

You Snooze, You...Win? The Evolution of Society's Relationship with Sleep and Napping

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ABSTRACT

Society's relationship with sleep across Western and most cultures continues to evolve and improve. Science now informs us that sleep is integral to health (mental and physical), growth, performance, and all forms of learning. Body systems depend on sleep and (many) have capacities to signal if not coerce sleep to protect us. Of all of the essentials in life: water, food, sleep, sunlight, human contact and movement – it is established that attempting to go without sleep is the deadliest.

Keywords: Sleep; Sleep Deprivation; REM; Non-REM; Neuroplasticity; Consolidation; Glymphatic; Napping; Glymphatic Pump; Consolidation; Sleep Hygiene; Rituals

Introduction

How and when did we pivot from a “you snooze you lose” culture, to one that is seemingly wrapping its arms around the value of sleep? Pop culture has shifted in less than a generation from people wearing a figurative badge about how little sleep they can get by on or sleep that they are not getting because they are too busy...to one that nearly shames the same values that it recently celebrated. We read about the matter-of-fact absolutes regarding sleep in magazines, hear about the same in podcasts, and consume scientific journal articles that are all lining-up about sleep as if this has been so well-known and engrained for decades that sleep is a hard and unified science. While there seems to be a clear parallel between how sleep has been treated with the “badge of busyness” that was once valued and is now out of favour, this article will focus on the facts that we have the sleep and the slightly more controversial topic of napping as each are related to health and performance.

What Defines Sleep, and Napping?

Sleep can be defined as an intentional state of lowered consciousness including body rest, eyes closed. Brinkman, et al. [1] defined sleep as, “...an active state of unconsciousness produced by the body where the brain is in a relative state of rest and is reactive primari-

ly to internal stimulus” [1]. There is very little agreement about the purpose of sleep, with opinions ranging from physiologic/cellular rest (brain and body) for restoration, growth, and repair; to a time to rebuild memories and adjust perceptions in an effort to shape learning and prediction accuracy for future world interactions. The same is largely true for the stages of sleep, the physiologic need for REM sleep, for example, includes theories ranging from a defense mechanism to fend-off invading functions on the visual cortex, to a necessary process that is part of consolidating important facts and events of the day into memories [2,3]. Napping is defined as a brief period of lighter (more wakeful) sleep. Scientifically, a nap can be defined as a short period of sleep, (citations from 10–90 minutes or as wide a range as 5 minutes to 3 hours), taken outside of the main nighttime-based sleep period to improve alertness, reduce sleepiness, and optimize cognitive performance [3-5]. Naps are quite in the scientific community, a point that will be addressed in more detail below.

History of Sleep in Literature, Societal Treatment and the Recent “Why We Sleep”

We have an uncomfortable and vacillating relationship with sleep in society, as depicted by famous writings and sayings. The Greek philosopher Plato was credited as having said, “Asleep, man is useless, he may as well be dead”. Yet William Shakespeare wrote that sleep

is “Nature’s nurse”, a “Balm of hurt minds”, and “Chief nourisher in life’s feast”. Charles Perrault wrote about sleep as a punishment in his 1697, “Sleeping Beauty” and Rip Van Winkle was characterized as a lazy Dutchman when he fell into a decades long slumber (1897). We have a wide range idioms, metaphors, and similes about sleep that reflect our inconsistent value of it in society as well. Some of the most polarizing phrases of speech include, “dead to the world” (uselessness); “sleeping giant” (unrecognized potential); “early bird” (productive) and “sleeping beauty”.

The origins of a single and long bout of sleep being positioned at night may have a physiologic basis related to light, which can then become a culturally-accepted practice that is even genetically encoded (circadian rhythm). These nocturnally-based periods of sleep have been steadily altered and intruded-upon over time with the invention of artificial lights using burnable materials, and still further change (more intrusion) came with electricity, not to mention wireless phones and social media. Through all of this change, why we sleep is becoming increasingly more well understood, due in no small part to the book of the same name, *Why We Sleep*, by UC Berkely professor of neuroscience, Dr. Matthew Walker [6]. With this book and many that have preceded it and come since, there appears to be a resurgence for the societal value of sleep, and understanding of the different health benefits, both direct and indirect, which will be detailed below.

Sleep Quality: Did I (and How Do I) Get a Good Night’s Sleep?

