

Teens, texting and the sleep connection

September 23 2009, By Jackie Burrell

Between their crazy schedules and upside-down circadian rhythms, teens always have been somewhat sleep-deprived. Now technology is making it worse. Teens are not just texting, instant-messaging and surfing Facebook all day; they're sleeping with their cell phones or laptops, too. Or rather, not sleeping. And doctors and parents, many of them raised in an era when phones were attached to walls, are concerned.

"So many teens are having [sleep](#) issues, and parents aren't necessarily regulating the use of the [electronic devices](#) enough," says Margie Ryerson, a Walnut Creek, Calif., therapist who specializes in [adolescent](#) issues. "It's impossible to wind down and relax the body, the mind, the senses and be ready to fall asleep."

The texting doesn't stop, she says, even after Mom and Dad are snoring softly in their beds. One of Ryerson's clients discovered her 17-year-old daughter was sending more than 3,000 text messages per month, many in the wee hours.

Of course, for every obsessive texter, there's a teen, "tween" or college student who simply turns off the phone at bedtime. But even the averages are extraordinary. A 2009 Nielsen study on teens and media found a 566 percent jump in teen texting rates during the past two years. The average teen sent 435 texts a month in early 2007. Now it's 2,899 per month -- 97 a day.

Teens are texting on the bus, in class, at dinner and in bed. It's the bed part that's worrying experts.

A Belgian study published last month found that late-night texting is affecting the sleep cycles of 44 percent of that country's 16-year-olds. Some 21 percent are waking up one to three times a month to answer a [text message](#), according to the Leuven Study on Media and Adolescent Health; it's a weekly occurrence for 11 percent of the teens, and a nightly or every-other-night wake-up call for 12 percent.

"We all know teens don't get enough sleep in general," says San Francisco youth culture expert Anastasia Goodstein. "As long as parents allow teens to have these devices in their bedrooms at night, teens will be tempted to use them. "... Teens would socialize 24/7 if they could -- especially if it's with a girlfriend or boyfriend."

Ryerson calls it the CNN syndrome of teenhood -- round-the-clock reports on breaking news about everything from homework to wardrobe choices to Starbucks cravings.

Norman Constantine worries that the stakes are higher than most parents realize. The director of the Oakland, Calif.-based Public Health Institute's Center for Research on Adolescent Health and Development says sleep deprivation is linked to memory and concentration problems, anxiety and depression, moodiness and hyperactivity.

"Many people assume these problems arise directly from adolescence, which is not really true," he says. "The real issue is sleep deprivation. Late-night texting can certainly make the situation worse. But one has to ask: Are the teens texting because they can't sleep, or are they staying awake because they are texting? We really don't know."

Teens tend to see sleep-deprivation as a "victimless crime," says San Jose psychologist David Marcus. So what parents can do is help them understand cause and effect. Have them go one week doing what they're doing; then have them try getting some phone-free, undisturbed sleep for

a week, and evaluate the differences. Ask, "How's your energy for sports, quizzes and classwork? Your ability to handle conflicts with your friends? How do you really want to treat yourself?"

STAYING CONNECTED

The surge in all-hours texting has been helped by unlimited text-messaging plans, Nielsen researchers say. But it also stems from the fact that a phone is no longer just a communication device; it's a carrier of games, facilitator of research, organizer of schedules and all-around boredom quencher. It's also an alarm clock, hence its location on bedside tables everywhere, including that of Andrew Jones' at home in Alamo, Calif., and at his college quarters at the University of Pennsylvania.

"I keep my phone by my head when I sleep," Jones says, "in case a friend of mine is in trouble and needs me -- whether it's emotionally (that) they need my help or they are in danger. If we didn't have our phones with us 24/7 while on campus, we would miss out on events, activities and even coursework. There are advantages to being constantly connected, but like nearly everything, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing."

What a teen or college student considers an emergency may differ from the standard parental definitions.

Orinda, Calif., mom Robin Fahr has seen the full range of teen texting in her own home. Fahr's daughter, Chelsea, 21, sleeps with her cell phone next to her bed. The University of California at Davis senior tells her mother it's in case a friend has an emergency. "Which could be anything from a middle-of-the-night breakup to needing a ride home from a party," Fahr says, "not exactly the kinds of emergencies we grown-ups are used to ..."

Son Tyler, 18, goes along with late-night texting for a while, then types

"goodnight" and turns off the phone. "While he loves his friends, he loves himself enough to get the sleep he needs," Fahr says. But little brother Jordan, 12, admits he has pulled texting all-nighters. "It's usually only when there's a sleepover going on somewhere, and others are at home, texting," Fahr says.

The psychology behind this constant contact is certainly understandable, Ryerson says. "It comes from wanting to avoid being left out. They won't be considered important and significant in their peer group, if they don't know what's going on. If they're on top of everything, they belong," she says.

It's not limited to the teen crowd either. Jones says there's substantial pressure at the college level, too.

"Since everyone else is always connected," he says, "they expect their peers to constantly be at the same level of connectedness. And when they're not, people rarely go out of their way to keep those less connected informed of what is happening."

SETTING LIMITS

What helps, at least for younger kids, says Danville psychologist Sara Denman, is parental involvement. "If all of their friends are all able to text into the wee hours of the night, it is hard for a middle or high schooler to set the limit themselves," Denman says. "Often they appreciate parents stepping in. "... I encourage parents to set a technology curfew."

Some parents find that cell phones carry their own curfew enforcers -- their batteries have to be recharged. "Many parents have their kids charge the phone and computer in the hall outside of their room, which confirms the curfew is being followed," says Denman.

Some of Ryerson's clients have taken it even farther: "I've actually had parents sleep with (the phones) under their pillow. As parents, we want our kids to be happy, healthy and responsible," she says, "and the most essential prerequisite for achieving balance is to first take care of ourselves physically -- eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep."

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Citation: Teens, texting and the sleep connection (2009, September 23) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-teens-texting.html>

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