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College Students and Sleep Deprivation

On a typical day at college, it is not unusual to see somewhat bleary-eyed students stumble into class in the morning toting a backpack, with an energy drink or coffee in hand. A few days ago I overheard a female student laughingly confess that she was drinking her third cup of coffee of the day, and it wasn't even 11 a.m. yet. It is not out of the ordinary for students to arrive at class sleep deprived and hope to compensate for it with a caffeine stimulant. Sleep deprivation is so common that probably every college student has experienced it, and some experience it on a weekly basis. If colleges provided more resources to raise awareness of the dangers of sleep deprivation, and helped students cope better with stress, they could be more successful in their studies.

In an article published by *College Student Journal* called "Relationship between Sleep Quality and Health Risk Behaviors in Undergraduate College Students," it states that 82% of students surveyed reported daytime sleepiness (Vail-Smith, Felts, and Becker). Another article published by *College Student Journal* titled "Revving and Staying Up: Energy Drink Use Associated With Anxiety and Sleep Quality In a College Sample" says, "Data from the 2008 National College Health Assessment Survey based on responses from 81,121 students, showed that stress and sleep problems were rated as 1 and 3 respectively in a list of top 10 impediments to academic performance" (Stasio).

As a student required to balance full-time school, part-time work, and family responsibilities, I can understand why students may feel that by necessity they have to miss sleep in order to keep up with studies and homework. Some students may feel that missing sleep is necessary if they want to have a social life outside of classes. Other students may dislike being tired, but don't really know how to solve the problem, or some may feel that it isn't a big deal.

While many students on campus may believe that sleep deprivation is just an annoying inconvenience that comes with studying at college, the consequences of not getting sufficient rest may be much longer reaching than they first appear. A number of studies have recently suggested that sleep deprivation is a serious issue, with significant health risks and personal complications. Some of the risks associated with sleep deprivation are an inability to concentrate, decreased mental function, and lower cognitive performance. The ability to plan, respond well to complexity, and make logical decisions are also impacted, causing students to be at risk for poor decision making. These problems in particular may negatively impact college students, causing a bad cycle as one problem fuels another.

In addition to the academic risks of sleep deprivation, students are also at risk for significant health problems. The incidence of obesity and diabetes are higher for individuals who are sleep deprived. An article published in December 2013 by the *American Journal of Epidemiology* states:

Among men and women who were not obese at baseline, participants who reported less than 5 hours of sleep had an approximately 40% higher chance of developing obesity than did those who reported 7-8 hours of sleep. The association between short sleep and excess weight gain was generally consistent across different categories of age,

educational level, smoking status, baseline body mass index, and physical activity level.

(Xiao)

There is also a correlation between sleep deprivation and an increased danger of traffic accidents and psychological problems. The instance of depressive symptoms also increases in correlation with lack of sleep. The National Sleep Foundation conducted a study that indicated that college freshmen are most at risk for sleep deprivation, so it is of particular importance that college freshmen receive help at the beginning of their schooling so that they can stay in college and be successful. In an article titled "Stress and Sleep Disturbances in Female College Students," researchers state that they found that first-year students were able to reduce depressive symptoms, along with improving sleep quality after undergoing a self-administered cognitive behavior program. They believe that a lot more research needs to be done in order to effectively help students manage their stress and sleep. These researchers also believe that colleges should make education in coping with stress, improving sleep hygiene, and their respective effects on health a mandatory part of the curriculum. (Lee) According to the National Sleep Foundation:

Poor sleep costs America billions of dollars each year and greatly compromises public safety and health. Possible solutions to the Nation's sleep problem may begin with promoting education and awareness of sleep disorders and their negative societal impact, research in sleep medicine, as well as public education about healthy sleep. The beginnings of these solutions lie in the hands of healthcare workers and educational institutions. (Wells, and Vaughn)

Because sleep deprivation has such far reaching effects in all areas for college students, I think that in addition to teaching students about sleep management briefly during orientation, it would be helpful to offer mentoring for students to help manage their time and stress. Having it

mandatory to take a class or obtain training in stress management and healthy coping habits might reduce the instances of negative habit-seeking in order to cope with stress and help students develop skills that can be of assistance to them over their entire lifetime. Posters might be used around campus during midterms and finals as reminders to students that study planning and sufficient sleep will help them far more than cramming and staying up all night. This preventative measures might assist students in staying in college long term if they are able to utilize coping skills and get sufficient sleep right from the start.

In conclusion, whether students recognize it or not, sleep plays a significant role in not only their success in college, but also for their health and well-being for a lifetime. Sleep should be considered an important part of schedule planning. Although many students feel that it isn't a big deal to skip sleep on a regular basis, getting more sleep would improve learning, health, and safety for everyone. With so many activities competing for time, awareness needs to be raised so that students more clearly understand how much sleep deprivation can impact their lives.

Colleges should consider providing more resources that help students cope better with stress and improve time management, so that they can sleep better. If institutions and health care providers work together to better educate individuals, offer support, and continue to research sleep deprivation, society can be greatly benefited with better health, greater well-being, improved education retention, and lower overall risks both physically and mentally.

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