The science of sleep quality has four generally-recognized attributes that can be referred-to using different terms. These attributes include efficiency (time in a resting position v. total time asleep); latency (time to get to sleep from first assuming the resting position), duration, and wake after sleep onset [4,7]. We can measure sleep quality using physiologic measures of respiration, EEG tracking of sleep cycles, a few proxy measures of hormones as well as cognitive performance upon arising, as well as subjective accounts. Sleep hygiene literature informs us that we will be more likely to improve all measures of sleep quality by manipulating variables of food, light, stress, liquid consumption, room temperature, exertion and hydration prior to sleep. Some of these variables need to be given consideration as little as 2 hours prior to a regular bedtime or as much as 8 hours for caffeine [4].

Health Benefits of Sleep

The benefits of sleep as both a preventative and restorative tool are both expanding and coming to a greater consensus. As with most developing sciences, there has been some overreach toward uniformity and retraction, allowing for a wider distribution of “normal”. This has occurred and is occurring still in nutrition and exercise as well. Health benefits emanating from consistent high-quality sleep are not unlike other claims in the recent craze to optimize all-things healthspan. Where something can be sold or profited-from, there will nearly always be claims that are exaggerated. Claims about consistent

high-quality sleep that have been well studied can be cited across every system of the body, from brain to immune, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, genitourinary, hormonal/endocrine, gastrointestinal and integumentary. Experts such as Dr. Matt Walker have suggested that obtaining fewer than six hours of sleep nightly will increase a person’s risk for Alzheimer’s Disease by 200% and cancer by as much as 40% [6]. Chang and colleagues (2025) demonstrated that the practice of working night-shifts for several nights of the week as a regular schedule elevates all-cause mortality by 12-52% [8].

It should be noted that a person can expect to receive local brain health benefits from regular, quality sleep that extend beyond performance. Long term changes in inflammatory markers and a natural “dishwasher-like” cycle of cleansing the brain depend on extended periods of uninterrupted sleep. Non-neuronal cells in the brain known as glial cells help to form a network of tiny pumps that serve to cleanse waste from the eye (Magonino, 1998), and clear alpha-synuclein, beta-amyloid, and tau from the brain [4,9]. These waste products would only abnormally (without the aforementioned pump) accumulate at night. The glial-based pumps are effective in the eye using aqueous humor and throughout the brain and spinal cord, using cerebrospinal fluid respectively as the mediums for this “wash” [4,9,10].

Health Benefits of Napping

Napping has received a very bad wrap, worse than “sleeping-in”. Society has treated napping as being on par with mental weakness, ineptitude, laziness, and more. As our society has evolved in our treatment of both mental health and come to appreciate differences in human needs and preferences, napping has become more accepted. All of these pleasantries aside, napping is yet to earn a scientifically-endorsed agreement on the inherent health benefits. Short term benefits have been more widely accepted in cognitive (impulse control, attention, accuracy) and motor performance as well as in mood regulation (affect, outlook, demeanor) [3]. Naps that are sufficiently-distant from a regular bedtime (> 6 hours by most citations) and are sufficiently short so as to not rob sleep quality that night (estimates range from 8 minutes to 30 minutes), are more well-received in research [3,4]. Granted, still, every person’s lived experiences, capacities, beliefs and preferences are different. The long-term health benefits of consistently napping are controversial enough to only receive a treatment and not a full-coverage at this time. One could read definitive papers that claim both benefits and detriments to long term health profiles as a function of napping in metabolic and cardiovascular profiles alike.

Individualized Preferences, Genetics and Cultural Expectations

While the efforts to offer population guidelines have been well-intentioned, the initial overreach suggesting that everyone needs a minimum of eight to nine hours of sleep per night has been largely modified to seven [4,6,7]. Clearly, there are and should be both cultural, geographic and seasonal variances to sleep that are accounted for these softer ranges/lower expectations. As with most guidelines,

those for sleep are generally helpful, yet not intended to be individualized. It may be appropriate here to re-use the healthcare quote regarding guidelines and trends, that, “Statistics are for populations, they are not for people” [11]. There are some people who genetically may not need as much sleep to experience similar values of restoration. The aptly-named Short Sleeper Syndrome is as you would expect, a genetic predisposition for “needing” less sleep [12]. This is thought to occur on a single gene (DEC2 and ADRB1 being most often cited), with mechanisms affording vastly improved sleep efficiency and reduced sleep latency – falling into a first stage of sleep quickly upon resting. Belief matters. Individual preferences matter. Cultural and family practices will influence identities (“early bird”, “night owl”) and these matter as well. Work constraints and social pressures matter. These variables all influence a person’s sleep routine, preferences, and realities. Geers and colleagues’ 2013 work on belief and the placebo effect are seminal reading here for those interested in a deeper dive [4,13,14].

