



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Key to Getting a Good Night's Sleep and Benefitting From It

By Guest Author: Sandra Thébaud, PhD

Sleep is so vital that, even when mankind was living in caves without the protection of doors or alarms and vulnerable to predators, we slept. We spend one-third of our lives asleep. Why? The field of biology is still unable to answer the question of *why* we sleep. We believe sleep is restorative, but what does it restore? Some studies suggest that there is a depletion of glycogen (one of the sources of fuel for your brain) during wake that gets replenished while sleeping.¹

But, sleep doesn't just affect your brain. It affects your entire physiology. Anyone who finds it difficult to get 7-8 hours of sleep on a regular basis, has trouble falling asleep or consistently wakes up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep understands the critical role sleep plays in keeping us mentally, physically and emotionally sound. Lawyers, who are one of the most sleep deprived of all professionals, certainly know this.² Most attorneys start a pattern of sleep deprivation even before practicing law (pulling all-nighters in law school, stressing about the bar exam). Once the practice of law begins, the stress continues as attorneys are pressured to meet deadlines, worry about cases, and stay up at night strategizing and planning. The practice of law, however, demands a high level of mental focus and emotional resiliency to stress, thus making sleep especially important for attorneys.

What Is Sleep Anyway?

Sleep is more complicated than just being the opposite of awake. Sleep has a well-organized structure to it and occurs in a cyclical pattern. First of all, sleep is defined by electroencephalographic (EEG) measures and is divided into two types. The first type is called REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. It is characterized, as its name suggests, by rapid movements of the eyes under the eye lids and usually indicates that the sleeper is currently dreaming. The second type is called NREM (non-rapid eye movement) sleep. This type contains 4 stages which can be characterized by specific changes in brain wave activity. It is also a non-dreaming state.

¹ Benington, J.H. & Heller, H.C. "Restoration of Brain Energy Metabolism as the Function of Sleep." *Progress in Neurobiology* 45 (1995): 347-360

² Cassens Weiss, Debra. "Law Is Second Most Sleep Deprived Profession, Federal Survey Finds." (Feb. 27, 2012) http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/law_is_second-most_sleep_deprived_profession_federal_survey_finds/

Here's how it works. After feeling sleepy and going to bed, you enter stage 1 (as defined by EEG brain wave activity). This is a very light sleep that lasts only a few minutes. Next is stage 2, which most people would recognize as being asleep. After several minutes, you move into stages 3 and 4. These stages are distinguished from stages 1 and 2 by specific EEG brain waves. As far as you're concerned, it's still sleep. By now, you've been asleep for approximately 90 minutes and are about to enter your first REM period. This will be the shortest REM period of the night – about 5-15 minutes. REM periods get longer and longer after every 90 minute cycle. Unless someone wakes you right now, it's unlikely you'll remember this dream. After this REM period, you'll start the cycle all over again beginning with stage 2. If there's any noise in your environment, you may wake up. Otherwise, you'll progress to stages 3 and 4. Once another 90 minutes has gone by, you'll enter another REM period. You'll keep cycling back through stage 2, then 3, then 4 and REM approximately every 90 minutes with each REM period taking up more and more of that time until you awaken for the day.

Strange But True Facts About Sleep You Should Keep In Mind

- Many drugs and medications can affect your ability to get a restorative night's sleep.
- Alcohol may make you fall asleep faster but it disrupts the structure of sleep making it more likely that your sleep will be shorter and less restorative.
- Caffeine has a half-life of 3-7 hours. That means half of the caffeine you ingested is still in your system 3 – 7 hours later. When was your last ingestion of caffeine?
- If you're a smoker, your body goes through withdrawal at night and can disrupt your system enough to wake you in the night without you realizing why.
- Unless you live in the middle of nowhere, there's always occasional noise outside. Most people wake up around 7 times a night but it's so brief that they don't remember it.
- If you pull an all-nighter (or more than one), at best you'll recover 25-30% of lost sleep by sleeping in on the weekends.

