

# To Sleep Perchance To...Enhance

*by Joe Scally*

You're feeling anxious, overwhelmed, stressed out. Your blood pressure is up, your weight is up, you don't look so healthy. You're forgetting things, it's hard to focus, everything seems to take more effort. You're irritable, fatigued, and achy. Do you need a medical exam, psychotherapy, medication? While we recognize that all of those are valuable and often necessary, there's something else you can do that could positively impact all the above listed problems: get more and better sleep.

Lawyers are notoriously sleep deprived. We stay up late or even pull all-nighters to get things done. Some wear functioning on little sleep as a badge of honor. Many lawyers ingest caffeine in various forms to work through fatigue. Alarmingly, some lawyers use more powerful stimulants in the mistaken belief that it will enhance their productivity. Most lawyers have, at some point, woken up in the middle of the night thinking about a client or a case.

While occasional late nights or 3 a.m. ruminations may be unavoidable given the demands of practice, when they become repetitive or habitual our bodies are severely impacted by lack of sleep. The biochemistry of sleep is intricate and fascinating; those details are for another article. A large body of research, based on growing knowledge about that biochemistry, confirms that sleep deprivation can cause all of the problems described above. The same research shows that adequate sleep can lead to improvement in or even elimination of those problems. Good sleep is great for our brains and our bodies. It helps us to learn, remember, work more efficiently, and perform better in a variety of ways. It makes us healthier. It even makes us look better.

Here are just a few of the things you can do to get more and better sleep:

- 1. Turn off the lights.** Light emitted by artificial sources, including screens (e.g. computers, cell phones, television), in the hours before bedtime interferes with the body's ability to produce and use melatonin, an important hormone that is essential to the sleep process. Dim the lights in the hours before bedtime. Shut off devices with screens. Instead, read a book, meditate, or have a conversation.
- 2. Keep it cool.** When it's bedtime, your core body temperature drops to initiate sleep. Keeping your bedroom temperature somewhere between 60 and 68 degrees supports better sleep. If your feet get cold, wear socks. Being too warm at night can lead to a heightened state of arousal that makes it hard to sleep.
- 3. Keep the cork in the bottle.** Alcohol generally does help people fall asleep faster. It also disrupts REM sleep, making it harder for sleep to be rejuvenating. Alcohol may impact women's sleep even more than men's because women metabolize alcohol more quickly. If you are having some drinks, try to stop at least three hours before bedtime.
- 4. Change to decaf.** Caffeine is a stimulant. Too much of it and your body is too charged up to get good sleep. This can lead to a cycle of feeling tired, taking more caffeine, feeling more tired, taking even more, and so on. Caffeine has a half life of 5 to 8 hours depending on a person's biology. To improve your sleep, try to stop ingesting any caffeine by 2 pm (earlier if you're especially sensitive to caffeine).
- 5. Exercise (at the right time).** Exercise and sleep potentiate each other. When we sleep, our body repairs and restores itself, enhancing the benefits of exercise. Exercise can help us get better sleep. We won't go into detail in this article, but the timing of exercise and its impact on sleep is related to body temperature and hormones which regulate sleep. Exercise early in the day is ideal for the greatest sleep benefit. Even if your full workout is later in the day, doing some activity, for even a few minutes, early in the day can help you sleep. Exercise in the late afternoon or early evening also positively impacts sleep. Exercise in mid-afternoon is health-promoting for a lot of reasons but has fewer benefits for sleep. Working out too close to bedtime interferes with a restful sleep. Motivation to exercise drops when we're tired, leading to fewer and shorter workouts. So, sleep is necessary for exercise to be beneficial. Exercise at the right times and in the right amount aids sleep.
- 6. Dress for success.** Wear loose-fitting, non-restrictive garments like boxer shorts, t-shirts, pajamas or nightgowns to bed. Or go naked. This helps your body regulate its temperature for sleep and keeps fluids, like those in the lymphatic system, flowing properly.
- 7. Breathe, meditate, visualize, to quiet the chatter in your head.** It's amazing how many thoughts and worries pop into our minds as soon as we hit the pillow. Meditating just before bedtime, using breathing techniques like 4-7-8 breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualizing a peaceful place, and other techniques can help calm what is sometimes called the chatter in our monkey minds.
- 8. Go to bed early to increase the power of your sleep.** My grandfather used to say: "Every hour of sleep before midnight is worth two after." Turns out he was onto something that sleep science has confirmed. The most rejuvenating sleep occurs between 10 p.m.

and 2 a.m. This is based on the cycle of hormone secretions that form our wake-sleep cycle. You don't have to be overly precise about bedtime. The optimal time will vary with each person and where they are on the planet, but our bodies are set up to fall asleep within a few hours of the sunset. That's nature's prompt to do the things we discussed above and settle in for a rejuvenating sleep. Better sleep improves our health and enhances our productivity. Take an inventory of your sleep habits to see if you're optimizing your opportunities for rejuvenating sleep.

Lawyers who are concerned about themselves or their peers can call the Lawyers' Assistance Program for information about well-being or help with substance use or mental health issues.

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