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Sleep your way to the top

Are you having sleep problems? If you can't sleep then not only is your personal life affected but your performance at work can be damaged too. Not getting a good night's sleep can have a negative impact your health and your wealth. Therese Ryan is one of Ireland's leading Stress management and Wellbeing experts. She gives her advice on how to restore your sleep patterns.



It is a very modern dilemma. We know we are tired, we know we want to sleep, we know but we just can't.

Research suggests that 45% of Irish people suffer from mild to moderate insomnia and 7% suffer from full-blown insomnia.

So what is going wrong?

Performing in the modern business environment can be tough, long hours, tight deadlines and long commutes. But nobody ever tells us how to sustain our mental and physical energy so we can do it all. That is where the role of true performance management comes into play. When I work with business client, I review what they are doing to sustain the mental and physical energy and this is where getting a good night's sleep is vital.

According to a recent study by the chemist chain Boots the average employee loses 151 minutes a day through tiredness. If you are determined to accelerate to the top of your career then nothing will slam on the brakes like losing two and half hours out of your working day.

So how has sleep become such a problem?

Well, our modern, driven, lifestyles have created lots of reasons not to sleep. We no longer prioritize this basic need. After all, there are more opportunities, more entertainment and more leisure. The problem is this has gone beyond mere tiredness; this acceptance is now costing people their jobs and lives. One of the world's leading sleep expert's Professor William Dement of Stanford University, claims we are now in the middle of a 'pandemic of fatigue'.

Our way in Ireland of dealing with the perpetual cycle of tiredness is to drink more coffee, more stimulant drinks and to just accept that this is how life is.

So what is fuelling this perpetual cycle of wakefulness? Are our beliefs about sleep affecting us? Some of the more common sleep myths are that by just being present at work you are performing, we can train our bodies to do without sleep, sleep deprivation can't kill you and that sleep is a waste of time and serves no real purpose. Sleep is for the weak. You snooze, you lose.

Let's just have a look at some of these beliefs and see if they stand up to close examination.

1. Being present at work means that you are performing

People have confused performance with presence. Only a fool believes that someone is able to perform at their full capacity when the tank is half full. It's simply not true that every bit of extra work is going to be great work, or even acceptable work.

2. We can train our bodies to do without sleep

Unfortunately our body cannot do without sleep. A study by the University of California in San Diego revealed that brain activity is altered when deprived of sleep and that lack of sleep does adversely affect the brain's ability to function as required.

3. Sleep deprivation cannot kill you?

If a slight insufficiency of sleep makes us feel unwell, would a prolonged one kill us? Studies by A Russian Scientist Marie de Manaceiene in late nineteenth century identified that sleep was more important than food or water, adult dogs that were deprived of sleep all died after 9-12 days regardless of how much food they ate. There's a reason why sleep deprivation is known to be one of the most effective forms of torture. Sleep deprivation really can kill you.

4. Sleep is a waste of time

I recall working with a group of high achievers who said that 'sleep was a waste of time' ...'that there so much to do that sleep just gets in the way'. However they were all frustrated as they felt that they had to work longer hours to get the same amount of work done. This misconception about sleep was their problem. However they are not alone in believing this. "You snooze, you lose" – as if anyone who sleeps at all is somehow failing. Sleep is so vital, sustaining us that we have to start prioritising it and realise that in order to be productive you have to be active. In order to be active you have to have the energy from within. If you want the hours in the office to work, you need the hours of sleep to make them count. Otherwise, you're just wasting your time, and your business' time.

5. Sleep is for the weak

Many people in Ireland equate exhaustion with the signs of success and achievement however the truth is otherwise. The simple truth is that lack of sleep makes us stupid and reckless. That's why the NRA is running those adverts about driver tiredness; tired people run silly risks, and people die as a result. And if it's not good for your driving, how can it be good for assessing the choices you take and risks you must run in your business life?

