

Multiple Sclerosis & The Vital Importance of Sleep

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a frightening disease for many reasons. Primarily, humans are terrified of MS because we do not fully understand it. It is also problematic because it affects many people differently. It is even unpredictable in how it affects individuals on a daily basis. Additionally, it continues to grow worse and becomes more difficult to manage as time passes.

Multiple Sclerosis affects all types of people, and shows little mercy when it attacks. It can make life very difficult, sometimes impossible. The fatigue is often overwhelming. As well there are the weakness, balance and mobility issues. The simple tasks of any given day become impossible and sometimes even dangerous. It tries the loyalty and commitment of friends and family. It can truly put the promise of *“for better or worse”* and *“in sickness and health”* to the test.

When you’re faced with a challenge like this, you have two choices, give up, or fight hard at every turn for any and everything that will make your life better. As humans, this is among the things we do best—fighting hard and long for what we believe is rightfully ours.

When Taking Life’s Little Things For Granted Is No Longer An Option

Humans often take the most important things in life for granted until they are gone. Sleep is a prime example of this. Over the course of a lifetime, the average person will spend 233,592 hours sleeping. Most people don’t even think about it until getting even a few hours of sleep becomes very difficult.

That’s where the problem begins for most people. They do not think about lack of sleep until it becomes an issue, people do not understand how quality of your sleep affects dramatically your quality of your life. The relationship between sleep quality and quality of life is particularly true in people who have disease challenges like Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Recently, Austrian researchers at the University of Vienna conducted a study on the effect of sleep on MS patients. They found that inadequate sleep quality was nearly twice as frequent in MS patients compared to people who did not have MS.

Sleep Hygiene And Sleep Debt: What is it?

Sleep Hygiene (SH) is the various practices one uses to achieve quality sleep. SH is essential in order for the brain to conduct its routine repairs from processing the day's events, in order to prepare for following day's events.

Sleep Debt (SD) occurs when you start getting less sleep than you need or poor quality sleep. It's like a financial debt that accrues over time from paying only a portion of a monthly bill.

Key Sleep Hygiene And Sleep Debt Concerns

SH and SD affects learning and memory. During sleep the brain organizes and files away all of the memories of the day. There is a huge amount of research showing that people who have better sleep hygiene perform better on memory and learning tasks. This is because the brain has had sufficient time and resources to better manage its constant rewiring.

Chronic poor sleep affects how your body processes and stores carbohydrates. It alters chemicals in the body that are known to affect appetite as well.

Obviously, Sleep Hygiene and Sleep Debt affect energy levels. When you don't get proper sleep you have less energy, you become irritable and impatient. While we all know this, the important thing to consider here is that as adults there are things that we must do in our days and things that we like to do. Since we are adults the things that we must do come first—that's the difference between being an adult and a child (again, typically and hopefully). Having less energy translates into having less fun. While you're putting the things you like to do on hold to honor your responsibilities and commitments, you're using up your energy supply.

Day in and day out, of not having the energy to do the things you like and want can lead to depression. There have been hundreds of studies confirming this. There's another key element to understand about poor sleep. Understanding it involves understanding what drives brain behavior, and how important sleep is to the brain. The brain views itself as the most important organ. So it behaves as if its needs are the most important. Thus, because sleep is vital to the brain, when your sleep is compromised, the brain processes it as a serious threat.

How the brain processes serious threats is logical but not always in our best interest. The newer part of the brain, where thinking occurs, shuts down when the brain perceives threat. When this happens the older part of the brain takes over. This part of the human brain is identical to brain in animals. It is designed to “survive now and ask questions later.” There’s a very valid reason for this. Imagine you’re a zebra. You hear a rustle in the bushes. It might be a lion; it could also be tumble weed. If you stop to think about it, and it is tumbleweed you’re okay. However, if you stop to think about it and it’s a lion you’re done. So in the interest of survival you “survive now, and ask questions later.”