Shorter-Term Performance (and Learning) Benefits from Sleep

Good sleep quality (as defined above) has the potential to positively support short-term performance gains the next day. Research has proven both psychologic (mental health), cognitive (reaction speed, decision making, divided attention), and physical (endurance, strength and agility) [4,15]. The positive short-term effects on the brain and body can boost performance at work, school, in competitive sports and in both our instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs – meal management, finances, errands) as well as our mobility-related ADLs and ADLs. Everyday life benefits from quality sleep can be experienced in walking, dressing, and self-care, through underpinnings in movement (both motor control and reflexes), dual-task capacity, attentional resources and response time [4,15]. While much of the aforementioned acute benefits of sleep could reinforce what a learner already knew or expected, there is a deeper benefit that may not be as readily apparent or known, through neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity includes a full set of processes that support all forms of learning. Physically, this includes making new connections (synapses) in the brain, making connections more efficient and resilient, improving infrastructure to active brain regions (blood flow), and more.

Functionally, neuroplasticity includes reorganizing the brain’s perceptions regarding a task or environment (schema that influences predictive processing), encoding memories of all types (facts, events and movements), as well as mental health/outlook or self-efficacy. While Kleim and Jones authored their seminal article on neuroplasticity in 2008, identifying 10 principles of neuroplasticity, the pair (and the field) were largely not discussing the benefits of sleep as related to neuroplasticity (a field in its infancy) at that time [16]. Yes, only 18 years ago, the principles of neuroplasticity did not give even a consideration for “sleep matters”. This is being revised with a forthcoming article in pre-press, adding some eight principles to the list – sleep

being key among them [17]. Therapists, coaches, teachers, mentors, supervisors, trainers and activity directors alike are “in the business” of helping people learn. Learning is made more efficient and more effective when learners have had a good night’s sleep (ideally multiple if not consistent) leading up to a time that they are exposed to new information (conference, training, class, practice, session or clinic visit).

This prepares the brain on many levels to be ready to attend-to and encode the new information. That is not where the role and story related to sleep stops. Sleep quality the night of said training, conference or clinic visit is equally important. It is during these cycles of REM and Non-REM sleep that the most meaningful stimuli of the day (facts, movements, episodes/events or interactions) will be consolidated. We “tag” important points and seemingly review, replay, and consolidate – if our time in restful sleep is uninterrupted that night [4]. Finally, the quality of sleep on the night preceding recall is critically important. The upcoming game, driver’s test, quiz, final, job interview or progress examination will be partly a reflection of how well this person slept the night before [4]. Performance in recall and execution depends on quality of sleep, as noted previously and (hopefully), made eminently clearer now. The acute consequences of poor sleep quality are not surprising and may include physical and psychological fatigue, irritability, blunted cognitive and motoric responses, as well as a tendency toward overeating [4,15].

Dreaming about the Future of Sleep – How Perspectives Could Change Further Still

- Do you remember when napping was “only acceptable” for kindergarteners and older individuals?
- Do you recall when napping was considered mentally weak?
- Can you recall when we would take drugs (yes, caffeine is a drug) to keep from feeling sleepy?
- Can you imagine a time that we would see rentable sleep capsules in airports?
- Have you expressed pride in needing very little sleep, or felt shame when hearing about others that need less sleep than you do?

If you were born before 1970, it is likely that you have lived to see all of these things pass, have perpetuated many of them, and are surprised to see others. Personally, this author is guilty of many of these offenses and beliefs. The future of society’s relationship with sleep is likely going to be much healthier than it has been to date. Expect less shame, stigma, and stereotyping. Expect people to be “wearing badges” about their consecutive sleep streaks, rather than their busy life only affording 4 hours per night.

- Expect more support for parents of infants.
- Expect more changes to support the sleep needs of our youth.

- Expect a more even-handed treatment of sleep as a complement for any intense learning, performance and rehabilitative venture - rather than an opportunity to profiteer by fear-mongering, through sleep-aids, and hyperbole.

As a popular TED Talk on neuroplasticity from 2020 concludes, "Neuroplasticity is a terrible thing to waste". Sleep plays a greater role in the equation of neuroplasticity. We know more now than we did six years ago, and expect to have made an even greater leap in the next six [18].

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