



AGING TODAY

Let's Sleep On It



By Bob Roth, Managing Partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions

My Aunt Viv of blessed memory had a unique way of passing on the news from Baltimore. She would give a quick rundown of the facts and then completely and at first unexpectedly proclaim, “There, I have now given you dinner conversation, goodbye.” In tribute to my loving Aunt Viv, I offer you an option to steer away from the same tired conversations of 3 a.m. tweet storms, the national debt and health care. Instead, acknowledge the debt incurred by interrupted slumber, its serious health consequences and its subsequent drain on our health care dollars and other economic factors. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you your dinner party conversation.

So just how important is sleep? It is troubling that conversations regarding sleep center around the question, “How important is sleep to you?” Many Americans wear their sleep deprivation as a badge of honor and glamorize their ability to survive on a few hours of sleep. Sleep as a vital component to good health, mental clarity and happiness are conversations we should be having.

The story of Randy Gardner is an excellent illustration of all the aforementioned points and scintillating dinner party repartee. For a high school science fair project, Gardner set a Guinness Record for staying awake 11 straight days while allowing scientists to study the effects of extreme sleep deprivation. To no one’s surprise, Gardner became irritable, forgetful, nauseous, and of course, unbelievably tired. However, five days into the experiment, he began to display symptoms that could pass for Alzheimer’s disease. He was hallucinating, severely disoriented and paranoid.

Gardner’s record still stands because Guinness World Records has eliminated the category, citing the health dangers of severe sleep loss. It’s

important to keep in mind, by the way, that Guinness does seem to deem it acceptable for a man to hold 13 live rattlesnakes in his mouth. It looks like skipping out on sleep is much more problematic than most realize. Interestingly, while Guinness rightfully recognized the disease-related risk that is associated with insufficient sleep, Gardner’s subsequent health issues are not even mentioned in a Google search. I learned about his paralyzing decade of insomnia in his 60s from an NPR podcast. Scientists point to his 11-day stint with sleeplessness as permanent damage to his brain.

What are the symptoms of a brain deprived of sleep? John Medina put it this way in his book *Brain Rules: Sleep well, think well*. Sleep loss cripples thinking in just about every way you can measure thinking: attention, executive function, immediate memory, working memory, mood, quantitative skills, logical reasoning ability and manual dexterity.

So what happens when we sleep? Surprisingly, rest is not part of the equation for the sleeping brain. Sleep is intimately involved in learning. Neural firing patterns present during the learning phase are replayed during sleep, strengthening the connections between the neurons that represent these newly formed memories, skill and habit learning.

Our brains act as the hazmat team during sleep. During our waking hours, our brains are busy using up the day’s energy sources, which get broken down into various byproducts. Without enough sleep time, these waste byproducts build up in the brain, and if they are not cleared away, they collectively overload the brain and are thought to lead to the many negative symptoms of sleep deprivation.

What happens when we don’t give our brains enough time to dispose of the unnecessary waste?

Perhaps that is when the build-up of proteins that are associated with neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, occur. There is a strong relationship between disordered sleep and neurodegenerative diseases; we just don't know which is the cause and which is the effect. If we can enhance the sanitation engineering for a brain at risk for neurodegeneration, perhaps we can reverse the course of the disease or even prevent it from happening altogether.

It is our job to get the word out to be sleep ambassadors. Remember the days when our kids didn't sleep and we were all busy reading up and Ferberizing our babies? We Boomers need to take our sleep just as seriously. Avoid coffee in the afternoon; don't go to bed too hungry or too full. Create a sleep space, dedicated to sleep-only that is cooler than the rest of the house. Get rid of the blue lights in your bedroom, such as smartphones, tablets, televisions and computers. The blue light suppresses the production of melatonin, which is the hormone that brings on sleep. Read a book or listen to an audio book. Nothing on television or the twittersphere is as important as maintaining our health and our sanity.

My New Year's resolution: cleaning house, decluttering, reorganizing, resetting, consolidating and preparing well for each day. I am doing this with both hands under my cheek and with my eyes wide closed.

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