

SLEEP TO WORK BETTER

Many people stagger into work every day looking tired and bedraggled, head straight for the coffee machine and make wry observations such as “There’s no life before coffee”, or “I’m just not a morning person”. If this sounds like you, your bubble is about to burst: there is no truth in those statements whatsoever. In fact, everybody is a morning person – if they sleep properly.

What is sleep?

Sleep is very important to most animals, humans included. People need to sleep every day, usually for several uninterrupted hours in a row (although the exact number differs for each person). The facts are that a good night’s sleep rests the physical body, reduces psychological stress, and improves the immune system. Good sleep means good health: it can even help you to lose weight!

Nobody can survive without sleep, yet we still know very little about it. All of us know how hard it is to concentrate after a late night, but a continual lack of sleep can make you irritable, physically ill, and if it goes on long enough, will make you age prematurely. In extreme cases, very long periods of no sleep induce hallucinations and madness.

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream

One thing that is known about sleep is that everybody dreams. Dreaming happens during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep. If you watch somebody in REM sleep, their eyeballs can be seen moving behind their eyelids. Some people remember their dreams better than others. If you believe you don’t dream, it’s only that you don’t remember.

Virtually nothing is known about dreams and their function, yet they appear in the life and folklore of nearly every culture in the world. Some experts believe that dreams help assimilate the day’s activities in the mind. Others see them as a way to solve problems; one famous example is how Nobel prizewinner Neils Bohr dreamed of the structure of the atom. Most people have experienced bad dreams, which sometimes wake the sleeper.

Nightmares are only one type of sleep disturbance. Statistics are not precise, but it has been estimated that up to 40 percent of people in western society experience sleeping problems. This is why the non-morning people feel so tired when they wake up.

Make sure you get enough

The most common sleep difficulty is not getting enough sleep. Young people party on the weekend and throw out the body’s natural rhythm. Parents with young babies are woken up regularly. Many people trying to cope with family, work, studies, social life, and hobbies try to survive on 5 or 6 hours per night. This is manageable if only temporary, but not enough sleep over a long time puts severe strain on both the mind and the body.

The most important thing is to get a comfortable bed. The next most important thing is to relax properly. Your body does not automatically relax when you go to sleep. Climate can interfere: too much light or heat can prevent sleep. Rather than take sleeping drugs, it is better to use dark curtains or invest in some air-conditioning. Keep it natural and your body will respond accordingly.

Demurely wake the sleepers...

What if none of these things affect you, but you still feel awful in the morning? You might be suffering from a sleeping problem and not be aware of it. Humans sleep in 90-minute cycles, which consist of a period of deep sleep sandwiched between two REM periods. If you wake up in the middle of deep sleep, you will feel disoriented and groggy.

To resolve your sleep problem, plan your sleep in 90-minute cycles and set your alarm to go off at the end of a cycle. You should then sleep for 6 hours, 7.5 hours, or 9 hours. Experts recommend 7.5 hours, but whichever length you feel is best for you, try to sleep according to the cycles. You will be surprised how much more refreshed you feel!

Summary and conclusion

The demands of life mean that we can't always satisfy every requirement of our human bodies. However, an awareness of the way our bodies function can help us to manage more effectively. A happy body results in a happy mind and that leads to better performance and productivity at work.

Sweet dreams!

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

A doctor's blog on sleep disorders
<http://blogs.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/>

How to become an early riser
<http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2005/05/how-to-become-an-early-riser/>

Physiology of sleep deprivation
http://sleep-disorders.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_physiology_of_sleep_deprivation

Next time, we will be discussing how to make work more fun.

References:

Coren, S. (1996). *Sleep thieves: An eye-opening exploration into the science and mysteries of sleep*. New York: NY Free Press.

Martin, P. (2003). *Counting sheep: The science and pleasures of sleep and dreams*. London: HarperCollins.