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## Feature Article

### Is Sleep Debt Bankrupting Your Career?

by Sandi Corbitt-Sears, StaffingU Director of Communication

We humans take the sleep process for granted, believing that nothing important happens while we're "unconscious" for several precious hours. The body does seem to rest while we sleep as our temperature, heart rate, and breathing decrease, but our brain remains active. Getting too little sleep robs our bodies of a crucial opportunity to relax and rebuild, and may deny the brain the time it needs to transfer short-term memories into long-term storage.

Science is now discovering that a lot more is happening during sleep than we knew. There is evidence that sleep debt may be responsible, in part, for obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, colds, and certain cancers. Chronic lack of sleep ages your body before its time, affecting your appearance, your energy level, and your health.

#### Sleep Deprivation

Because we don't respect our need for sleep, about 50% of the adult population is sleep deprived at any one time. These "walking wounded" can experience any of the following, depending on the extent of their sleep shortage:

- impaired performance
- poor concentration
- decreased alertness and attentiveness
- daytime sleepiness
- irritability
- mood swings
- erratic behavior
- hallucinations

One of these sleep-deprived zombies might be driving the car next to you on your way to work, piloting the plane that's taking you to a conference, or making crucial decisions that will make or break your business. One of them might even be you.

When sleep deprivation becomes chronic, it creates what is known as a "sleep debt." Sleep debt is cumulative, so the longer it continues, the more problems it creates...and the harder it is to overcome.

It's estimated that two-thirds of us are saddled with a sleep debt that we never seem to pay off. We may accrue that debt due to untreated sleep disorders, but most of us go into debt by making bad choices. In our fast-paced society, getting too little sleep can be seen as a sign that we're operating at peak efficiency. If we're too busy to sleep, we must be getting a lot done, right? But the efficiency we're so proud of attaining is just an illusion if it's costing us sleep time. What we're really doing is running up a debt that might cost us our health, our safety, and our careers.

### **How Much Do We Need?**

It's generally believed that the optimum amount of sleep for most people falls between 6 and 9 hours each night. There are, however, individuals who require as little as 5 hours or as many as 10. If you're curious about the right number of hours for you, don't set the alarm for several days and then average the number of hours you sleep before waking up naturally. Of course, if you've been burning the candle at both ends, it may take several days before you catch up on your sleep so that you can get an accurate estimate. The amount of sleep you need to feel rested and refreshed the next day is the right amount for you. If you're dozing off during the day or having difficulty focusing, you probably need more shut-eye.

Our need for sleep doesn't decrease as we age, as is commonly believed, but the amount of time spent in REM sleep does. REM stands for Rapid Eye Movement; it's the sleep phase during which dreaming occurs. REM may also be a critical step in the building of memory. Infants are in REM 50% of their sleeping time, adults spend 20% in REM, and the elderly only 15%.

### **Sleep Disorders**

If you spend enough time in bed to be rested and refreshed, but you're still experiencing the symptoms of sleep deprivation, you may be suffering from a chronic sleep disorder. There are several possible culprits.

#### *Sleep Apnea*

A serious medical condition, sleep apnea is caused by a blocked airway

that causes breathing to stop briefly many times during the night. Often the individual with sleep apnea snores and he/she may move around a lot during sleep.

#### *Narcolepsy*

Individuals with narcolepsy fall asleep suddenly several times a day, often experiencing hallucinations just before or after an episode.

#### *Restless Legs Syndrome*

With RLS, a "crawling" sensation in the legs makes it difficult to fall asleep. The sensation may be relieved by walking.

#### *Periodic Limb Movement Disorder*

With PLMD, an individual's arms and/or legs jerk repeatedly during sleep, decreasing deep sleep and causing daytime sleepiness.

#### *Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome*

DSPS is a sleep timing disorder. Those who suffer from it fall asleep at very late times, getting up late, as well. This may put them out of synch with the general public, negatively affecting their career and relationships.

If you suspect you have a sleep disorder, consult your doctor. He/she may recommend a visit to a sleep lab, where you will be monitored while you sleep. Because sleep disorders can rob you of quality of life and even threaten your survival, it's worth the time and expense to rule them out. For a quick preliminary assessment, try the [sleep test](#) at Sleepnet.com.

### **To Sleep Well**

Even when sleep disorders are not the problem, our routines and habits can cause poor sleep. There are a few simple actions you can take to begin sleeping soundly:

- Darken the room, using room darkening shades or heavy draperies, if necessary.
- Run a fan or use "white noise" to block out disturbing sounds.
- Establish a regular sleep schedule.
- Get a moderate amount of exercise late in the afternoon.
- Stay away from alcohol and caffeine for several hours before bedtime.
- Eat a light snack a few hours before going to bed, but save heavy meals for earlier in the day.
- Engage in a relaxing activity just before bed, such as a warm bath, soothing music, or a relaxing book.
- Set worry aside when you hit the sack. If you're worry-prone, jot down your concerns and leave them where you can pick them up

again after a good night's sleep.

Allowing a sleep debt to accumulate is risky business. It can hinder career advancement, prompt poor business decisions, lower workplace morale, and impair safety. The negative effects may not be evident this week or this month or even this year. But unless you're one of those extremely rare individuals who truly does thrive on little sleep, you will eventually pay a steep price for sleep deprivation.

Don't let sleep debt bankrupt your career. Take steps today to get the sleep you need to be on top of your game, and you'll automatically jump ahead of the sleep-deprived competition.

To learn more about sleep and sleep debt, visit the [Sleep Foundation](#) or the [Sleep Research Society](#).

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*Sandi Corbitt-Sears is Director of Communication for StaffingU, the leader in providing relationship-building techniques guaranteed to grow your business. For information on StaffingU's programs and services, including TeleClasses (live telephone-based classes), Virtual StaffingU (web-based courses), individual and group coaching, on-site training and speaking, and consulting visit [www.StaffingU.net](http://www.StaffingU.net) or call 866-SU-WORKS (789-6757)..*

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