WHY WE NEED SLEEP

Thulani DeMarsay, PhD

Do you wake up tired or feel fatigued during the day? Do you experience difficulty performing certain tasks because of tiredness or find yourself nodding off? If so, you are not alone. Nearly half of all Americans lack the amount of sleep they truly need, according to the Better Sleep Council. As a result, people often have difficulty performing daily tasks, and are at a higher risk for developing chronic illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and cancer.

Although there are many reasons why people are not getting enough sleep, many of the causes for sleep deprivation in today's culture are self-imposed. We have 24/7 access to the Internet, smartphones, tablets, texting, gaming, TV and a host of other devices, which can overstimulate the brain and nervous system. In addition, obligations to work and family can also interfere with getting enough sleep.

As a health coach, I am well aware that sleep is essential for our physical, emotional and psychological well-being. However, I did not always appreciate a good night's sleep.

Early in my career, I thought sleeping was for the birds. I routinely worked 14-hour days and pulling all-nighters was seen as a badge of honor among my entrepreneurial group of friends. Like many high achievers, I have had my struggles surrendering to sleep, even though I may have felt tired and had one eye open!

Because of my own tendencies to work a lot, I have had to be very diligent in making sure that I take breaks and get good sleep.

If we do not get restorative sleep, our bodies will eventually break down and we will become ill and unable to accomplish much of anything. For anyone who values productivity, that would be catastrophic!

Why Sleep is Important

According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM),

"Sleep deprivation is a condition in which an individual fails to get enough sleep. Whilst the amount of sleep varies from one individual to another, on an average basis, most adults need about seven to eight hours of sleep every night to feel well rested and alert, teens need an average of about nine hours of sleep every night and children need an average of nine or more hours of sleep to feel active and alert."

Our ability to feel energetic and engaged depends largely on whether we are getting enough sleep or not. In addition, it is also dependent on whether we are sleeping at a time when our body is ready to rest.

We have an internal clock that controls our sleep cycles. This clock follows a 24-hour repeating rhythm called the circadian rhythm, which signals to our body when to sleep and it regulates many functions in the body.

When the circadian rhythm is disrupted, it can adversely affect our health.

Poor quality of sleep interferes with our focus and ability to perform certain tasks efficiently. Sleep deprivation is linked to car crashes, medical errors and a host of occupational blunders. Additionally, insufficient sleep can cause mood swings, anxiety, memory impairment; it can contribute to hypertension and cardiac diseases, obesity, depression, and so forth.

How Sleeping Improves Wellness

Here are 7 health benefits associated with quality sleep

1. Sleep helps reduce depression

A lack of sleep impacts your body's serotonin levels, and increases your risk for depression. Serotonin is an important neurotransmitter that affects your happiness and well-being, as well as bowel function, mood, and sexual function.

If you are currently suffering from depression, aim for at least 8 or 9 hours of sleep per night to boost serotonin and naturally reduce depression.

2. Sleep helps reduce stress

Stress isn't always mental; when your body lacks sleep, it enters a state of stress, which results in higher blood pressure and increased production of the stress hormone, cortisol.

A spike in cortisol can make you feel more anxious and stressed, and interferes with the rest of your body's hormone balance. When you're feeling stressed, make sleep a priority to naturally reduce stress and regulate hormones.

3. Sleep repairs your body

As your body sleeps, it produces human growth hormone (HGH), which supports restoration, good bone and muscle health, and slows down the aging process.

Sleep also helps repair your nervous system and aids in the production of melatonin -- a sleep hormone that strengthens your immune system and reduces the risk for cancer and other diseases.

Additionally, sleep boosts blood flow and improves your skin and complexion, which is why some people refer to it as beauty sleep!

4. Sleep promotes weight loss

Your metabolism often increases during deep sleep, which can help you maintain a healthy weight and stave off weight gain and obesity. Sleep also helps regulate hunger hormones, ghrelin and leptin to prevent you from overeating and craving unhealthy foods. If you're currently struggling with losing weight, try getting more sleep to aid in your weight-loss efforts.

5. Sleep helps fight inflammation

Since sleep helps boost immune system function, getting more sleep helps maintain your white blood cell count to repair and strengthen your body's defense system. The more sleep you get, the more resistant you'll be to infection and illness.

6. Sleep promotes good heart health

Considering the lack of sleep is linked to stress and high blood pressure, your risk for stroke and heart disease increases when you fail to get enough sleep. To reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease, exercise regularly and eat heart-healthy foods, then top off your day with 8 to 9 hours of restful sleep.

7. Sleep helps maintain hormone balance

Like most animal species, humans are diurnal, which means our bodies are designed to function optimally during the day, and rest at night.

This type of sleep pattern helps regulate our body's natural circadian rhythm, which in turn, helps regulate all our hormones.

For example, cortisol and adrenaline naturally decrease at bedtime to help us feel more relaxed. Sleep helps maintain fertility hormones and menstrual cycle, your mood, your hunger, and much more for optimal body function.

