

New study uncovers how a series of sleep loss impacts mental and physical wellbeing

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All it takes is three consecutive nights of sleep loss to cause your mental and physical well-being to greatly deteriorate. A new study published in *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* looked at the consequences of sleeping

fewer than six hours for eight consecutive nights—the minimum duration of sleep that experts say is necessary to support optimal health in average adults.

Lead author Soomi Lee, assistant professor in the School of Aging Studies at the University of South Florida, found the biggest jump in symptoms appeared after just one night of [sleep loss](#). The number of mental and [physical problems](#) steadily got worse, peaking on day three. At that point, research shows the [human body](#) got relatively used to repeated sleep loss. But that all changed on day six, when participants reported that the severity of physical symptoms was at its worst.

"Many of us think that we can pay our sleep debt on weekends and be more productive on weekdays," Lee said. "However, results from this study show that having just one night of sleep loss can significantly impair your daily functioning."

Data provided by the Midlife in the United States study included nearly 2,000 middle-aged adults who were relatively healthy and well-educated. Among them, 42% had at least one night of sleep loss, sleeping 1 ½ fewer hours than their typical routines. They recorded their mental and physical behaviors in a diary for eight consecutive days, allowing researchers to review how sleep loss causes wear and tear on the body.

Participants reported a pile-up of angry, nervous, lonely, irritable and frustrated feelings as a result of sleep loss. They also experienced more physical symptoms, such as upper respiratory issues, aches, gastrointestinal problems and other health concerns. These [negative feelings](#) and symptoms were continuously elevated throughout consecutive sleep loss days and didn't return to baseline levels unless they had a night sleep of more than six hours.

About one-third of U.S. adults sleep less than six hours per night. Lee

says once that becomes a habit, it's increasingly difficult for your body to fully recover from lack of sleep, continuing the vicious cycle of worsening daily well-being, which could impact one professionally. A previous study led by Lee found losing just 16 minutes of sleep could impact job performance. Her previous findings also show that minor sleep loss can decrease daily mindfulness, which is a critical recourse for managing stress and maintaining healthy routines.

Lee says the best way to maintain a strong daily performance is to set aside more than six hours to sleep every night.

More information: Soomi Lee, Naturally Occurring Consecutive Sleep Loss and Day-to-Day Trajectories of Affective and Physical Well-Being, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/abm/kaab055](https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kaab055)

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