



Every Z Counts: The Importance of Sleep

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“So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.” – Hebrews 4:9-10

Overview

Most people are aware of the associations between periods of extreme sleep loss and significant negative consequences on our physical, cognitive, and psychosocial functioning. The consequences include increased risk of serious conditions such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and depression. However, recent research examines the impact of cutting your sleep short by as little as an hour or two a night – often called partial sleep loss or sleep restriction.¹ This information is surfacing at a time when the quantity and quality of our sleep is being compromised by a variety of factors: from the ever-increasing draw of technology to growing ministerial expectations.

Reflection Questions

- Do you sacrifice sleep on a regular basis? Do you find it impacts your mood and overall effectiveness?
- What are some practical ways to be more mindful of your sleep routine? Are there some simple changes you could make in your daily routine that might improve quantity and quality of sleep?

How many Z's do we need?

- Most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep each night to maintain optimal health.²

How many Z's are we getting?

- A quarter of U.S. adults say they don't get enough sleep at least half of the time.³
- 41 million U.S. workers recently reported getting fewer than 6 hours of sleep a night.⁴

Why does it matter?

There are a variety of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial costs associated with partial sleep loss, such as:^{1, 5}

Physical

- Increased snacking and caloric intake
- Increased inflammatory processes
- Decreased immune response to vaccines
- Decreased glucose tolerance
- Altered timing and amounts of hormones related to growth, stress response, and appetite regulation

Cognitive

- Decreased vigilant attention
- Decreased alertness and response speed
- Decreased verbal learning
- Decreased working memory
- Decreased complex decision-making

Psychosocial

- Increased impatience
- Increased irritability
- Increased pain sensitivity
- Decreased optimism
- Decreased sociability

Why do we need to be especially thoughtful about minding our Z's?

1. *It doesn't take much.*

Many of the consequences of compromised sleep were observed after relatively mild decreases in total sleep duration (1-3 fewer hours a night) for relatively brief periods (several days to weeks).

2. *We are not as aware as we think we are.*

People often underestimate the severity of the cognitive and behavioral impairments they are experiencing during periods of partial sleep loss.

3. *Existing health problems don't help matters.*

Most of the findings about sleep restriction are based on the effects of partial sleep loss on otherwise healthy individuals. If you have existing health problems, they may both contribute to sleep loss and exacerbate the consequences.

4. *The more you lose, the more you lose.*

Many of the negative consequences of partial sleep loss increase in severity as duration of sleep decreases.

5. *It takes more effort to change than maintain.*

It is more difficult to make up for sleep loss than it is to maintain a consistent schedule of adequate sleep. For example, sleeping in on your day off does not typically make up for a significant sleep debt from the rest of the week. You can also alter your biological clock – making it harder to go to sleep some nights and get up early when you need to.

6. *Sleep isn't "in."*

As much as the notion of self-care and maintaining wellness has begun to be integrated into our societal values, it's still not always readily accepted or rewarded by others or even ourselves. Telling your parishioners or fellow priests that you went to bed an hour early to maintain your health doesn't always receive as much affirmation as sacrificing sleep to attend that last-minute committee meeting.

7. *Age doesn't let us off the hook.*

Many people believe that older people need less sleep. Older people don't need less sleep, but they may get less sleep due to changes in quality of their sleep and increased likelihood of having a medical condition that disrupts their sleep.

Additional Resources

To learn practical strategies for improving your sleep, see the following resources:

1. ***Your Guide to Healthy Sleep*** from the National Institutes of Health:
http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/healthy_sleep.htm
2. Guidance on good sleep practices from the National Sleep Foundation:
<http://www.sleepfoundation.org/article/ask-the-expert/sleep-hygiene>
3. ***How to Get a Good Night Sleep*** from the American Psychological Association:
<http://www.apa.org/topics/sleep/why.aspx#>

Sources Cited

- ¹Carpenter, S. (2013). Awakening to sleep. *Monitor On Psychology*, 44 (1), 40-45.
- ²National Sleep Foundation. (2010) How much sleep do we really need? Washington, DC: National Sleep Foundation. Available at <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/article/how-sleep-works>.
- ³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). Perceived insufficient rest or sleep among adults—United States 2008. *MMWR*, 58 (42), 1175–1179.
- ⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). Short sleep duration among workers – United States 2010. *MMWR*, 61(16), 281-285.
- ⁵Banks, S., & Dinges, D. (2007). Behavioral and physiological consequences of sleep restriction. *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 3(5), 519-528.



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