

The Distinct Nature of Sleep

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Engaging in meaningful occupations is essential for overall health by promoting independence, enabling self-expression, and supporting emotional, physical, and mental well-being. According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (2020), occupations include activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living, health management, rest and sleep, education, work, play, leisure, and social participation. While all of these occupations contribute to health and quality of life, sleep is arguably among the most important because it provides the foundation for engagement in all other occupations. Without adequate sleep, individuals would be unable to recover mentally and physically from daily demands fully, maintain the energy needed to participate in meaningful activities, and support overall health and well-being, given the critical role that sleep and rest play in promoting performance, participation, wellness, and well-being. This paper will examine the distinct nature of sleep and how engagement in sleep supports occupational outcomes.

According to Faulkner (2022), sleep is especially important for occupational performance, as it influences cognitive abilities such as alertness, attention, executive functioning, and learning, as well as physical performance, ranging from basic physiological functioning to athletic capacity. Additional research has indicated that sleep deprivation causes “deficits in cognition, vigilance, memory, mood, behavior, ability to learn, immune function, and general performance” (Mukherjee et al., 2015). Even small reductions in sleep may impair attention control, response time, and executive functioning required for daily task completion. Sleep deprivation is also associated with slower information processing, reduced working memory capacity, and poorer decision-making, which can interfere with complex or multi-step activities. These cognitive effects translate into safety risks, including impaired driving performance characterized by reduced alertness, delayed reaction time, and increased risk of

judgment errors. Importantly, individuals may not accurately perceive these impairments, as subjective alertness does not always reflect actual performance. Physically, insufficient sleep can reduce endurance, impair coordination, and decrease task performance efficiency, affecting both basic and demanding activities. Overall, sleep is essential for occupational performance in cognitive, physical, emotional, and safety-related domains.

Sleep has often been described as an occupational need, as participation in sleep “influences mood, behaviors, and energy levels” (Tester & Foss, 2017). Sleep is not a passive state but a biologically active process that supports restoration and regulation of physiological systems. Sleep disruptions can interfere with brain functioning and limit restorative processes such as healing and cellular regulation. These impairments are associated with reduced attention, weaker working memory, and decreased cognitive efficiency. Sleep also contributes to the organization of daily functioning by influencing energy regulation and emotional stability. As a result, sleep participation affects broader life domains, such as work, social interaction, and daily task engagement.

Engaging in sleep also supports physical health by promoting essential restorative processes within the body (NIH, 2022). During sleep, the body supports the repair of the heart and blood vessels, regulates appetite-related hormones, and maintains blood glucose control through insulin. Sleep also supports tissue repair, muscle maintenance, and cellular recovery by regulating hormone release. In addition, adequate sleep strengthens immune functioning, improving the body’s ability to respond to illness and infection. Prolonged sleep deprivation has been connected to increased risk for conditions such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and stroke.

Reduced habitual sleep duration has become a growing public health concern because it negatively affects general well-being (Shah et al., 2025). Research demonstrates a relationship between sleep duration and well-being, where both insufficient sleep (less than 7 hours) and excessive sleep are associated with poorer outcomes. Sleep disruption is linked to decreased emotional stability, including increased anxiety, difficulty regulating emotions, and amplified stress sensitivity. It is also associated with reduced psychological functioning, such as lower resilience and increased depressive symptoms. In contrast, maintaining recommended sleep duration supports emotional regulation and cognitive clarity in daily functioning. Sleep contributes to wellness by supporting energy regulation, stress management, and consistency in daily routines (Williams, 2025). When sleep is irregular or insufficient, wellness may be disrupted through reduced motivation, decreased focus, and difficulty preserving daily balance across activities.

In occupational therapy (OT), sleep is considered an essential occupation that should guide both practice and research across settings (Faulkner, 2022). Sleep is increasingly recognized as a distinct focus of intervention, linked to environmental context, routines, activity timing, and performance capacity. Inadequate sleep may also affect the accuracy of assessments by altering cognitive and behavioral performance during evaluation. Historically, Adolf Meyer identified sleep as one of the fundamental components of human function alongside work, rest, and play (Pendleton & Schultz-Krohn, 2024). The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (2020) now classifies sleep as an occupation in its own right, reflecting its central importance in daily life. Because sleep cannot be performed by another individual or substituted, it holds a unique position among occupations. Occupational therapy interventions may support sleep

through environmental modifications, routine development, and mindfulness and relaxation-based strategies.

Overall, sleep is a foundational occupation that supports performance, participation, wellness, and well-being across the lifespan. Evidence consistently demonstrates that sleep is essential for cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, physical restoration, and effective engagement in daily occupations. When sleep is disrupted, individuals may experience widespread effects that limit participation and disrupt balance across life roles. Because sleep is an indispensable activity, it plays a distinct and essential role in human functioning and in occupational therapy practice. Recognizing its importance reinforces the need for continued research and intervention to support client outcomes and overall quality of life.

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