Below are some tips and strategies you can use to get a good night's sleep.

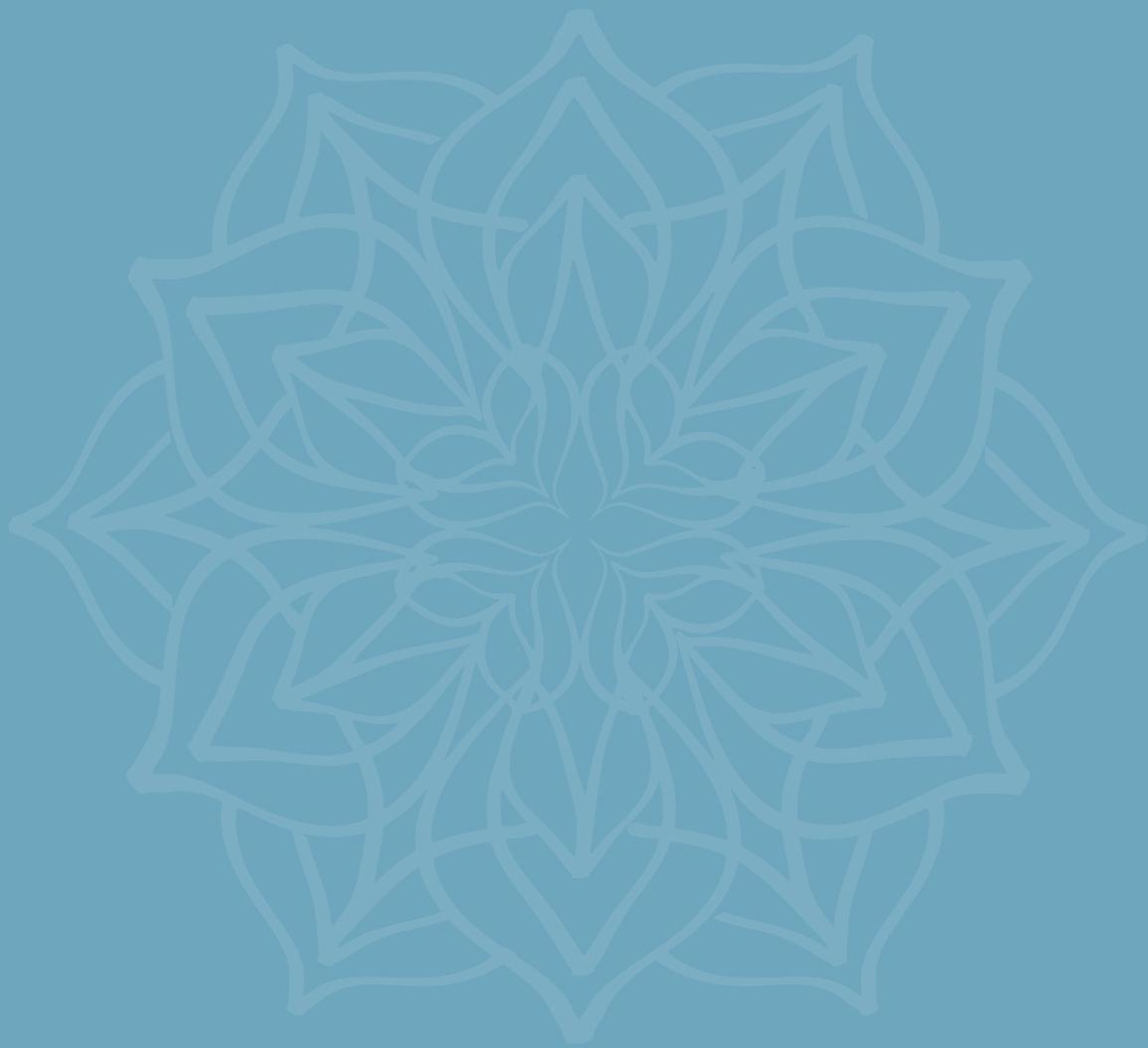### Getting a Good Night's Sleep – Strategies and Tips

- Remove or turn off all electronic devices in your bedroom. If you must keep your cell phone turned on, do not sleep next to it.

- Do not eat 3- hours before bed.

- Try to abstain from caffeinated beverages or limit to day time only.

- Make an effort to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.

- Do not ignore tiredness. It is a signal from your body that your body needs rest.

- When you are not tired, do not go near your bed.

- Try to get energy from natural sources such as the sun, healthy food & herbal teas.

- Improve your sleep environment. You are most likely to get a good night's sleep if your bedroom feels more peaceful and comfortable.

If you have had difficulty sleeping for more than 3-months, I would suggest a visit to your PCP to make sure there isn't anything medically going on.

I hope you find these tips helpful!

Yours in Health,
Thulani

THULANI.COM