



Sleep: The Swiss army knife of health

It is interesting how, when we are asked how we are, we tend to refer to how much or how little we are sleeping. Assessing our sleeping patterns is a standard way to check the state of our health. It is a reliable barometer of our quality of life.

Deep down we know that to rest is as important to us as food and water. According to Matthew Walker, author of *Why We Sleep*, and head of the Berkeley's Sleep and Neuroimaging Lab in the US, sleep "is the single most effective thing we can do to reset our brain and body health each day – Mother Nature's best effort yet at contra-death." Yet we so often tend to neglect sleep hygiene.

In fact Walker says, we find ourselves amidst not only the Covid 19 pandemic but we are also plagued by a "silent sleep-loss epidemic" that he describes as the "the greatest public health challenge we face in the 21st century."

Thanks industrialisation, urbanisation and our relentless quest for progress, development, distraction and busy-ness, we disregard the importance of slumber. Technological advances of the past century – electricity, computers, cell phones, Internet etc., have made it possible to completely override the natural rhythm of day-night, work-rest. And we have embraced our 'liberation' from nature's constraints, with gusto so much so that we consider sleep an inconvenience, a waste of time, even a luxury we can't afford. We sleep less, have reduced quality of sleep.

A big mistake says Walker. He is of the opinion that one of the reasons is that we do not understand or appreciate the evolutionary purpose of sleep and why we need it. All living organisms need rest. But humans choose to deprive themselves of enough sleep. We are the only ones that do that and as a result we suffer serious repercussions for our physical, mental and emotional health. Even one night of poor sleep – defined as either less than seven consecutive hours or frequent waking – can have negative effects on our health ([Watson et al., 2015](#)). "Sleep affects almost every tissue in our bodies," says Dr. [Michael Twery](#), a sleep expert at NIH. "It affects growth and stress hormones, our immune system, appetite, breathing, blood pressure and cardiovascular health." Research shows that lack of sleep increases the risk for obesity, heart disease and infections and much more. (For more on this topic and effect of sleep deprivation on our wellbeing, Walker's book is a brilliant read).

Then, when we become so sleep deprived that our bodies and minds can't take it anymore, we swing the other way and now we just can't stay awake.

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This is not because we are tired or sleepy but because we are weary, wiped out, wrecked. Being tired is what we feel after strenuous or prolonged activity or at the end of the day. A good night's sleep solves this problem.

But fatigue, *daai is anner levels* as we say in the Cape.

It is an all-absorbing, whole-body and mind weariness, from the moment you drag yourself out of bed with a deep desire to crawl back under the covers until you fall back into bed at night. Experts identify three types of sleep-influenced fatigue:

- **Transient or acute fatigue** brought on by extreme sleep restriction or staying awake for an period over one or two days.
- **Cumulative fatigue** is brought on by repeated mild sleep restriction or staying awake for long periods over a number of days in a row.
- **Circadian fatigue** has to do with disruption of our sleeping patterns and our circadian rhythms or 'biological clock'. Our bodies are highly sensitive exposure to light and the natural day-night cycle. Variations in the natural rhythm cause disruption which lead to problems with getting enough sleep.

Now here it becomes complicated because fatigue may be caused by other factors also and it is important to have a health professional distinguish among sleep disorders, other conditions and a lack of sleep hygiene. I leave the diagnoses up to them.

What I want to lay to rest is the guilt feelings about "sleeping too much" during your break. You had planned to do so much more than you are managing. It is frustrating and it feeds your feelings of guilt for not doing (or being?) enough.

But I want to assure you that catching up on sleep is a thing.

We can actually take steps to recover from a sleep deficit.

Just like we reduce our financial debt faster by paying back more than we usually do, we can get out of the rest red zone by sleeping more. And our subconscious minds know this so when an opportunity presents itself in the form of a holiday, we tackle that sleep debt by ... yes, sleeping!

Research has shown that it can take as many as nine days to eliminate sleep debt and to return our body to its baseline and to reduce the many risks associated with too little good quality sleep.

So go ahead! Sleep, snooze, nap, rest, relax, recover for as long as it takes while you have the opportunity. Banish feelings of guilt and free yourself from the curse of the twenty first human namely thinking that your value lies in doing rather than being. Sleep is medicine.

Sleep is the Swiss army knife of health. When sleep is deficient, there is sickness and disease.

And when sleep is abundant, there is vitality and health.

- Matthew Walker

Keep well and sweet dreams

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