

Seeking restorative sleep in the midst of pandemic and beyond

March 22 2021, by Jasmine Geonzon



Credit: Jim Agnew

With the stress of an ongoing international pandemic and the onset of midterms on top of everyday life, sleep represents a critically important time for our minds and bodies to play catch up.

To commemorate World Sleep Day on March 19, W&M News spoke to Eric Garrison about how better [sleep](#) practices are key in maintaining overall health, energy and immunity. Garrison is one of three assistant directors of William & Mary's Office of Health Promotion and a staunch advocate for [restorative sleep](#).

What would you say defines a good, restorative sleep?

Restorative sleep would be where we go to bed at a consistent [time](#), wake up at a consistent time without an [alarm clock](#), unless there's a major adjustment, e.g., to get to the airport or something, and feel that we have the steady energy we need throughout the day. That comes from a combination of sleeping, fueling, training, hydrating, managing stress and being mindful. The longer we sleep, the longer we live.

What benefits come out of consistent rest?

There are so many. I really don't know where to start. From a student perspective, it can help with memory and recall. From an athletic perspective, it can increase performance and help with recovery. In general, whether you're a student, faculty, staff or family member, it will increase your productivity. People who sleep better tend to have better moods, even if there's a mental health challenge that you're facing. If you've got cardiovascular issues, it can help there too. For people who are trying to maintain their cholesterol, blood sugar, and other aspects of a healthy body, it can play a major role in [physical health](#). And finally, I think one of the most important things I could say during the pandemic—this SARS-CoV-2 pandemic—is that it can very much help maintain a healthy immune system.

How can you establish boundaries between your bedroom as a sleep space and not a workspace? How does this apply to people working from home or to students in dorms whose bedroom is their workspace?

Creating boundaries between workspaces and sleep spaces is one of the important things that I can teach or encourage. Unfortunately, in a

university setting, it's one of the hardest to enforce. In an ideal world, we would have a sleeping chamber with nothing but a bed. There are two things beds are for: sleeping and the other more intimate activity. Unless you're doing one of those things, you really shouldn't be in that space. It's very difficult at universities, because we not only sleep in our beds or are intimate in our beds, but this is also where students do their homework and where they lay out our clothes. It serves as their couch when they have friends over, and they watch TV from their beds. Humans do so many things on or in our beds that are not conducive to good sleep, and yes, that includes naps. Naps should occur outside of the bed, because they are not full sleep.

Boundary-wise, one of the things I would recommend is not a physical one, but a chronological one. Treat your sleep time as the most important appointment of your day, and it's not to be borrowed from. For instance, I'm in bed at nine o'clock, and I'm up at five to go to the gym. If anything steals that time from me, it's either an emergency or something else got in the way. I don't say, "You know what? I didn't do the dishes. Let's do them at nine o'clock." One of the most important boundaries is treating your sleep time like an appointment.

What are some indicators you might need to improve your sleep schedule?

No one ever wakes up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. ... We never wake up feeling fully energized. Look at your energy levels throughout the day. Do you have the energy—emotional, physical, and spiritual—to make it through the most important parts of the day? We all have lulls during the day; most of us have a lull before and one after noon. That's naturally the way our body works, as melatonin and serotonin play against each other. I recommend a sleep journal for everybody. Find out when your lulls are, and if you find your lulls are consistently at 10

o'clock in the morning, don't schedule your Fourth Dimensional Geometry class at that time. Plan your lull times for lull work. That might be the time when you read through your physical mail or your non-professional email. It might be when you tidy up the kitchen or do something that does not require a lot of focus. It's important to have the energy to do what you need throughout the day, and that energy needs to taper off at the end. Building energy is like a big Ayers Rock, where you move up slowly, maintain that plateau, and at the end, it should slowly drop off. You do not want to be approaching your sleeping time, feeling highly energized and awake. Likewise, we don't want to use caffeine to start our day feeling over-energized. There needs to be harmony throughout your day.

Let's look at some common sleep beliefs and see if there are any nuggets of truth to them. First, can daytime napping make up for lost sleep during the night?

Napping can make up for a lack of energy or prepare you for something later. Most naps taken between one and three in the afternoon won't affect your nighttime sleep. You can sleep for about 20 to 45 minutes, while a few people sleep a full cycle or 90 minutes. The myth is that I can pull an all-nighter and then take a nap the next day and be fine. There's some truth in that from the sense of bodily restoration—with some healing or recovery for your immune system—but it's not something to rely on consistently. When I was a peer educator at William & Mary back when the Earth's crust was molten and cooling, the belief was you could not make up sleep debt on a weekend. We now know that, with its restorative properties, sleeping in on a Saturday or a Sunday can make up some of your sleep debt, but again it's a plan B.

Another belief: Is there certain, magic number people

should aim to sleep each night?

We used to talk about hours, but now what we're really looking at now is sleep cycles. A sleep cycle lasts 90 minutes, and people need between five and six cycles daily. You can picture one cycle as a hill. You want to wake up at the bottom of a hill, where you're more likely to feel rested, instead of somewhere towards the top of the hill, where you wake up feeling groggy. If people were to set their bedtime according to their cycles, so they wake up at the bottom of the cycle, they would automatically feel more energized. For instance, with my 5 AM awake time, if I'm not asleep at 9:30 PM, I have to wait until 11 PM., i.e., 90 minutes later, so that I awaken at the end of a cycle. There's a great website called SleepyTi.Me that I recommend to everybody. It counts backwards and says if you want to wake up at 5 AM, these are all the times you need to go to bed. This means going to bed at a time that would allow me to wake up at 5 AM feeling quite refreshed. Stop thinking you need seven to nine hours, and aim for five to six full cycles.

What resources are available to members of the William & Mary community struggling with achieving restful sleep?

People can see me, literally and figuratively. They can see me on Zoom or see me in my office, since I'm fully vaccinated. I will see students face-to-face and talk to faculty members and staff. I offer Zoom workshops on how to get a better night's sleep. There's a wonderful "Ways to Flourish" podcast on how to adjust our sleep for daylight savings time or international travel. There's also the National Sleep Foundation, which has a wonderful journal you can print and fill out. Health literacy is very important when it comes to energy management. If you're looking at a website on sleep, and you find that it's brought to you by a wonderful drug company that produces XYZ sleeping

medication, please be wary of that advice. There may be a secondary motivation for them to have this website. There are ways to improve your health literacy by looking at multiple sources, looking at scientifically informed sources, and looking at sources and sponsors, particularly drug organizations and pharmaceutical companies or others you know. Sadly, there may be an ulterior motive for the information they are offering you, when good sleep is as easy as asking an informed person about how to have it. I am always happy to be that person!

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