

## Feeling Tired – Go on, Take a Nap!

In recent years I have come to know the importance of a good night's sleep. In the mid 1990's I was studying for a number of qualifications and the only time to get the homework done was when my then teenage boys had finished theirs and gone to bed. So I would be up until 1:00 and 2:00 in the morning and sometimes later if an assignment was due in. Over a period of time I learnt to catch up by sleeping in at weekends and on holiday. Nevertheless, in time I also found it increasingly difficult to get to sleep and I never seemed to be really refreshed in the mornings – a bit like having a hangover but without the enjoyment of the alcohol! To compensate, my caffeine intake shot up to alarming proportions. Then the dreaded hyperthyroidism struck and it was time to take a look at my lifestyle. In point of fact it was an imposed change and not by choice – a real 'wake up' call (please excuse the pun!). The importance of sleep was drummed into me by the extremely kind and caring doctor I consulted and over six years I have made gradual and substantial improvements in my sleep routine. Professionally, I also moved into the field of Stress Management and this reinforced the deleterious effects of late nights and early mornings.

And so it was that in the Spring of 2008 I found myself manning the stand for our professional body at the Health at Work exhibition in Birmingham. Directly opposite us were two great guys with an incredible looking contraption they called a 'sleep pod'. To be honest it was a bit futuristic and looked more like a dentist's chair with a canopy over it! I was assured it had all been scientifically evaluated and was beneficial to relaxation and thus enhanced wellbeing and increased productivity at work. As Marcus explained to me, the concept is that one sits back in the chair, closes the canopy and sets the timer to however long one wishes to nap. Gentle music plays and coloured lights help one nap contentedly, waking refreshed and ready for anything. Sounds almost too good to be true! I was promised a 20 minute slot but, sadly, had to forego this in order to leave early to deliver an evening presentation many miles away. However, Marcus did insist that I read 'Take a Nap! By Sara C Mednick PhD and indeed I did.



'Take a Nap!' is an interesting review of Mednick's research into sleep and in particular how taking a nap can help restore our energy and productivity. Mednick begins by reviewing sleep patterns over the ages and much of her information makes fascinating reading. For instance, did you know that the term *siesta* is derived from the Roman *sexta* meaning 12 noon, or the sixth hour of the day by their counting. At 12 noon the Romans would take a nap!

It would also seem that left to our own devices we would take a mid-day nap. Dr Jurgen Aschoff refurbished some abandoned WWII bunkers in the 1950s with all the amenities of small one-bedroom flats, except there were no windows or clocks, radios or newspapers. In fact, there was no way in which to tell the time of day or night. The volunteers assisting with his research went through a short transitional phase and then began to settle into a new regime where they would experience a large dip in energy in the middle of the night when they would sleep for six to seven hours. Roughly 12 hours later they would experience a mini-dip that would drive them back to bed for a shorter period of sleep. Mednick goes on to suggest that the invention of the clock in the middle ages followed by the industrial revolution brought about a scenario whereby we came off of the land and began to 'go to work' in factories by day, sleeping by night. She also cites many instances when sleep deprivation has led to disastrous results, including the Exxon Valdez tanker that ran aground and friendly fire on troops in Iraq.

## Review written for the Thyroid UK newsletter by Pat Endicott

So what does Mednick believe napping can do for us? Described in her books as *'free, it's nontoxic and it has no dangerous side effects'* one wonders why napping has been given such a bad press over the years. In truth, I wish I could master the art; my father could drop off to sleep at the drop of a hat and wake refreshed 20 minutes later, and my youngest has 'power napped' his way through his Masters Degree and almost to a PhD – so there must be something in it, surely.

Mednick gives 20 reasons including increasing alertness, speeding up motor performance (apparently there is an ideal time of day to thrash your partner on the squash court!), improving accuracy and decision making, preserve youthful looks, and reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes. Better still, it can help to lose weight as studies show that sleepy people reach for high-fat, sugar-rich snacks more often than people who are properly rested. Wow! I really need to give this a try!

Mednick explains that napping can reduce your risk of developing diabetes as sleep deprivation increases insulin and cortisol levels, which in turn raise the risk of diabetes in later life. This interested me because it fits with research conducted into stress, which also increases cortisol levels and runs amok with insulin levels, increasing the risk of diabetes. Indeed, similar research has shown that a poor night's sleep causes the body to produce the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol the next day in order to get one through the energy slump caused by lack of sleep, which then leads to another poor night due to the 'burn' effect of those very hormones. So maybe Mednick is on to something here, including her other claims that napping improves stamina, elevates mood (sleep increases serotonin [the happy hormone], apparently), boosts creativity, reduces stress and dependence on alcohol and drugs and helps our memory – now, where had I got to?

'Take a Nap!' goes into some pretty complicated information on natural sleep cycles, circadian rhythms and much more but the basics are that to optimise napping one needs to follow a complicated algorithm. 'Ah', you sigh – 'I'm not up to that, I'm too tired!' Indeed, so was I when I read the book so I just used the Nap Wheel on the front cover of the book to calculate my best nap time which is dependent on when one wakes in the morning. For instance, if one wakes at 7:00 am, a 90 minute nap at 1:00 p.m. would be considered the 'perfect nap'. But we can nap for much shorter time, with even 10 – 20 minutes can be beneficial. Equally, the time of the nap, relative to morning waking time produces different properties; a nap early in the day inspires creativity, later in the day improves alertness and motor skills and even later will increase the ability to concentrate well on complex issues. Is this, perhaps, why I find it easier to study in the early hours of the morning, and so too my son?

Equally important to know is that for a quick nap one needs to restrict a nap to less than 20 minutes. Dropping into a deeper level of sleep in the daytime may mean waking feeling rather grumpy and just as tired as your pre-nap state.

Driving to Cambridge recently I listened to an interview with Neil Stanley, a sleep researcher at the University of East Anglia. Stanley is calling on people to take the problem of sleep deprivation and its consequences more seriously. Poor or inadequate sleep has been shown to be responsible for lower levels of immunity, poor performance, mood changes and even weight gain. So perhaps there is far more to sleep than most of us realise and it really is vital to our overall health. I found Mednick's book fascinating and thought-provoking. More information can be found on her website (<http://www.samednick.com/>) – so happy reading and, of course, happy napping!

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