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Lack of Sleep and Anxiety

I came down with my first panic attack after a night in which I lacked sleep. I had the next day off so it was one of those nights where I anticipated all the things that could be done in the day that followed. My mind was essentially racing all night or so it felt. Towards the next day I had a very bad panic attack – my first actually.

I'm not telling you this to scare you or suggest it was simply the lack of sleep causing my panic attack but rather because you have probably heard about the benefits of sleep and this piece of my personal history has an important implication: that sleep can have a very powerful influence on your moods, particularly influence your anxiety and panic attacks.

Some of additional problems associated with lack of sleep are that it can elevate the body's production of stress hormones, affecting mood of course, cause depression, raise blood pressure and boost blood levels of substances that are responsible for increasing inflammation, which appears to be a major risk factor for heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and even obesity.

There is research showing subjects who lacked sleep ended up eating more. Sleep deprivation can affect hormones which regulate appetite control.

Now it's not all negative: let's look at some of the benefits of sleep:

- boosting the immune system
- maintaining a healthy weight
- helping you work and live more productively and interact more effectively with people
- positively influencing your physical, mental and emotional health

So I think it's clear that proper sleep is very important.

How much sleep?

Somewhere around 8 hours. It could be a little more or less, depending on the individual but this is probably a relatively good guideline.

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How can you get a good night's sleep?

Watch out for caffeine; even one cup in the morning can affect some people.

Ensure that your room is quite dark because too much light can be very problematic for sleep. If light is a problem then you might consider investing in a slumber mask which helps to block out light.

Ensure you do not have too much noise in your room. If noise is an unavoidable problem (as it is for many folks in busy areas) then consider getting a white noise machine or small fan that runs in the background. You can adjust to this consistent background noise while these things help block out other external noises.

Also ensure that your room is not too hot. A cool temperature is best for sleeping.

If you awake in the night then do not turn on the lights, but rather use a flashlight where feasible. Light affects a brain chemical called melatonin. Melatonin regulates our sleep-wake cycle, so having too much light will cause you to increase levels of melatonin which begins to wake you up. This is the same process that happens when the sun comes and you begin to awaken.

Ultimately I think that the key to good sleep is establishing a routine and preparing for bedtime in advance, making your sleeping quarters as comfortable as possible. Using some natural aromas or lighting a candle as you do your "shut down" routine, i.e. brushing teeth, etc., can be helpful.

Also developing good sleep habits such as sleeping on your side and developing - and sticking to - a bedtime and sleep schedule can be incredibly helpful.

An additional tip is using a Mantram. Remember when I talked about my mind racing at night? Well that's why a Mantram is important. A Mantram is a word or phrase that you repeat over and over to go to sleep. Doing this can actually be quite relaxing and powerful. You may be surprised at how helpful this is in helping to quiet the mind and lull you to sleep.

Ensuring you have enough sleep and a quality sleep can have an overall positive effect on your anxiety and overall health.

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