While this works fine for zebras, it can be problematic for modern day humans. The reason is even though the old part of our brain hasn’t changed since we were cave people, human lifestyles and technology has changed a great deal. This is a problem for the old brain, because it processes all threat the same: “survive now ask questions later”.

“Survive now, ask questions later,” in terms of sleep debt, when translated in the old mammal brain, becomes, “go to sleep, right here, right now.” That’s fine if you’re in a cave, or wandering the Serengeti. However, if you’re driving on the freeway, or working as an Air Traffic Controller—the consequences are potentially devastating.

Sleep Hygiene and Sleep Debt are also bad for your heart. Since the brain processes a sleep debt as stress, it naturally responds with the standard human stress response. That is, it prepares for fight-or-flight. To do this it raises the blood pressure to increase blood flow and oxygen to the large limbs to prepare them to run or to do battle.

That’s good in the short term. However, when your blood pressure is continuously increased, you develop “high blood-pressure”, which is dangerous.

Lack of sleep and poor sleep can also cause your heart to beat irregularly, which is one of the leading causes of strokes.

Why A Good Bed Is Crucial To Good Sleep Hygiene

You move the least when you sleep. At this time, gravity is the major force affecting your body, and particularly your spine. Good back support evenly distributes the stress on your spine while you sleep.

Most orthopedists agree that mattresses should adapt to the body's curves, while remaining flat. Having a pleasant spring action, good ventilation, and not being too warm or too cold is also important. Adapting to your body's natural curves, while remaining flat and having good spring action is the difference between a good mattress and a great mattress. This is because these factors seriously affect your spine during sleep. The spine is like the main highway in your body for the transmission of nerve impulses between the brain and the body. So the integrity of the spine will affect the integrity of the information flowing between your brain and body. As you know all too well, there is a big difference between a fast moving efficient highway and one that is not.

When you are lying on your side on a hard mattress, only your hip and your shoulder are supported and your spine is curving outward from the mattress. A soft mattress will cause your hip and shoulder to sink creating a sideways bending of your spine away from the mattress. When you are lying face up, your pelvis and upper back are in contact with the mattress, while the small of your back receives minimal support. This is not good spine support.

In a survey of orthopedic surgeons, 95% believed that mattresses played a part in the management of low-back pain, with 76% recommending a firm mattress. Additionally, most physicians who regularly treat lower back pain patients advise against the use of soft mattresses.

People who have chronic low-back pain are more sensitive to the firmness of mattresses than healthy people. People with MS are twice as likely to have lower back pain as people who do not have MS.

The bottom line is that more uniform body support reduces back pain and produces a more uniform sleep. More uniform sleep makes you healthier on multiple levels.

All of the research, the theory, and the physician opinions aside, let's just draw on some common sense. If you're about to bake something, it helps to have a good oven and the right pan. Having a good oven and the right pan won't make you a pastry chef; however, not having a good oven and the right pan can easily result in a flop. You sleep in a bed, so the first step of getting good sleep is getting a good bed. Therefore, having a bed that easy to get in and out

of, that promotes uniform spine support is one of the fundamental currencies of good sleep for people enduring MS.

Multiple Sclerosis: The Big Picture

As we said in the beginning, enduring Multiple Sclerosis is an all out war, all day, every day. Humans are animals, and there are certain basic truths about animals. They need to eat, breath, drink water, and sleep. Everything else is want not need. When you are in a war, you have to pay particular attention to your basic needs. The better you attend to your basic needs, the better positioned you are to do battle. A hungry soldier, a thirsty soldier, or a soldier gasping for breath, is not the best soldier that he or she could be. Arguably a soldier who is weary because he or she has not slept well is perhaps the least effective soldier of all. When the battle is constant, as it is in MS, the preparation needs to be equally as consistent. Eat good food, drink pure water, breath deeply and most of all sleep well through the night. You'll find our best sleep solutions at the links these links, memory foam mattresses, latex mattresses and adjustable beds.