

Minding Our Sleep Powerhouse

BY ROBIN OAKS

I'm going to make a statement that may sound like heresy, considering that as legal professionals we believe our skillsets, cognitive abilities, and success are measured by what happens while we're awake. However, the truth is that rest and what happens while we're not awake, i.e., sleeping, are critical for our performance, productivity—and sustainability. Getting deep sleep is not just a time for our brain and body to rest, it is when vital maintenance, repair and functioning actively occur.

In *Sacred Rest: Recover Your Life, Renew Your Energy, Restore Your Sanity*, Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith argues that rest needs to be reframed as an essential restorative activity affecting all areas of life: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, environmental, and creative. Dr. Dalton-Smith asks us to evaluate, "What are the things that we can do to pour back into the areas where we feel depleted?" Recognizing what getting "good sleep" means is an important part of answering that question.

This week after feeling jet lagged from my cross-country travels, I was challenged to catch up with work deadlines and pulled a few caffeine-fueled late-nighters. I slept less than five hours several nights in a row, which caused me to feel quite depleted—on many levels. However, far more was at play than my perceived lack of hours in my illusory sleep bank account, because it is not simply the quantity but the quality of sleep that really matters.

Dr. Matthew Walker, a sleep scientist, has researched how getting good quality sleep affects our metabolism, regulates our appetite, maintains our reproduction organs, immune system and cognitive functioning and mental/brain health – and prevents illness (including depression and dementia). In his informative and entertaining Ted Talk¹ (and in his book), he emphasizes how sleep affects our ability to think, learn, memorize, and make logical decisions. He cautions us, "Sleep, unfortunately is not an optional lifestyle luxury, it's a non-negotiable necessity. We can't catch up on sleep. Sleep is not like the bank; you can't accumulate a debt and then hope to pay it off later. Human beings are the only species that deliberately deprive themselves of sleep for no apparent reason."

Among a host of research, Walker cites one study in which people had their sleep restricted to four hours in one night (I recently experienced that each night for several days!). The researchers found that with only one night of sleep deprivation there was not ten percent, not twenty percent, but a whopping seventy (70%) percent **reduction** in natural killer cell activities, which are a vital part of our immunity defense mechanism for preventing disease. In fact, because of the link between sleep deprivation and cancer, the World Health Organization has designated "any form of nighttime work shifts as a probable carcinogen because of a disruption of a person's sleep-wake rhythms."

The disruption of sleep cycles caused by my recent travels across many time zones reminded me that our modern-day advancements in travel and technology are not without their destructive stressors to our health and well-being. In one study, researchers found that when daylight saving time happens in springtime, and we "lose" an hour of sleep, there was a "twenty-four percent increase in heart attacks the following day." Interestingly, when time is adjusted and we "gain" an hour of sleep time in autumn, studies have shown a "twenty-one percent reduction in heart attacks."

Neuroscientists in recent years are discovering more about what's happening in the brain that makes deep sleep so important to cognitive functioning and health. Sleep is characterized by different phases and patterns of neuronal activity. It is believed that several vital functions relating to memory integration, cellular repair, growth hormone regulation, and cognitive functions, such as focus, decision-making, and learning, are affected during the deep sleep phase.

It is in the *slow-wave* brain activity phase of deep sleep that important functions of the glymphatic system occur. The glymphatic system refers to a network of vessels in the brain and fluid exchange that work together in an intricately choreographed process to facilitate the removal of waste products. Harmful neurotoxins (including beta-amyloid believed to be linked to Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease) that have accumulated in the brain each day are cleared out through the movement and interactions of the glymphatic system, which becomes most active mainly during



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deep sleep. I hope this article motivates each of us, in our individual way, to wake up—and recognize how important sleep is to our making a good living and living well.

I recently was introduced by one of our Bar Association board members to a local functional nutritionist, sleep expert, and board-certified health and wellness coach, Shawna Robins. In her book, *Powerful Sleep, Rest Deeply, Repair Your Brain, and Restore Your Life* ², she outlines the importance of “good quality” sleep and how to get it. I asked her to contribute to this article with some valuable insights about sleep and our brain health.

Shawna, what motivated you to help others become aware of the connection between sleep and brain health?

