

Sleep: Chief Nourisher in Life's Feast

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“Now, blessings light on him that first invented sleep! It covers a man all over, thoughts and all, like a cloak; it is meat for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, heat for the cold, and cold for the hot. It is the current coin that purchases all the pleasures of the world cheap, and the balance that sets the king and the shepherd, the fool and the wise man, even.”
~Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 1605.

Our society has mixed feelings about sleep. In our zeal to achieve, to learn, and to do more, sleep is a casualty. We know the value of sleep, especially the clarity of mind and improved physical performance that come with it. And yet it is one of the first sacrifices we make at the altar of modern success, both as adults and, perhaps more damagingly, for our children. Just like our sleeping patterns, our views on sleep vary. So here, humbly offered, are some of my thoughts on the topic, informed by some reading, my own sleep struggles, observing my teenagers, and the children of others.

Many teenagers wear their lack of sleep as a badge of honor. They boast of how little sleep they are getting, how busy they are and how many activities they are packing into their lives. One of my favorite high school students goes as far as to call sleeping a waste of time in her frenetic world. And who are their models in this regard? We adults!

It seems pretty clear the teenage years require more sleep than anyone but newborns. When their world allowed, my teens had no problem sleeping for more than thirteen hours. Sometimes they slept so long I worried about what they should be doing instead. These times of marathon sleeping followed busy school weeks, but not always. I was consistently amazed and often unnaturally distressed with how “unproductive” my children could be when their lives slowed down enough to allow them to rest.

I once heard a talk about difficult conversations and the speaker mentioned HALTING before taking things on – figuring out whether you or the person you were confronting was Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. Our decision-making ability is so impaired by fatigue. Teenagers, with their impulsivity and developing moral compasses, are particularly vulnerable to the ravages of sleep deprivation.

Perhaps it is because I am growing older and moving slower; I enjoy a good night’s sleep and acknowledge its benefits more than ever. I am gentler to those whom I love, more patient with those with whom I struggle, and a considerably better listener and problem solver if I am rested.

Different people need different amounts of sleep and sleep differently. I know many colleagues who can function well on four or five hours of sleep and others who are “worthless” with less than eight. But I don’t know any teenagers who can make it without sufficient sleep for more than a few days.

While it sometimes made for stressful nights, there were many rewards for ensuring my kids went to sleep at a decent hour, turned off the computer, and worked productively on their homework so that sleep could be, what Shakespeare called, “great nature's second course, chief nourisher in life's feast.”

I encourage you to allow your student the benefits of sleep. Some of my fondest and most vivid memories spring forth from those times when I am rested and open to something new and different.

As we head full speed into a new year, consider some good, long nights of sleep and perhaps a few afternoon naps thrown in for good measure in 2016!

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