

A Good Night's Sleep? What's That?

By Dawn Harner, LCSW-C
Training Coordinator/Counselor
Student Counseling Services

I'm not sure that the words college and sleep should be used in the same sentence. It seems that when students manage their time, sleep is never a priority and is usually one of the first sacrifices they make. Life in college is much different than when you were in high school. Never again will you experience years of a schedule that continually changes and lacks routine. It often seems that as soon as your body and mind have adjusted to your schedule for the fall semester, it is winter term, then a new schedule for spring, and before you know it you are into summer.

Although it may have seemed irrational at the time, there was a purpose to your parents regulating your schedule throughout the years. Routines help us know what to expect and regulate our physical bodies. Although I realize that only a few make it through college without pulling at least one "all nighter", Student Counseling Services would like to provide you with some tips in regards to getting a consistently good nights rest.

- **Go to bed and get up at the same time each day.** Although this may not always be realistic, do your best to keep as close to it as you can. Therefore, even if you have class at 10:00am 3 days a week and no classes until 1:00pm the other two days, get up at 9:00am every day regardless. I realize this initially sounds ridiculous, but if you don't, the days you sleep in will impact your ability to fall asleep that night which will limit the number of hours you are able to sleep before having to get up at 9:00am again. Staying on a consistent schedule will allow your body to regulate itself, fall asleep quicker, and remain in REM sleep for longer periods of time in one night's rest.
- **Adapt a sleep routine for the hour prior to going to sleep.** A consistent healthy routine will help prepare your body for sleeping (which is supposed to be a peaceful, pleasant, and restful time). During this hour, dim your lights. Our bodies release various chemicals depending on brightness. Change into comfortable clothing. This will help you to feel relaxed. Do something low key during this hour. Read a book or magazine, take a hot shower, listen to soothing music, have a cup of decaf chamomile tea, or even some warm milk flavored with cocoa.
- **Make sure your room and especially your bed are familiar, comfortable places.** You are most likely moving into a new room or apartment at the start of the year and it might feel as if you are staying in a hotel. Surround yourself with things that are familiar and provide you comfort. Pictures of your family and friends, your favorite blanket and pillow, or the stuffed animal you've been sleeping with since you were 4.
- **Do not consume caffeine after 4pm.** Caffeine is a stimulant which takes time to clear out of your system. Even though you had Red Bull at 5pm and it is now 11pm, does not necessary mean that the caffeine has completely worn off.

Drinking caffeine in the late afternoon or evening to get through studying or a night class, will also keep you awake at midnight when you are lying in bed trying to fall asleep.

- **If you lie down to go to sleep and 30 minutes later you are still awake, get back out of bed.** The pure frustration of not being able to fall asleep when you want to, can be enough to keep you awake. Get out of bed and do something that still fits into your calming nighttime routine and takes your mind off not sleeping. Then, after about 30 minutes get back in bed and try to go to sleep again.
- **As tempting as it might be, do not nap.** A 20 minute power nap will eventually lead to a two hour nap, which will impact your sleep cycle, REM periods, and your ability to fall asleep that night. This can be a vicious cycle of trying to catch up on sleep, but never feeling well rested due to the lack of quality sleep. Instead, get through the day and then go to bed an hour earlier that night.

Please keep in mind however, that difficulty sleeping can also be a symptom. Therefore, if an inability to sleep or excessive sleeping continues for more than two weeks, we recommended you consult with SCS 410 543-6070 or SHS 410 543-6262 regarding the specifics of your situation.

Posted 1/13/10 TT