

6 – March – Newport Academy - Adolescent Sleep Disorders

Teenagers today are busier than ever before. In addition to the normal school load they are also juggling sports, extracurricular activities inside and outside of school, taking on the challenge of college preparatory classes and for many – part time jobs. Stress and expectations for a teens is sky high. According [the Sleep Foundation](#) and several other groups, teens should get anywhere from eight and a half to ten hours of sleep each night. But for most, the alarm sounds off by six a.m. on a good day. This means teens must be in bed by 9:30 at the latest the night before; not any easy task when most are out until dark with practice, clubs or work before ever beginning their homework. There are numerous studies showcasing the importance of sleep for adolescence, and the possible consequences when the body's need isn't met.

The problem of sleep deprivation is a growing concern, especially as more and more distracting technology and forms of social media finds its way into teenagers' hands. Lack of sleep can affect not only a teen's grades but also their social interactions, attitude and even their mental or physical health.

What Causes Sleep Deprivation?

The most common sleep disorder is insomnia and it umbrellas several areas that could be affecting a teenager's sleep; these include non-restorative sleep (light sleeping where the body and mind do not receive adequate rest), sleep disruption (noises waking one up for example) or trouble falling asleep. Whatever the cause may be the end result is the same – not enough sleep. Insomnia is usually brought on by stress. No one can argue that teenagers face a high amount of stress. Their busy schedule alone is enough of a burden to keep up with. Once you add in their social happenings, family problems and future concerns – you have a very anxious, very stressed out young adult.

There is also Psychophysiological Insomnia which occurs when anxiety over *feeling* tired the next day or worry about falling asleep itself. Many of us have been there before. You continually look at the clock and tell yourself, "If I fall asleep *now* then I'll get 6 hours of sleep..." Imagine experiencing that every night, worrying about being tired the next day if you can't fall asleep soon.

Parasomnia is another common culprit in sleep deprivation. This includes any disruptive sleep behavior such as the occasional limb movement, nightmares, teeth grinding, sleep walking, night terrors or even bedwetting. Most of these occur (generally) without the child even being aware that it occurred. They might not remember the bad dream upon waking up *or* they may not remember waking up at all. Still, the body isn't receiving the sleep it desperately needs.

Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome is also an obstacle at this age. Teens with this syndrome produce the chemical known as melatonin later at night than normal. This chemical regulates sleeping and waking patterns. So, a teenager may not actually feel sleepy until midnight or later, even though their body and mind are still in need of the normal amount of rest.

Obstructive sleep apnea is a major concern too. Teens dealing with this disorder will stop breathing for a period while asleep. One will occasionally wake up when this occurs, but more often they remain asleep. But again, the problem is that they are prevented from falling into a deep, healthy state of sleep. A warning sign for this particular disorder could include snoring or sweating while asleep and it can be caused by obesity and by enlarged adenoids or tonsils.

Distraction are playing a larger role with the lack of sleep teens receive. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest joined with texting and playing games on smart phones has teens staying up later. They will spend hours looking at status updates, new photos and talking about any topic instead of getting to bed. Others may watch television late into the night. All of these actions act as a stimulant for the brain, making it difficult for the teen to shut down and begin the sleeping cycle.

Some other causes of sleep deprivation include:

- Brain and nervous system
- Cardiovascular system
- Chemical imbalance
- Weak immune system
- Pathological sleepiness, insomnia and accidents
- Stress and anxiety
- Emotional disorders (depression, bipolar disorder)
- Obesity and diabetes
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Travel (change in time zone)
- Environmental factors (too hot, bright, noisy)

Effects of Sleep Deprivation in Adolescence

If just feeling drowsy during class were the only side effect from lack of sleep, then there wouldn't be as much concern. Unfortunately the problems goes well beyond heavy eyelids as it can affect all areas of the teen's life.

As mentioned earlier, sleep deprivation can wreak havoc on a student's grades. This isn't just caused by falling asleep in class. Teens who do not acquire the needed amount of sleep may not be *mentally* awake during a lesson - leaving them unfocused and moody during the early part of the school day. Two separate studies

show that students who begin school later in the morning (thus providing them with more time to sleep) had improved grades. College of the [Holy Cross and Brown University](#) conducted a joint test with 3,000 high school students in 1998 and the [University of Minnesota](#) tested more than 7,000 in 1997. By starting classes just thirty minutes later resulted in higher grades among all the students. It also showed a decrease for disciplinary problems and teen depression.

