

EMPLOYEE HEALTH

Sleep your way to better – and happier – memories



Getting enough sleep can help you remember positive events and make you happier.
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As you move further in to 2018 and take a look back to review your goals for this year, you may notice an underlying theme to all of them – many of them are likely focused on creating happy memories.

We all want to be happier and many of the things we do are an attempt for us to improve the amount of happy memories in our lives. Being fit and healthy, learning a new skill, checking an item off our bucket list, all of these often boil down to making sure we have happy lives to live and remember.

So what is the secret to happiness? To a mind full of memories that make you smile? And do we have to travel to the high mountains of Tibet or the far shores of Paradise Island to find it?

The truth is, happiness comes in all shapes and forms, but some recent studies have shown one of the easiest paths to happy memories is something every one of us does every day – sleep.

As early as the 1920s, research has shown that memory retention improves after sleep. What we have come to realize since then, however, is that sleep is not just an essential part of improving our ability to remember, but also effects what types of things we actually do remember.

Research as far back as the 1950s showed that some memories are dependent on sleep to be able to form and that sleep is an important part of our brain's functioning. More recent research has shown us that sleep not only improves our ability to remember, but can even be used to help us learn from what we remember. That's right, you can even learn from the information you are remembering, all while you are sleeping.

This is why you will sometimes wake up in the middle of the night or first thing in the morning with that Eureka! great idea. Your brain was actually learning new information while you were sleeping.

The opposite is also true in that lack of sleep has been shown to seriously impair our abilities to remember and learn new information or new tasks. In fact, some studies have shown the ability to learn new information

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decreases up to 40 per cent when we are sleep deprived. Knowing this in high school may have changed your mind about staying up all night to study for that big exam!

But it goes even further. One recent and fascinating study showed that not only does lack of sleep impact our ability to remember things, but it also makes a difference in what we remember. The study showed participants who were either well rested or sleep deprived a variety of data that was coded as either positive, neutral or negative. They then allowed everyone to get some sleep and asked them, several days later, to recall the data. They found the sleep deprived participants were less likely to remember data overall, but more importantly, they were much more likely to remember negative data over positive data. In fact, they were almost 60 per cent more likely to forget the positive emotional words.

So, what does that mean to you? It means that when you're not getting enough zzz's, you're more likely to forget lots of things, including important events in your life. What's more, you are much more likely to forget the positive things than the negative things. It doesn't bode well when our overall goal is to have a head full of happy memories of our happy life.

So, how do we go about getting the sleep we need? While it is not always easy to do, there are a few tricks you can use to make it happen.

Prioritize. One of the easiest things to do is to prioritize sleep. Many of us get so caught up in the daily grind and running from one place to another, we forget to set aside the proper number of hours for sleep. You should be getting between 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night.

Be consistent. As much as possible you want to have your sleep and wake times be consistent. This is important, especially if you are having trouble getting to sleep at night or getting up in the morning.

Avoid the bad stuff. It may seem like alcohol helps you get to sleep at night, but it changes your sleep patterns and will not help you get a better night's sleep. Other things to avoid before bed include nicotine and caffeine.

Kill the lights. Not just the bedroom lights, as we all know sleeping in the dark makes for a better night sleep, but also the blue light coming from your phone, computer and TV. Try to avoid using any of these before bed, and if you really feel the need to check that e-mail or app, turn your devices to orange light mode during the evening.

Create your zeitgeibers. Having a set sleep routine, (the technical term is zeitgeibers) creates habits you can use to train your brain to know when it is time to go to bed. Things like brushing your teeth, having a shower, reading a book, and others are all things you can do to train your brain that it's time to move into sleep mode.

Stay active. Getting exercise during the day, particularly vigorous or cardio-based activity, will help you sleep better at night. The only trick is to be sure you don't exercise too close to bedtime.

Write it down. If you can't stop those stressful thoughts from circling in your brain, whether it's things that are worrying you or the never ending to-do list, take a pen to paper and write it down. Often writing it down will help get it out of your brain and help you get back to sleep.

Give up! And if worse comes to worse, just give up. Get out of bed, do some bedtime yoga, or do anything relaxing that will help you get back into sleep mode. It may take anywhere from 20 to 90 minutes, but sometimes getting out of bed and doing a calming activity can be the best bet for getting back to sleep.

Get some help. If all else fails and you are not able to master the art of getting a good nights sleep, seek help. Often medical advice from a sleep clinic can help you be able to get sleep you need.

So, the lesson for 2018 seems to be if you want to have a more positive outlook on life, and you want to actually remember your more positive experiences, be sure to prioritize your sleep and make sure you are getting enough.

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