

Sleepy Hollows Ethical Thinking

Sleep-deprived workers are less likely to resist temptations to act unethically and lack what one researcher calls ‘moral awareness.’

By **Todd Henneman**

Sleepless nights have a new casualty: ethics. For years, health experts have warned Americans that getting too little sleep puts them at higher risk of diabetes and other health problems.

Now research suggests short nights also contribute to ethical lapses. Sleepy workers are more likely to take credit for someone else’s work, blame a co-worker for their own mistakes or move slowly so they qualify for overtime, among other behaviors.

“Decades ago, people believed that good people do good things and bad people do bad things and never the twain shall meet,” said Christopher Barnes, assistant professor of management at the University of Washington’s Foster School of Business. “Over the past 20 years or so, there is a growing body of research that the same person can be good in some situations and bad in other situations. One of the factors that determines whether you’re good or bad on a given day is how well you slept the night before.”

It stems from sleep’s restorative role. Neuroscientists have found that sleep deprivation affects the prefrontal cortex, which is the region of the brain that helps people control emotions and behaviors. Not getting enough sleep impedes self-control, leading to unethical behaviors.

Sleep-deprived workers act more unethically at two steps, Barnes said. They’re less likely to resist temptations to act unethically, and his most recent research, which will be published in the *Journal of Sleep Research*, shows that they’re lower in “moral awareness.”

Moral awareness is the degree to which people recognize that they or those around them might be about to do something unethical. Someone with high moral awareness thinks about whether they are violating codes of ethics or moral principles. Someone with low moral awareness doesn’t realize it.

Sleeplessness also causes other workplace problems.

Barnes found a 5.6 percent spike in mining injuries on “Sleepy Monday,” the Monday after daylight saving time, when workers got 40 minutes less sleep on average. Other studies have found that 24 hours without sleep or a week of sleeping five hours a night leads to a performance impairment equivalent to having a blood-alcohol level of 0.05 to 0.1 percent.



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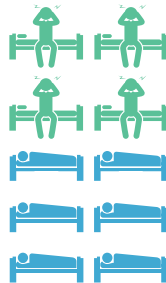
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Source: Various studies

“Small amounts of lost sleep matter on outcomes we should care about,” he said.

Seven to eight hours of sleep is enough for healthy adults, according to Dr. Timothy Morgenthaler of the Mayo Clinic.

But 4 in 10 Americans get less than the recommended amount of sleep nightly, compared with just 11 percent who did in 1942, according to Gallup data. Earlier this year, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention called insufficient sleep “a public health epidemic.”

At the same time, the workweek is growing longer. Full-time employees work an average of 47 hours per week, and almost 4 in 10 say they work at least 50 hours, according to Gallup’s Work and Education Survey.

But research also has found something that seems to mitigate for a sleepless night: caffeine.

Consuming 20 ounces, the equivalent of a Starbucks venti-size coffee, could help sleepy workers regain control, according to a study by professors at the University of Washington, University of Arizona and University of North Carolina. In the study, subjects were kept awake 24 hours and given gum that they didn’t know contained caffeine.

Workplaces should give longer breaks, address problematic employees who may be causing stress, and allow naps, said Michael Christian, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of North Carolina’s Kenan-Flagler Business School.

Naps as short as six minutes have been shown to improve performance, said the University of Washington’s Barnes. Companies from behemoths such as Google Inc. to smaller firms such as design-and-marketing company Quango Inc. offer nap rooms.

And for those wanting to sip coffee in the nap room? Starbucks is making that easier.

CEO Howard Schultz announced in October that the world’s biggest coffee chain will deliver its coffee and other high-end coffee drinks in select markets beginning in the second of half of 2015.

“It’s much more common to sleep five hours a night for a couple of weeks, especially if you have a new baby at home, and that has undesirable effects on our ability to act morally,” Christian said. “There’s more work that needs to be done.” *wf*

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