If these are the myths about sleep then what are the truths you need to understand. They are; why do we need to sleep? How many hours sleep do I need to try and get? How will lack of sleep affect my work performance? What are the symptoms of sleep deprivation?

Why do we need to sleep?

Firstly the secret to business performance is mental ability and this is sustained by the brain's ability to function which is supported by sleep. Sleep is needed to regenerate certain parts of the body, especially the brain, so that it may continue to function optimally and when we are sleep deprived our brain waves become unbalanced. This affects our sleep cycle. This in turn affects our feelings and performance when awake.

How many hours sleep do I need to try and get?

It is recommended that 8 hours of sleep will restore the body, getting it ready for the next day's challenges. However as our lives change so do our way of sleeping/resting. For example in some cultures, total sleep often is divided into an overnight sleep period of 6-7 hours and a mid-afternoon nap of 1-2 hours. We have to alter

our perception of acquiring rest. The most important thing is that you prioritize the need to catch up on your sleep during the week or at weekend. Fit it in when and where you can.

How will lack of sleep affect my work performance?

A poor night's sleep may just leave you tired but prolonged sleep disruption - what we call long-term tiredness - can cause poor concentration, memory loss, depression, traffic accidents and, in extreme cases, heart disease, kidney failure and impaired immune systems. When you are tired all the time you are more prone to accidents than someone who has had a great night sleep. Research has found that speed and accuracy is undermined by sleep deprivation. Sleep deprived people do not perform as well on tests as fully rested subjects. This was confirmed by Carlyle Smith, professor of Psychology at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario who found that students who studied hard all week and then stayed up all night partying on the weekend lost as much as 30% of what they had learned during the week.

By contrast, a good night's sleep allows our body to function at a slower, restful pace. This allows the body to repair and restore itself. Sleep enables the central nervous system, which is the electric circuit board of your body, to relax. This helps us to concentrate, worry less and supports us to manage life challenges better. Lack of sleep can make us feel depressed which in turn affects motivation.

What are the symptoms of sleep deprivation?

In my work I often see the following as directly linked to lack of sleep. However what I have noticed is that once the cause to the symptom of sleep deprivation is addressed, then the symptoms do dissipate: The short term sleep deprivation symptoms which I have observed in clients are

- Irritable
- Accident prone
- Mood Swings
- Missed deadlines
- Skin rashes
- Sluggish digestive system - Indigestion
- Craving sugary, high energy foods, - chocolate, fast food
- Increase in caffeine intake – coffee, tea, soft drinks,
- Increase in alcohol intake – nightcaps, etc.
- Feeling down – constant sadness
- Feeling empty – loss of focus or vision
- Indecisive - Unable to make decisions
- Doubting one's ability
- Increased in negative self talk

If sleep deprivation is not managed and dealt with it will develop in Long Term Sleep Deprivation, where the person will develop insomnia. The health risks associated with this are heart disease and depression and it can result in a person experiencing hallucinations.

Commonly asked Questions regarding Sleep

1. Does alcohol help you sleep?

People are resorting to the few drinks to help them switch off; however a drink can become a bottle very quickly and is not a long-term remedy. Alcohol disturbs brain patterns which results in unsettled sleep not only that but alcohol dulls the mind and fills the body full of toxins and will make you sluggish on the job which undermines job performance. What I advise is to cut down on your alcohol intake and seek out other ways to relax. The essence of being a professional is knowing what you are good at and knowing when you need support. Remember if you need support the best thing to do is seek professional help.

2. How do sleeping tablets affect job performance?

What we need to appreciate about medication is that it is a short term solution that only relieves the symptoms of unrest. However medication can undermine job performance as it dulls the body resulting in drowsiness during the day. Being alert and functioning is essential to performing so the important thing is to use medication as a short term solution and seek professional help to deal with the cause of unrest.

Sleeping tablets are a short term fix and need to be taken with care. Katie Morgan, British sleep expert says that a problem with sleeping tablets lies in their name. Regardless of brand, 'sleeping tablets' do not promote sleep as much as they suppress consciousness. They're an emergency spare tire; they'll get you to the garage to get it fixed, but that's about it.

