

MISSING SLEEP? DON'T BE DEAD TIRED

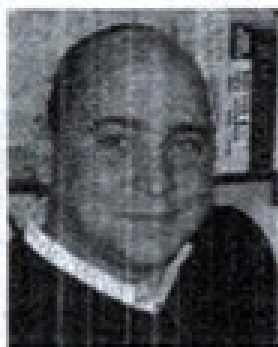
(PART I)

By Dr. Derek Conte

Fatigue can kill you. Lack of sleep can cause depression, obesity, mental derangement, diabetes and heart disease. We all know without being told that getting too little sleep will affect us negatively and we've all experienced that lack of sharpness or moodiness when we are sleep-deprived. But could we perceive the deeper damage lack of sleep can do to us? Probably not. How is it that sleep-deprivation indeed causes serious illness? Recently, Naked Science presented the show, Dead Tired, on the NATGEO channel. The findings were so compelling I wanted to share them with our readers, in two installments.

Sleep repairs and reboots the body and the mind. There are two basic parts of sleep --- and we need both: Deep sleep (or non-REM) sleep, to heal the body, and shallow sleep (or REM) sleep to heal the mind. REM and non-REM sleep alternate about every 45 minutes, the deepest sleep coming earlier in the night. REM refers to Rapid Eye Movement and is the period during which we dream. Why do we dream? We dream to solidify and integrate learned information and to solve problems. It is a hard-wired, primal phenomenon and essential to our future survival. Imagine not being able to learn language or remember the tough lessons of life! In fact, if we do not allow ourselves to dream by taking the time to sleep, the brain will force dreams upon us while we are awake! (More on this next month)

When we lose sleep we lose short-term memory, reaction speed, attentiveness and sharpness of discrimination. After 16 hours without sleep our motor skills resemble a person with a blood/alcohol level of .08 (legally intoxicated) and can experience what is known as a "micro sleep", where



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the brain shuts down without warning for 3-15 seconds of 'rest', during which time we are literally unconscious. Many of us accept this as part of a busy life, but this can be exceedingly dangerous to us and others.

In the USA, 250,000 people fall asleep at the wheel while driving every day. "Drowsy driving" causes 1 in 4 accidents and cause 1,500 deaths per year. How can they tell? The gentle angle of drift from the road made by the tires in the grass or dirt before the impact is consistent with someone gradually dozing off at the wheel.

Another sleep-deprived state is called "reverie", a sleep-walking state of random thoughts drifting from one part of the brain to another producing gibberish of non-sensical speech when we are profoundly fatigued.

We make 10x more mistakes on too little sleep. In one major Canadian city, 1 in 5 medical interns who worked 100 hours per week reported making mistakes that injured a patient, and 1 in 20 reported making a mistake when tired that actually killed a patient. I hasten to add here: it's not the doctor; it's the lack of sleep! Despite their superb discipline, good intentions and best efforts to save lives, they cannot push back the need for sleep indefinitely - nor can we. It is estimated that we get about 90 minutes less sleep per day than our relatives 100 years ago. In an optimal 8 hour period, that is a loss of about 18%. Wouldn't you love to have that time back every morning when the alarm rings? (Next month: the pathological consequences of sleep deprivation from Naked Science)

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