

# parenting matters

## Buffering Stress~Sleep~The Unsung hero



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By Gila Lindsley, Ph.D.

In the current economic climate, all of us are familiar with stress. However, based upon my years of seeing our Lexington school system youngsters I am quite aware they have known stress for many years preceding not only the current economic crisis, but certainly well preceding the frightening events of 9/11.

How does stress look in a youngster? At the minimum you will likely see edginess and irritability, curtness to family members who try to talk to them. There might be physical problems such as headaches or stomach aches; or difficulty falling asleep at night, restless sleep even once they do fall asleep, waking up in the morning feeling (and acting!) awful. In far too many of the youngsters, I see more serious problems develop. Intentional food restriction. Cutting. Beginning to sneak alcohol, cigarettes. Getting involved with recreational drugs such as “weed” to calm down, “speed” to keep going. Obsessive-compulsive disorder might develop. Frank clinical depressions can begin. The rise in depression-related suicidality country-wide among preteens and teens has increased to an alarming rate.

Sleep: All of you are by now familiar with the stresses of academics and peer pressure. I am, therefore, going to focus on a factor which often goes unnoticed: the additional stress imposed by chronically insufficient sleep. Said one youngster to me, “I just can’t keep up. I have to worry about practicing piano, getting all my classwork done on time, being on time for my after-school activities and my one-afternoon-a-week job. Long

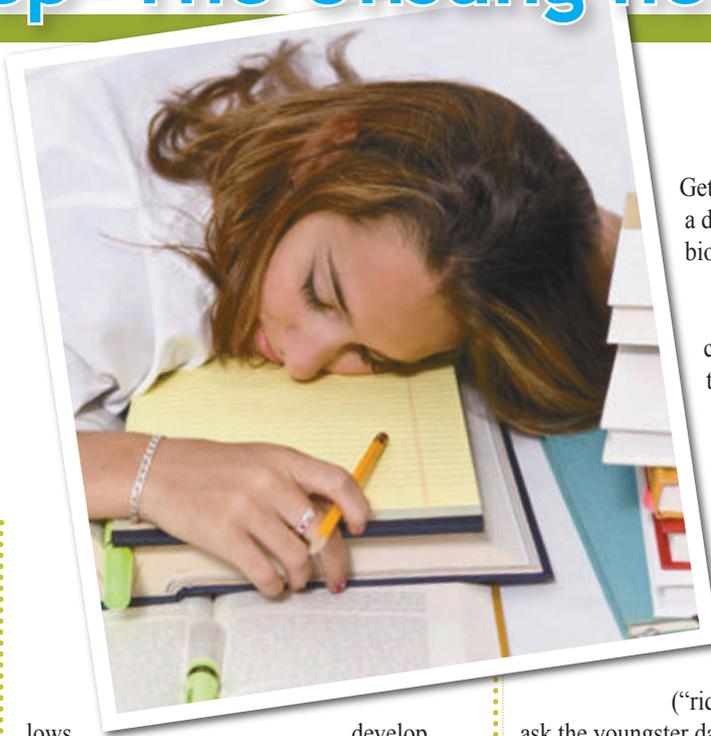
after my family has gone to sleep, I work and work and work. If it’s 4 AM by the time I finish, I don’t even bother going to sleep for the couple of hours left. I just can’t do this anymore.”

Insufficient quality sleep on a regular basis, seven days a week, is a hidden but extremely important contributing factor to stress. Did you know that for students of middle school or high school age the necessary amount of sleep per night every night is ten hours? That means that if the youngster must wake up at 6:30 in the morning in order to be on time for school, that s/he should have actually fallen asleep by 8:30 PM? But, of course, kids don’t get to bed, let alone to sleep, by then. According to the National Sleep Foundation, “A recent study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that as much as two-thirds of high school students get less than seven hours of sleep nightly.”

What problems are brought about by chronically insufficient sleep? It is during a part of sleep called REM sleep that the process called memory consolidation happens. Especially if we lose the final two hours of sleep when the majority of REM sleep occurs, we will not have converted into long term memory much of what occurred the day before. Translated this means that staying up very, very late to study then waking up after not enough hours of sleep is an exercise in futility. Whatever was learned during those late hours will be poorly remembered the next day if at all. That by itself adds to the stress.

During the early parts of the night, a different stage of sleep is prominent. It is called delta sleep. During delta sleep, the physical wear and tear of the day is repaired. However, efforts to stay awake beyond the biologically correct time for falling asleep can interfere with this part of sleep. Caffeine (including the rather high level of it found in extra strength pain relievers, taken to relieve the headache resulting from escalating stress) will definitely interfere with delta sleep.

A full period of sleep balances out mood. In the absence of consistently sufficient sleep, moods get out of balance; excessive highs and



Getting sufficient sleep on a daily basis is an absolute biological necessity.

② Perhaps challenge your youngster to a single-week-plus-two-days of getting at least close-to-adequate sleep each night. Then the youngster will be able to see for his or herself what kind of difference it might make. In my own clinical practice, when I suggest this

(“ridiculous”) experiment, I

ask the youngster daily to track mood, ability to remember what was studied, comfort with other people as well as when bedtime was and when wake-up time. Typically, the results cannot be argued with. We go from there.

③ It is well to remember that human beings are social creatures. Social interaction is for most people as vital as food and water, shelter and — of course — sleep. This means that well-meaning parents who insist their child does homework instead of socializing ultimately may be feeding into the problem. BOTH are important. The better plan is to help the child create a schedule that integrates academics and socializing.

④ Finally, if indeed no matter how the child tries the course load is too great to handle without skimping (often significantly) on sleep, then this too must be addressed. The guidance counselor can often be quite helpful.

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lows develop. The feelings of tension, depression, inability to cope become magnified. Attempts to compensate involve using alcohol or marijuana to relax; perhaps cutting which for some seems to release tension; or simply yielding to the increased tension and irritability and letting the cards fall where they may. Conversely, the National Sleep Foundation indicates that “A recent study found that adolescents with earlier bedtimes were less likely to suffer from depression and thoughts of suicide.”

Sleeping in on week-ends (if one’s schedule even permits this) does not really help. It takes three full days to pay back the sleep debt that has accrued. But a week-end has only two days. And, worse perhaps, because of sleeping late on Saturday and Sunday mornings where possible, it is even more difficult to fall asleep at the necessary time on Sunday night. So, by Monday morning, any gain made over the week-end will have been erased.

Conclusions:

① Just about every school child (as well as many adults!) I have worked with thinks it’s dumb to worry about sleep. “How will I get my school work done?” “If I can’t text friends late at night (everyone does it) I’ll be out of it.” Etc. But: No matter how anyone would prefer to have it otherwise, one cannot argue with the body’s wisdom.

*Parenting Matters columns are not intended as a substitute for therapy. Please see a Licensed Social Worker, Psychologist or Psychiatrist if your child is in need of professional care.*