

How to Sleep Better

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Sleep is a wonderful thing, but unfortunately for many of us, a good night's sleep is something that happens all too infrequently. In fact, some studies have shown that most of us in North America are chronically sleep-deprived. In the second half of this article, we will explore some ways to improve your sleep that you might not have thought about. But first, let's look at some of the reasons why we sleep.

The most obvious answer as to why we sleep is to recover and heal. The body needs to repair itself, clean out waste products and replenish energy stores. Waking up, feeling rested is one of life's simple pleasures. However this physical recuperation is only one of the many functions of sleep.

When we sleep, we go through two main phases. The first phase occurs when our body and our mind are both at rest. This happens shortly after we first fall asleep. It is brought on by reduced sensory input (darkness, quiet, no movement, etc.). The function of this part of sleep is restorative.

The second phase of sleep is called rapid eye movement sleep, or REM sleep. This is the part of sleep in which we dream. It's called "rapid eye movement" because of the movement of our eyeballs underneath our eyelids that happens when we dream. This part of sleep is not necessarily restful. Our mind acts as if it is awake during REM sleep. Our body can react, too. Sleepwalking, talking in our sleep, and tossing and turning in response to a dream all happen during REM sleep. We cycle through these two phases of sleep throughout the night. As the night progresses, we have less "restful" sleep and more REM sleep. If REM sleep is not restful, then why do we have it?

REM sleep has many functions. One purpose is to help with memory and learning. Research in rats suggests that we repeat things we have done in the day again during REM sleep. This repeating of newly learned things during REM sleep looks as if it could be a key step in our learning process.

Another function of REM sleep is in processing the emotional stress we experience during the day. Our dreams express our fears, anxieties and frustrations. Here, our dreams act like a release valve, blowing off the accumulated steam of the day. This is a critical function for our survival. In a set of Machiavellian experiments with rats, it was discovered that if rats were deprived of any sleep, they died after about three weeks. If allowed to have the first "restful" phase of sleep, but not REM sleep, they died after five weeks. Seeing these results opened my eyes to other possible functions to sleep in addition to physical resting and restoring.

Through the rat sleep-deprivation experiment, I noticed how critical REM sleep and dreaming are to our survival. The rats died quickly even when they were allowed to have the first "restful" portion of sleep. This illustrated that without the nightly processing and stress release of REM sleep, life quickly becomes literally unbearable.

Now that we have explored some reasons as to why we sleep, let's look at some ways to improve our sleep.

Sleep and dating have something in common: The harder we try, the less likely we are to succeed.

We can do things that make the probability of sleep more likely; however, we can't necessarily control falling asleep. This can be frustrating for many, because even if you avoid caffeine, alcohol and eating heavy meals late at night, and you exercise properly, you still might not sleep well. Sleep reminds us of the unpredictability of nature: that even with all of our knowledge and technology, we are still subject to nature's whims. We have no ultimate control over sleep; therefore, it underscores our vulnerability and helplessness in the face of nature. However, for those of us who do not sleep well, we do have to confront this aspect of ourselves if we want to learn to sleep better.

In order to sleep well, we must let go of control. We are obliged to learn to entrust our well-being to something other than our conscious self, and to let the deep, dark and scary subconscious mind take over. The subconscious is where dreams come from. This realm of dreams is strange and wonderful. The colorful images of our dreams offer us a window into our own unlimited creative potential. Our dreams can encourage us to create. In fact, creating - by taking our dreams and manifesting that vision into reality - is a great way to increase the possibility of sleep.

Another way to increase the likelihood of sleeping well is to act with integrity. Worrying about whether we will be caught in our deceptions takes a toll on us. We use the expression "being able to sleep at night" to denote that we have acted honorably and our conscience is clear. As Macbeth will tell you, a troubled conscience leads to troubled dreams and disturbed sleep.

My own struggle with insomnia has led me to be a better person. I find that if I am "cleaner" with my energy, i.e., I avoid lying, cheating and stealing on all levels, my conscience is clearer and I sleep better. The more integrity and honor I act with, the better I sleep. I find that if I try to get an advantage over someone or something by dishonest means, there is a cost to my actions: my own health. The peace of mind of not having anything to hide is tremendously freeing. Not having to worry about being caught in my deceptions leaves more energy for my own health and healing. By acting with integrity, my goal is to stop adding skeletons to my already crowded closet. It's much easier and quicker to empty out my closet if I stop adding new things to it.

In trying to sleep well, our real challenge is to do the right thing, even if it takes longer or does not pay off in the short run. Come clean. Shelve your pride and admit to someone your role in a problem. Go ahead and tell your mom it was you who broke the window, and not the kid down the street. Then watch and see how much better you sleep.

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