 2014). Other studies show that poor sleeping habits can accelerate the onset of Alzheimer's disease (Di Meco, Joshi, & Praticò, 2014).

Unfortunately, simply catching up on sleep on your days off will not reverse the damage caused by sleep deprivation. It is only by improving your overall sleeping habits and consistently getting restful sleep that you can not only shield yourself from the potential risks, but also gain the benefits of productivity, stress reduction and improved health. Studies show that the following recommendations can be helpful in improving your sleep hygiene (Stepanski & Wyatt, 2003):

- Develop a routine around bedtime, try to go to bed and wake up at the same time. Engage in relaxing activities close to bedtime. This may include reading or listening to calming music.
- Your bedroom should be a sanctuary for sleep, make sure your bed/mattress, the room temperature and noise level are all at your ideal comfort level.
 - Generally cooler temperatures are conducive to good sleep.
 - Darkness is another important variable, so if you are working on night shifts, install some light blocking shades or curtains, or invest in a sleep mask to cover your eyes.

- If you prefer to sleep in silence, communicate with your family to let them know. On the other hand, if you are the type of person that generally falls asleep in front of the TV, you may benefit from installing a white noise machine, or a fan in your bedroom.
- Your bedroom should be associated with sleeping and sex. Avoid doing other activities in bed such as work, watching television, or using your computer.
- If you tend to ruminate on a task list while you are lying in bed, start making a written to do list before you lay down.
- After you set your alarm, do not look at the time on your phone, and turn your bedroom clock away. If you are waking up in the middle of the night, do not check the time, as will result in more wakefulness.
- If you are feeling restless, do not stay in bed. Leave the bedroom and engage in another relaxing activity until you feel tired.
- Avoid caffeine several hours before bed.
- Avoid using alcohol as a sleeping aid (although it may help you fall asleep, it will actually drastically decrease the quality of your sleep).
- Get exercise throughout the day, but avoid exercising too close to your bedtime as that may stimulate wakefulness.
- Avoid eating a large meal right before bed, but eat a light snack if needed.
- Taking naps throughout the day may decrease your ability to fall asleep at night, therefore experiment by trying to not take naps during the day.

If, after implementing these suggestions, you are still finding it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep, you may decide to consult your primary care doctor to find out what sleeping-aid medications are available. Taking prescription sleeping medication in the short term can help to remind your brain of what its like to sleep, and can help restore your natural sleep cycle. Additionally, there are natural medication alternatives such as melatonin. Taking melatonin may give your body a boost of an already naturally produced sleep chemical. Finally, if your sleep difficulties seem to be directly related to a recent loss or trauma you have experienced, it may be helpful to seek out a mental health professional to help you address those issues.

References

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