So what do you need to do for a good night's sleep?

Turn the phone off

Decide a time at night when you are going to put your phone on silent. Research from ComReg identifies that we are switched on 24/7. With 4 million citizens we have 5 million mobile phones, 886,300 broadband subscribers, 841,000 – digital TV subscribers. If you are going to sleep allow your body/mind to drift into slumber you have to switch off. Put the laptop out of the bedroom, put the phone onto silent and tune out.

I recommend that you turn your phone onto silent at night, if it's important the person will leave a message. Be disciplined with your use of the laptop, remember these devices were developed to make life easier, agree to check your emails by a certain time last things at night (9pm) and then switch off.

Make your Bedroom a Technology Free Zone

It is estimated that we will spend one third of our lives in bed so how come our beds are not longer a place of rest but a place of torture. We go to bed with the intention of resting, hoping that we can put an end to the day. You feel physically wrecked, fall into bed but then the torture starts.

You are awoken from your sleep, mind racing, you toss, you turn, no rest, no sleep, torture, it is dawn and you start another day. All you want to do is be able to switch it off but your mind won't let you.

You need to persuade your mind to let go of the day when it gets into the bedroom, so it can let the body relax into sleep. The simple solution is to firstly make your bedroom and bed a place for sleep and sex only. If you want to create a space where your body and mind can rest than any and all reference to work needs to go. Put it in another room or better still leave it at work.

Take a Power nap

Winston Churchill summed the whole benefits of power naps when he said:

"Don't think you will be doing less work because you sleep during the day. That is a foolish notion held by people with no imagination"

For those who think never napping is toughness and a sign of leadership, it's worth remembering that Churchill stuck to napping all the way through the Second World War, even at the darkest times.

We believe that sleep is to be taken in a single uninterrupted block of seven or eight hours during the night. However, as the demands of our lives change so too does how we sleep. Power naps are a great way of topping up your sleep tank during the day.

People who are advocates of the benefits of sleep and performance are the following daytime nappers: Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Lance Armstrong, Margaret Thatcher, Napoleon Bonaparte, John F Kennedy, Ellen MacArthur and Salvador Dali. It's worth remembering that those who cite Thatcher and Bonaparte as never needing sleep ignore the fact that they topped up their sleep tank in this way all the time. People like Ellen MacArthur doing solo Round-the-World sailing races get specialist training in how to cat-nap

to best effect - it can be that effective at recharging the batteries!

More Good Sleep Tips

- Recognise that you need to sleep, there's no point feeling guilty about it.
- Start saying No to additional demands
- Set a regular schedule to go to bed and get up.
- Get some exercise earlier in the day as exercising before you go to bed stimulates the body which is counter productive to sleep.
- Don't eat, drink alcohol or smoke for 2/3 hours before you go to bed.
- Turn your clock so you can't see it. Clock watching keeps you awake.
- Go to bed early one night a week; give yourself at least an 8 hour sleep. Remember this is your time to recharge the body for the sleep is has missed out in the week already.
- Have a communication free night one night a week – put your phone on silent and take time out from the additional distractions and demands
- Try reading or listening to a relaxation tape at bedtime.

SUMMARY

You can have all the qualifications, ability and will in the world however the key to business performance is been able to sprint when you are required too and knowing when to call it a day. Sleep is essential to the functioning of our body, undermining the need for sleep will undermine your performance. So start prioritizing and start sleeping your way to the top.


-Ends-

Therese Ryan is Ireland leading Stress Management and Wellbeing Expert, director of Renewal Consultants and Head of the International Stress Management Association in Ireland.

She is consulted regularly by both press and media for her advice and opinion on the issue, one such show has been, RTE 1 Health Show 'How long will you Live? 2007 /2008. She works with individuals and Organisations to enhance performance by creating positive change.

Read more about Therese Ryan on www.renewalconsultants.com

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