Almost everyone has experienced an occasional poor night's sleep. It's normal. If you don't stress out about it, it remains a temporary experience. You will easily bounce back from any physiological consequences as well. However, studies on chronic sleep deprivation show permanent changes to health status in controlled animal studies that could reflect

similar permanent health changes in adults (i.e. weight gain, decreased immune functioning).³

Your Subconscious Is The Key To A Good Night's Sleep

There are many things that you can do to improve your sleep. For example, avoid caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, heavy meals and exercise at least 4 hours before bedtime. Minimize noise, light and excessive temperature at night. Do not take naps during the day and try to wake at the same time every day. But what do you do if you've been suffering from poor sleep for a very long time? Most people with poor sleep have been tolerating it for years. For sleep therapy to be effective, it must include a cognitive restructuring of your beliefs around sleep. The difference between people who sleep well and those who don't is in their minds. People who sleep well think differently than people who don't. People who have trouble sleeping have beliefs such as:

- The older you get, the less sleep you get
- If I don't get a good night's sleep, I'll be a wreck the next day
- I should be able to fall asleep in minutes
- I can't get a good night's sleep without a sleeping pill
- I just don't sleep well

These beliefs are not exactly accurate. For example,

- Not all older people have trouble sleeping
- It's possible to function just fine on a poor night's sleep
- People vary in how fast they fall asleep
- Your body knows how to sleep; it just needs to relearn how
- Poor sleep is neither a personality characteristic nor part of your identity unless you make it so

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is usually the non-medical treatment of choice for insomnia. People who sleep well do so because they don't have beliefs that contribute to poor sleep. This is what makes the cognitive portion of sleep therapy (CBT) so vital. No sleep restructuring program is complete without a restructuring of your beliefs about sleep.

³ Everson, C.A. & Szabo, A. "Repeated Exposure to Severely Limited Sleep Results in Distinctive and Persistent Physiological Imbalance in Rats." *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 8 (2011): e22987

In one of many studies comparing CBT to placebo for patients with primary insomnia, CBT helped improve NREM sleep much more rapidly than a placebo.⁴⁵⁶

Just How Powerful Is Your Mind?

The mind-body connection is not just lip service. Studies on the “placebo effect” prove that the mind has power over our ability to heal. Every thought and emotion you experience has a corresponding neurochemical and hormonal output. Your subconscious beliefs and their corresponding neurochemical and hormonal outputs influence how you sleep. In the early 1900s, Émile Coué, a French pharmacist, believed that our imaginations were more powerful than medication. He noticed how, when someone said that a certain stressful incident was bound to give them a headache, that person actually ended up with a headache. He believed that if people could talk themselves into getting sick, then they could talk themselves into becoming well. So, when he gave his patients medicine, he told them how well it worked for the symptoms his patients suffered from. He also noticed that his patients’ symptoms improved more when he praised the medicine he was giving them rather than when he didn’t. He began instructing his patients to tell themselves, “Every day in every way, I am getting better and better.” He had them repeat this phrase over and over again in a relaxed state every day. And many of his patients got better!

If you believe that poor sleep is a part of your nature, a function of age or something only a sleeping pill can help you avoid, then your body will react to these beliefs and make them true for you.

In Summary

Imagine if you could access the limiting beliefs in your subconscious mind and change them. You would be able to improve your sleep (or any other aspect of your life). Imagine if you chose to stop using temporary medical solutions and deal with the root cause of your sleep problems.

The good news is you don’t need willpower or determination to change your subconscious beliefs.

Start by paying attention to the words you use when you talk about your lack of sleep to others. Pay attention to what you tell yourself about sleep before bed, during the night and

⁴ Krystal, A.D. & Edinger, J.D. “Sleep EEG Predictors and Correlates of the Response to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia.” *Sleep* 33 (2010): 669-677.

⁵ Siebern, A.T. & Manber, R. “Insomnia and Its Effective Non-Pharmacological Treatment.” *Medical Clinics of North America* 94 (2010): 581-591.

⁶ Siebern, A.T., Suh, S. & Nowakowski, S. “Non-Pharmacological Treatment of Insomnia.” *Neurotherapeutics* 9, no. 4 (2012): 717-727.

when you wake up. Are those beliefs true? Or is your belief that they're true creating a self-fulfilling prophecy? Question your beliefs so that they have less power over you. Sleeping pills are an acceptable short term solution. Sleep hygiene rules are a great short term solution. Changing your beliefs is the only long term solution.

Is it necessary to struggle to improve your sleep? Only when you fail to realize that it's your subconscious beliefs that you're really struggling against. Like most things, getting more or better quality sleep can be easier than you think. What do you have to lose? A good night's sleep. What do you have to gain? Many a good night's sleep!

About the Author



Dr. Sandra Thébaud is a Psychologist and PSYCH-K practitioner. After 20 years as a psychologist, she now helps people access and shift limiting subconscious beliefs in a fraction of the time traditional psychotherapy takes. She is also the author of *The Art of Loving Life* and *The Young Person's Ultimate Guide to Managing Stress and Navigating Life*. Both books are available on Amazon. You can reach Sandra at 720-378-8080 or learn more at www.ArtofLovingLife.com.

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