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Midday Pick-Me-Up

Well-Planned Naps Boost Brainpower

by Lane Vail

Sleep, along with nutrition and exercise, shapes the backbone of overall health, yet 40 percent of Americans get an insufficient amount, according to a recent Gallup survey, and the potential health risks are considerable. “Sleep deprivation affects every organ system and disease state,” and is associated with higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, cancer and mortality, says Michael Breus, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Scottsdale, Arizona, and founder of *TheSleepDoctor.com*.

“It’s best to get seven to eight hours of sleep in one big block at nighttime,” counsels Breus. Yet the circadian rhythm dictates two peaks of sleepiness every 24 hours—one in the middle of the night and another 12 hours later, says Dr. Lawrence Epstein, director of the sleep medicine program at Boston’s Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Interacting with the circadian rhythm is the homeostatic rhythm, which causes greater sleepiness the longer we’re awake. Both circadian and homeostatic sleepiness elevate by mid-afternoon, resulting in the familiar 4 p.m. slump. Siesta cultures split sleep, notes Epstein, slightly reducing nighttime sleep, but devoting time midday to nap.

“Naps are a double-edged sword,” observes Epstein. While they help

relieve short-term sleepiness, poorly planned naps can perpetuate an unhealthy cycle of daytime sleepiness and nighttime wakefulness. Stepping outside for 10 minutes of sunlight and fresh air can stamp out sleepiness, says Breus, which is much healthier than reaching for a caffeine jolt or sugary snack.

Be a Better Napper

A study published in the *Journal of Sleep Research* suggests that merely falling asleep may initiate memory processing and cognitive consolidation, helping explain why German scientists found even six-minute naps to be rejuvenating. If substantial daytime sleep is needed to overcome a deficit, strive for 90 to 110 minutes, the length of time needed to complete a full sleep cycle. Here are other practical tips.

Reflect on the rationale. “Boredom, laziness or avoiding work are the wrong reasons to nap,” says Amanda Chan, managing editor for healthy living at *The Huffington Post*, which instituted two cozy nap rooms in its New York headquarters after founder Arianna Huffington collapsed from exhaustion several years ago. A quick pick-me-up to boost mental agility and mood is a reasonable excuse to snooze.

Plan a prophylactic nap. Forestall late afternoon fatigue by napping

between 1 and 3 p.m. Waiting until early evening to nap can interfere with nighttime sleep, advises Epstein.

Embrace darkness, coolness and quietude. Melatonin, “the key that starts the engine of sleep,” is suppressed by even the slightest amount of light, so wear eyeshades, suggests Breus. Keep a blanket and earplugs handy.

Lie down. If a bed or couch is unavailable, try napping on a yoga mat on the floor. A chair should be reclined to support the lower back and avoid straining the neck from “bobblehead” syndrome, says Breus.

Power down. Setting an alarm for 10 to 25 minutes allows time for only the first two sleep stages: falling asleep and light sleep. Breus explains that sleeping longer than 25 minutes triggers deep sleep, from which waking results in sleep inertia, or grogginess, that impairs mood, decision-making and motor skills.

Napping at Work

While many progressive businesses such as Google, Apple and Zappos permit or even promote workplace napping, most companies are still skeptical. “We live in a culture that minimizes the importance of sleep,” comments Epstein. “We prize productivity and think it shows worker loyalty to put in excessive amounts of time.”

Ironically, mounting research suggests that napping may boost the brainpower needed to function at peak performance. A recent study found

“Sleep is never a waste of time if it’s helpful.”

~ Dr. Michael Breus

that nightshift air-traffic controllers that napped for 19 minutes showed better vigilance and reaction times than non-nappers. Other documented benefits include better concentration, memory and creativity.

Seek out a sleep sanctuary at work, such as an office with the door closed and blinds drawn, an unused conference room with a couch, or a first-aid office cot, suggests Chan. Another option is to nap in the car, but Breus insists that nappers tell colleagues where they’re going as a precaution. Better yet, bond with a “nap buddy” willing to read nearby during snooze time. “You’re very vulnerable when you’re asleep,” he says. “Be safe.”

If sleeping is not currently condoned in the workplace, consider approaching the human resources department with information on the positive effects of appropriate napping on work performance, says Epstein. Suggest implementing a sleep wellness program, which can offer education on sleep deprivation, techniques to improve sleep and individual screening for sleep disorders.

Lane Vail is a freelance writer and blogger at DiscoveringHomemaking.com.



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