My journey started while I was working with my father, a serial entrepreneur who was in his early 60’s and CEO of a very successful mortgage banking technology company. He called me into his office one day and asked me to read his emails because he couldn’t remember how words were spelled. I had noticed his constant need for a daily afternoon “power nap” for the past few years and his struggle to find his words while speaking to clients, employees, and his board of directors. I asked him what was happening, and he told me he was just so tired all the time. “How many hours do you sleep at night Dad?” I asked him. “Not much,” he said. “Maybe 3-4 hours on a good night.” Two years later I found myself sitting with him across from a neurologist at Keck USC hearing his diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease. He was 62 and we had no family history of Alzheimer’s or dementia. Our lives were rocked at the core.

His lifestyle of many years of poor sleep, high stress, eating the SAD (Standard American Diet) diet predominately made up of processed foods, “non-fat” food and sugar, statin use for high cholesterol and no exercise had inflamed his body and brain to a point of no return. He was forced to sell his company and stop driving and traveling. This spurred him to make important lifestyle adjustments, including changing his mindset, diet, sleep and stress management, which ended up adding 12 important years to his life. Watching him learn and grow after his diagnosis was my inspiration to share knowledge about making small but powerful lifestyle changes that have a big impact on your overall health and quality of life.

What challenges do you hear from the professionals you coach that most affect getting a “good night’s sleep”?

My work with clients has shown me that stress is the number one issue when it comes to negatively impacting their sleep. I share with my clients the cycle of cortisol and show them that if they want to sleep the necessary seven

to nine uninterrupted hours that the brain and body needs to repair itself at night, then you must find ways to make time for daytime stress reduction. This can be a morning workout, doing meditation in your office or car, reading a book or even listening to relaxing music. Anything you enjoy that helps you to unwind for 20-30 min each day. Most people rely on unhealthy stress reduction choices like drinking alcohol, taking “sleep aid” drugs, binge watching TV, online shopping, social media scrolling or eating sweets, which only makes getting the proper sleep even more difficult.

My number one takeaway is this—if you want to sleep well at night, then you need to prioritize it by making better daytime choices with your diet, nutrition, hydration, exercise, and stress reduction. After a few weeks you will see your sleep improve with both length and quality. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Why We Sleep; Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams (2017); Ted Talk https://www.ted.com/talks/matt_walker_sleep_is_your_superpower?trigger=0s
- 2 Download a copy at <https://thirdsparkhealth.com/powerful-sleep/>

Daytime Tips for Optimizing Deep Sleep

- Turn off all electronics in the evening (and reduce your blue light exposure). Try to do something before bedtime that focuses on relaxing your body and quieting down your thinking, such as taking a warm bath with Epsom salts, meditating, doing a body scan or visualization practice or yoga nidra, or listening to soothing, slow music.
- Have your Vitamin D levels checked by your doctor each year. Low Vitamin D levels can cause sleep problems.
- Maintain cool temperatures in your bedroom at night (around 65 degrees, more or less). Sleep scientists contend that your body needs to drop its core temperature by about 2 – 3 degrees Fahrenheit to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- Go to bed at a regular time (optimally by 10:00 p.m.) and wake up around the same time each day, whenever possible. Regularity in sleep-wake cycles make a difference.
- Don't eat or drink anything (including alcohol and sweets) three hours before bedtime, and reduce caffeine intake, especially in the afternoon.
- Sit outside, first thing, in the early morning sunlight for at least 10-15 minutes. Don't just look outside but be outside (this affects your pineal gland), even on cloudy days. This is very important to help regulate—and if you have been sleep-deprived, like I was recently, this practice really works to reset—your sleep-wake cycles.
- Raise awareness with others in your legal work environment about getting good sleep. Consider watching Matt Walker's brief Ted Talk during your next office meeting to spark a well-being in law discussion.

Robin Oaks has been an attorney for nearly forty years, and for twenty-five years has provided legal services focused on independent workplace investigations and mediation. She is certified in and has studied a wide range of healing, emotional intelligence, cognitive fitness, and mind-body practices. She is a well-being consultant and offers confidential professional life coaching sessions for legal professionals seeking to optimize potential, restore balance, and thrive during stressful life changes and challenges. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.