

Put on the Brakes

You and I will never achieve and sustain true health unless we get adequate daily rest, much of it in the form of restful sleep. When we sleep, our bodies and minds shut down, allowing them to regenerate and heal.

Sleep allows your body to heal and your cells to grow and repair. It also allows your mind to rest and helps your body fight infection. When you are fully rested, you are able to think more clearly and perform better physically. Sleep allows your hormone levels to balance, specifically the hormone serotonin, which is a major player in mood and depression.

The amount of sleep you get also plays a significant role in your ability to stick with a moderate, nutritious diet. According to fitness expert Jorge Cruise: "Lack of sleep ... affects your levels of leptin, the hormone that makes you feel full. When levels are low, you crave sweets such as candy, desserts and even starches. Lack of sleep can also slow your metabolism, which prevents your body from using glucose effectively."

Most of us would be quick to say that we want to eat right and be more energetic and healthy. But how do we expect to accomplish this without making every effort to get a full night's sleep?

Somehow we consider sleep to be an interruption to more valuable activities—even a waste of time. We try all kinds of ways to pump up our energy level with caffeine, drugs and sugar, all the while stubbornly refusing to simply lie down

and rest. We lose our ability to listen to the message our tired bodies are trying to give us.

Unfortunately, the effects of getting too little rest often don't show up for years. Our bodies, which must struggle to repair themselves with insufficient rest, begin to break down little by little.

Like air, water and food, sleep is essential. Without it, we cannot survive. With too little of it, our quality of life is severely compromised.

So what can you do to get a better night's sleep? Here are some suggestions:

- »Set a bedtime for yourself that is an hour earlier than the time you normally go to bed.
- »Get some exercise every day.
- »Be sure there is fresh air in your bedroom.
- »Use a good, supportive mattress and 100 percent cotton bedding.
- »Try stress-reducing techniques such as taking a warm, relaxing bath or praying just before you go to bed.
- »Reduce the distractions in your sleeping area. Remove the TV set and work station, and keep your bedroom for sleeping only.
- »Avoid drinking or eating anything caffeinated within six hours of your bedtime.
- »Spend time outdoors. People sleep better after they have been exposed to daylight.
- »If necessary, consider taking natural supplements that are known to aid sleep such as chamomile, passionflower, kava kava, hops, valerian, St. John's Wort, calcium and magnesium. (Check with your health-care provider first.)

In his book *Healing by Design* Dr. Scott Hannen writes: "The body was designed to work hard, but it was also designed to rest and to heal. If the body consistently receives the proper amount of rest, it will have adequate time to heal. ... The problem is that in our 'microwave society,' everything moves at such a fast pace that it appears to be nonstop, and the body never gets a chance for rest or recovery from the continual stimuli that place stress on it."

If this is your story, put the brakes on and begin to get the rest your body needs. You will be a better person for it, and everything in your life will work better. You will be able to accomplish more work with more energy, and you will feel less fatigue at the end of the day.

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