When a teen continually misses out on their needed sleep, it can bring on a serious battle with depression. In a study conducted by [Dr. Siddique](#), a sleep specialist in New Brunswick, New Jersey, he found that students who were lacking enough sleep during the day were three times more likely to suffer from strong depression symptoms than those he met the suggested minimum. Depression is a serious issue for teens who are already facing so many other issues in life; and it is connected to a loss in their quality of life and in many cases, suicide.

Studies have also shown that sleep deprivation ups the risk of drug and alcohol use among teenagers. The [2004 April issue of Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research](#) found a significant connection with substance abuse among those with poor sleeping habits, especially among males. The lack of sleep leads to a domino effect of problems; poor decision making, spending time with the wrong crowd because a change in attitude/mood has set up a wall with your friends and family, recreational drug use in order to feel alive. It is a slippery slope that one can easily fall down.

Other side effects may include:

- Body tremors
- Severe headaches
- Increased blood pressure
- Aching muscles
- Weakened immune system
- Easily angered
- Trouble with memory
- Weight loss or gain
- Stunted growth

Avoiding Sleep Deprivation

It goes without saying that sleep is of the utmost importance for adolescence. Saying “go to bed earlier,” is easier said than done. So how can one help their teen obtain the sleep they need? There are several ways to assist.

Teenagers are extremely busy once they enter middle and high school. Homework is constant, there always seems to be practice after school for a sport or club (which can last till five or six that night) and there are relationships to maintain. And each of these areas is very important. The drive instilled into today’s students is great

than most parents realize. Teachers hammer in the importance of *their* class, their assignments and their tests. Well-meaning counselors continually talk about the difficulty of being accepted into a good college and how taking on extra-curricular activities (and community service projects) will serve them well on those applications. Parents do their best to ensure homework is being completed and all practices are being attended. The sad truth of it is, though, that many adults are just seeing the individual jobs (*just* one practice or one page of homework). In truth, teenagers are overwhelmed. They do their best to keep up with the load as well as the pressure, and in doing so will sacrifice sleep to get everything finished.

So one of the first things that we can do to help is lighten their load. Help your teen pick out which areas are the most important. With clubs and sports, which one does your teenager enjoy the most? Do they really need to be involved in five? Assure them that they will be fine (and probably happier) with one or two. Help them to also prioritize their homework. Assist them with creating a schedule for each day, recording due dates and planning out how much work needs to be finished each night. There are many apps that can quickly be used to easily keep track of their schedule. Be open to discussing your teenager's after school job as well. While the lessons of responsibility and hard work are important, your teen's health is even more vital. Some have to work, and that is okay. But if your child doesn't really need the job, discuss cutting back on the work hours or cut it out completely. Again, one must remember the full schedule teenagers already juggle. Likewise, be willing to lighten their chores on school nights.

While you may not be able to convince their teachers to lighten the load, it never hurts to ask. Many teachers are willing to work with a student if they are aware of the stress being placed on them. Many districts are testing out the effects of starting the school day (at the high school level) earlier. Speak with the school board about all the recent studies on a delayed start for school. It should be hard for them to argue the benefits. What district doesn't want better grades?

Another way to help is through a mandatory evening blackout; make and enforce a rule that has your teen turning off their phone, computer, television and any other electronic, distracting device at least thirty minutes before bedtime. The same should be applied to homework as well. All of these things stimulate the mind and can add un-needed stress, both of which can make it difficult to fall asleep. Help your teen come up with some 'bedtime rituals', just like they had when younger. Suggest that they read a book (one that they'll actually enjoy as opposed to a school assigned text), listen to some relaxing music, eat a light snack without any sugar/caffeine or just sit and have a nice conversation about their day. Keep a consistent schedule for your teen too. Just because they are older doesn't mean they shouldn't have a bedtime curfew. Encourage them to exercise. This is beneficial for numerous reasons – they will obviously stay in shape, be healthier and it will wear down parts

of the body allowing it to relax more quickly at bedtime. One needs to be tired both mentally and physically to fall asleep more easily.

Sometimes these methods still don't help and you're left feeling helpless. Thankfully, there are other forms of assistance. Centers such as Newport Academy specialize in helping teens break free from unwanted patterns such as sleep deprivation. We specialize in equipping teens with the tools and knowledge needed to live a happier, healthier life. You want to see your teen succeed and we can help them in finding that in their life. Feel free to call us today to see how we can assist you.