

Sleepless students

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“Not before 2.00pm on weekends,” was what I was told by a teenage student who other than being the son of a friend also happened to be struggling in mathematics. His mother, who wished to organise maths support for him and he, who was equally keen to do the same, had a real issue. He wanted to catch up on his sleep on the weekends.

Despite my best efforts to convince him that early morning, around 10.00am, would be a good time for some mental gymnastics and mathematics, he did not get talked into it. So like all teachers looking to make life easy for adolescents, I too agreed to follow his schedule while sacrificing my siesta.

It has been observed that most teenage students do not get enough sleep during the week. They may sleep more on weekends but that does not fix the problem. Researchers call it “binge sleeping”.

They largely remain unable to develop a healthy sleeping pattern. If a you sleep until noon or 2.00pm on weekends, the brain tends to recognise that as a time for sleeping. Come Monday morning and the brain continues to be on the wrong schedule. School may begin early morning but your brain does not wake up until later in the day.

Research suggests that insufficient sleep puts adolescents at risk for cognitive and emotional difficulties, also poor school performance. Ronald E. Dahl, MD, a professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburg says: “Although it’s difficult to untangle cause and effect, it’s likely that sleep deprivation and problems controlling impulses and emotions exacerbate one another leading to a negative spiral of fatigue and sleepiness, labile emotions, poor decision-making and risky behaviour.”

Teens as it is struggle to learn to deal with stress and emotions and sleep deprivation makes things worse. It can negatively affect their growth rate and immune system, making them more susceptible to serious illnesses. An average of only five to seven hours of sleep makes one tired and cranky; developing lack of self confidence along with mood swings. Such students often find it difficult to get along well with others in school or at home and tend to argue over trivial things.

Research suggests that inadequate sleep can impair memory and inhibit creativity. It also results in anxiety and depression, decreased socialising, reduced concentration and a decreased ability to handle complex tasks.

Many factors can influence an adolescent’s ability to get a good night’s sleep before tackling a demanding day at school; social activities such as marathon wedding parties, homework and the frighteningly competitive private tuition culture generate enormous academic pressures. Also, television and internet use; religiously chatting online, networking and logging on to facebook.com. As we find more and more ways to stay connected at night, there has been an increase in the night-owlish behaviour of teenagers.

People need different amounts of sleep in different stages of life. Kinsella (2006) observes that in the past two decades, studies have shown that teenagers require considerably more sleep to perform to their potential than younger children or adults. Research suggests that adolescents, starting around the beginning of puberty and continuing into their early 20s, need nine hours and 15 minutes of sleep. Children need 10 hours and adults need 8 1/4 hours. Until age 10, most children wake up fresh and energetic. At puberty, however, the body clock, which regulates sleeping and waking hours, changes. This delay in the body’s circadian clock makes teens wide awake at 9.00 or 10.00pm when people of other ages are getting tired. Their internal clock makes them stay up later and sleep in later. When they get up early for school, they are losing vital hours of sleep night after night.

Carskadon (1998) says that a hyper-active circadian clock does make falling asleep more challenging for teens. However, irresponsible lifestyle can make falling asleep all the more difficult. Teens are advised to follow the following healthy bedtime habits to make falling asleep easier:

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- Go to bed around the same time each night; this helps the body get into a familiar routine.
- Follow a calming bedtime routine such as reading or taking a bath.
- Don't exercise just before going to bed.
- Avoid foods and drinks with caffeine such as soft drinks and chocolate after noon.
- Use the bed just for sleeping — not doing homework, watching TV, sending instant messages, playing video games or talking on the phone. This will train the body to associate the bed only with rest and sleep not with recreation.

We can intervene to change the sleep behaviour of young people before it gets out of hand. Parents may need to adjust their schedule to allow more sleep. They may know their teens are exhausted but feel like criminals when waking them up early. So, teens snooze for an extra couple of hours on weekend mornings. However, it is advisable to let them sleep in on the weekend, but no more than for two or three hours later than their usual awakening time or it will disrupt their body clock.

Another important thing to avoid is arguing with adolescents just before bedtime. Making some lifestyle changes like scheduling early dinners would be useful; big meals close to bedtime require digestive processes that can keep you awake.

Making the children shower at night and set out their clothes in the evening, too, can help. That way he or she can get a few more minutes of sleep in the morning. Removing clutter from their bedrooms is important, too. Heavy studying or computer games before bed can be arousing. It should be strongly discouraged. The flickering light of a computer or TV in the room can also cause disturbance.

It is important to set a regular sleep-wake routine and educate children, parents and teachers about the importance of restful sleep. Parents need to understand that many things account for teens not being sleepy until 2.00am. They must not think that their child has turned into a lazy, sleepy, young adult who wouldn't wake up in the morning and is trying to undermine their authority in some way.

Changes in the circadian timing system of adolescents combined with external pressures such as the need to awaken early in the morning for school, produce a potentially destructive pattern of early morning sleepiness in them. Some students have to travel longer distances for which they need to leave home as early as 6.30am. If necessary we must consider pushing back the school starting time to allow them to get their much-needed rest because we cannot possibly hope to enrich minds and inspire dreams in sleep-deprived students. ■