

SLEEP CAN REDUCE STRESS LEVELS*

by

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One picture of a lawyer is staying up until all hours working.

That may involve staying up night after night preparing for litigation - the cross-examination the next day, the submissions to the judge, the address to the jury. It may be working long hours on some matter, such as a commercial transaction.

That is a necessity of life for many lawyers.

Working long hours is stressful enough, but when it cuts into usual hours of sleep, stress levels will go up higher.

For some lawyers, the long hours may not translate into a long-term stress problem. But for some, it will.

Stress and sleep have a two-way relationship. High stress levels can make sleeping more difficult. They can even lead to sleep disorders.

At the same time, getting a good night's sleep can help reduce the effects of stress.

“Many things that we take for granted are affected by sleep,” says Dr Raymonde Jean, director of sleep medicine and associate director of critical care at St Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City. “If you sleep better, you can certainly live better.”

“Sleep can definitely reduce levels of stress,” she says. “With that, people can have better control of their blood pressure. It's also believed that

sleep affects cholesterol levels, which plays a significant role in heart disease.”

“A good night’s sleep allows you to tackle the day’s stress easier,” according to the Sleep Disorders Health Centre on www.webmd.com.

“When you are tired, you are less patient and easily agitated which can increase stress. Most adults need 7-8 hours of sleep per night. Practising good sleep hygiene along with stress-lowering tactics can help improve your quality of sleep.”

And that sentence brings us to the second part of the two-way relationship between sleep and stress.

The first part is that good sleep can reduce stress. The second part is that stress can reduce the quality or even the ability to sleep.

“Stress causes insomnia by making it difficult to fall asleep and to stay asleep, and by affecting the quality of your sleep,” says Dr Neil Kavey, director of the Sleep Disorders Center at The New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City.

“Stress causes hyperarousal, which can upset the balance between sleep and wakefulness. Nevertheless, many people under stress do not have insomnia.”

If you are not sleeping well, whatever the cause, it is important to get on a good programme - one that pays attention to periods of relaxation.

Dr Kavey suggests three steps:

First, set your bedtime and your wake-up time according to the number of hours of sleep you are getting currently. For example, if you are sleeping

only five hours a night (even though you usually plan to spend eight hours in bed), set your sleep time for that amount. Then gradually increase the amount of time allotted for sleep by 15 minutes or so every few nights. The idea is to “squeeze out” the middle of the night-time awakening and gradually increase the amount of sleep you will get during the night.

Second, spend some time “winding down.” A person with insomnia needs a “buffer zone,” a period of time to allow the activating processes in the brain to wind down and to allow the alerting mechanisms to decrease their activity so that the sleep systems can take over. “I suggest that you start winding down two hours before bedtime. Stop all work and end phone calls to family and friends, as often they are activating. Watching television is all right in the evening. However, an hour before bed, I recommend reading or listening to music.”

Finally, focus on conditioning yourself for different sleep behavior. Insomnia is painful for people. It can take control of their lives. When someone suffering from insomnia walks into their bedroom, they often feel anxious, uncomfortable and tense, as they know from their experience that they might spend the night tossing and turning. They need to set up a situation so that they like going to their bedroom. The bedroom should be visually pleasing and very comfortable. One should use the bedroom only for sleep, sex, and changing clothes - pleasant activities. If awake in the night, one should leave the bed and bedroom and spend “unpleasant” times awake in another room. “Waking” activities such as working on the computer, talking with one’s partner, talking on the phone and watching TV should take place out of the bedroom.

“It’s important to recognise that transient insomnias are very common,”

Dr Kavey says. “A night or two of insomnia may not be much of a problem for most people. But if insomnia persists for days and has an impact on the way you feel during the day, you should think about speaking to your doctor.”

This is the third in a series about the stress-busting effects of three things: exercise, good nutrition and sleep.

An interesting and important fact is that these three have been proved to also be beneficial for depression, heart health, diabetes, general well-being ... the list goes on

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