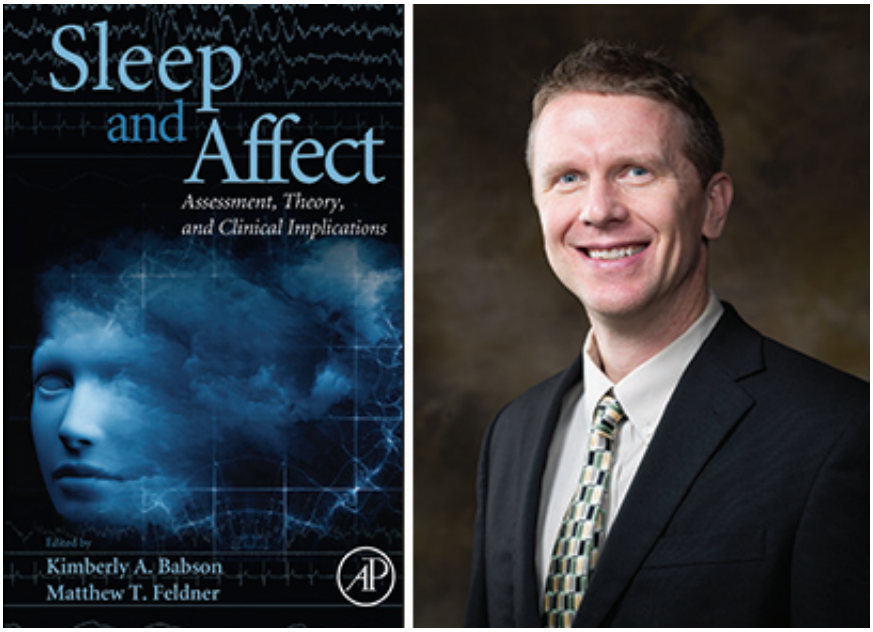
Sleep loss tied to emotional reactions

March 25 2015, by Chris Branam



Matthew T. Feldner, University of Arkansas. Credit: Logan Webster

A person's loss of sleep can be connected to their likelihood of reacting emotionally to a stressful situation.

That is one of the recent findings included in a new book, "Sleep and Affect: Assessment, Theory and Clinical Implications," co-edited by a University of Arkansas psychology professor and his former doctoral student. Affect is a term in psychology that describes a broad range of emotional experiences.

"In our study, we wanted to find out if there was a link between the loss of sleep and our emotional response," said Matthew T. Feldner, a professor of psychology in the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences. "We saw that if a person lost a night of sleep they responded with more emotion to a laboratory 'stressor.' This finding extended previous work that had linked chronic sleep loss to anxiety and mood disorders."

Feldner co-edited Sleep and Affect with Kimberly A. Babson, a health science specialist at the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Menlo Park, California. Babson earned her doctorate in clinical psychology at the University of Arkansas.

Sleep and Affect summarizes research on the interplay of sleep and various components of emotion and affect that are related to mood disorders, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder and depression.

"One of the themes that emerged across these chapters is that certain components of emotion seem particularly linked to sleep," Feldner said. "What we call 'stressors' tend to be more emotionally arousing for people who haven't slept well, and emotional arousal also appears to interfere with sleep quality."

Babson conducted sleep-and-affect studies at the U of A under a National Institutes of Health research training fellowship. That research spurred her's and Feldner's interest in a book that synthesizes the latest research into the interrelationships between sleep and affect.

"We present this information in a way that will help clinicians both assess for sleep problems and problems related to anxiety or mood, when a patient is seeking treatment for one and maybe not the other," he said. "By improving sleep, we might improve our treatments for anxiety problems."

This book also includes the latest findings in neuroscience related to sleep loss. There appear to be effects of sleep loss on the functioning of the emotional regulation circuit of the brain, Feldner said.

"Some of the neurobiological structures that we think are involved in regulating emotional or affective experiences don't seem to function the same after we lose sleep as they do when we are fully rested," he said.

"Sleep and Affect" is published by Elsevier Publishing.

Provided by University of Arkansas

Citation: Sleep loss tied to emotional reactions (2015, March 25) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-03-loss-tied-emotional-reactions.html

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