

How sleep helps teens deal with social stress

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Wang's study is the first the first to identify the timing in which sleep helps with adolescents cope with stress. Credit: Via Pexels

A new Michigan State University study found that a good night's sleep does adolescents good—beyond helping them stay awake in class. Adequate sleep can help teens navigate challenging social situations.

The study, which focused on ninth grade students, found that [adequate sleep](#) allowed students to cope with discrimination and challenges

associated with ethnic or [racial bias](#). It also helps them problem-solve more effectively and seek [peer support](#) when faced with hardships.

"Findings of this study have important implications," said Yijie Wang, assistant professor of human development and [family studies](#) at MSU. "Understanding how sleep helps adolescents negotiate social challenges may consequently elucidate how promoting sleep may improve adolescent adjustment during [high school](#) and beyond."

Published in *Child Development*, this is the first study to identify the timing in which sleep helps with adolescents cope with stress.

Compared to adults and children, [high school students](#) are particularly at risk for insufficient sleep due to early school times, busy schedules and increased social stressors. The transition to high school also introduces more diversity to their [social environment](#) and relationships.

Via this study, Wang and co-author Tiffany Yip of Fordham University wanted to pinpoint the effect sleep has on coping with discrimination. They found that if a teen has a good night of sleep, they are able to cope with harsh experiences—like discrimination—better.

"This study did not treat sleep as a consequence of discrimination," Wang said. "However, our team did identify the influence of discrimination on same-day sleep in other studies. These studies showed that, on days when adolescents experienced ethnic or racial discrimination, they slept less and also took longer to actually fall asleep."

Participants in the study wore an actigraphy watch, which tracked physical activities in one-minute intervals and determined their sleep-wake state, every day for two weeks. The students were also asked to complete a survey each day before bed, reporting their daytime

experiences such as ethnic or racial discrimination, how they responded to stress and their psychological well-being.

A surprising finding in the study was that peers, not parents, were the immediate support that help adolescents cope with discrimination.

"Compared to parents, peers are likely to be witnessing and involved in adolescents' experiences of ethnic or racial discrimination on a daily basis," Wang said. "As such, they're more of an immediate support that backs up adolescents and comforts them when discrimination occurs."

Still, parents have an important role in helping their children cope with both sleep and [social situations](#). Beyond getting the recommended eight hours, the quality of sleep is just as important. That includes having a regular bedtime, limiting media use and providing a quiet, less crowded sleep environment.

While encouraging good sleep habits in adolescents can be a struggle, said Wang that the benefits of a routine help them cope with the challenges of life in high school and beyond.

"The promotive effect of [sleep](#) is so consistent," Wang said. "It reduces how much adolescents ruminate, it promotes their problem solving and it also helps them to better seek support from their peers."

The research was first published online Oct. 28, 2019 in the journal *Child Development*, and will appear in the forthcoming Sept.-Oct. 2020 print edition.

More information: Yijie Wang et al. Sleep Facilitates Coping: Moderated Mediation of Daily Sleep, Ethnic/Racial Discrimination, Stress Responses, and Adolescent Well-Being, *Child Development* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13324](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13324)

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