

**Sleepless in America**  
**From Inner Peace for Busy Women**  
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I was at a small dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Trent, Italy in the summer of 2001. One of the participants, a busy minister, asked a heartfelt question about how he might be more effective as a spiritual leader. His Holiness grinned and replied, “Get more sleep.” A lot of heads nodded sagely, including my sometimes sleep-challenged menopausal one.

In a 24/7 society where you can order everything from underwear to tents from mail order houses in the middle of the night, sleeplessness is becoming endemic. It has been cited as the nation’s number one health problem. We are sleeping, according to the experts, a whopping 20% less than our peers did one hundred years ago. It is no wonder. They weren’t tempted to check their e-mail in the middle of the night when they got up to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom.

Busy people, say the researchers, are apt to cadge more time for work by sleeping less. I have done that when big deadlines loomed, and managed pretty well for a couple of days. But then I hit the wall. Too fatigued to think straight, irritable and unhappy, I lost my center and became one more dismal statistic in sleep deprivation and performance impairment. I have friends who actually boast about how little they sleep. It gives them a perverse kind of pride. “See how busy I am? I must really be important.” Maybe. But I know that both their work and their families suffer when sleep is sacrificed to the god of commerce. And their lives are shortened as well. Those who sleep less than six hours a night die sooner than those getting seven hours or more.

A few grim facts and statistics are always good for a heads up. According to a survey by the National Sleep Foundation in Washington, 40% of Americans are so drowsy during the day that they can’t get their work done effectively. I am always amazed that when I read books on balance or efficiency, sleep is so rarely mentioned. Without enough of it all the organizational tips in the world are essentially useless. If you are wiped out, it is hard to even program your Palm Pilot, or set your alarm clock for the

right hour. Getting rid of clutter or freezing casseroles ahead for the next week's dinners are low priorities when you are dozing off in your soup as the senior President Bush once did on a state visit to Japan. I would say that getting enough sleep is the single most important strategy in staying centered, effective, productive, creative, kind and present in your interpersonal relationships.

A study published in the *British Journal of Occupational Health and Environmental Medicine* reported that the effects of sleep deprivation are similar to being drunk. Getting less than six hours sleep can affect memory, coordination, reaction time and judgment. Drivers who had been awake for 17-19 hours performed worse than people whose blood alcohol levels were 0.05 percent, which qualifies you as a drunk driver in most European countries. In America, 62% of those polled reported feeling drowsy sometimes when driving and 27% actually admitted to dozing off behind the wheel sometime in the year they were polled. It is no wonder that 100,000 car crashes annually are attributed to fatigue.

The National Sleep Foundation estimates that sleepiness costs \$18 billion annually in lost productivity. If you add in the costs related to employee health and industrial accidents and errors, the toll is even greater. Many industrial accidents are fatigue-related. The ones most often cited are the nuclear reactor meltdowns at Chernobyl and Three-Mile Island, the Challenger disaster, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. More than half of all workers surveyed (51%) admitted that drowsiness on the job cuts down on the amount they can accomplish and the quality of what they do. I was surprised that when workers were asked to estimate how sleepiness affected their work, the average response was that it reduced their competence by 30%.

How much sleep do you need? Enough, say the experts, so that you feel rested the next day. Thomas Edison, in spite of the fact that he invented the light bulb, slept 10 hours a day- six hours at night and two two-hour naps. I need eight to nine hours of sleep to feel rested. And most people need somewhere between seven to nine hours to function optimally. The problem is that many of us make sleep a low priority, mistakenly believe that six or seven hours are enough for the average person, or think that we can make up for lost sleep over the weekend. We can't. Lost is lost, and the effects of sleep deprivation are cumulative.

Not surprisingly, women complain of drowsiness and fatigue more often than men do. Women still do the overwhelming majority of housework and child-care, even when they are married and both they and their husband work outside the home. Many women do the equivalent of two full-time jobs. On average, a married woman with children has seventeen hours less leisure time per week than her mate! The people who get the least sleep are women with children under the age of eighteen. Any mother knows that her brain comes equipped with a beeper-equivalent that goes off at night when her children stir. Feeding and calming babies, and responding to older kids who wake up in the night, not to mention waiting up for teenagers who may be out late, can seriously cut into sleep. On average, adults with kids sleep 6.7 hours a night compared to their childless peers who average 7.2 hours.

There are a whole host of reasons why people don't get enough sleep. Stealing from Peter to pay Paul in the hopes of having more hours in the day is a major one. But what about those times when you go to bed with the intention to sleep, and end up counting your anxieties instead of sheep? About 10% of Americans have chronic insomnia. Another 50% have intermittent trouble sleeping. Other than medical problems, which should always be ruled out first, the most common causes of insomnia are depression and stress. Sleep clinics are popping up in major cities all over the country. And a major study showed that an eight-week sleep program was more effective in curing insomnia than sleeping pills.

So what do these sleep clinics teach? Although the curricula vary, stress reduction and relaxation skills are major components. Learning how to come back to your center allows you to let go of afflicting thoughts, reduce muscle tension and come into the present moment so that sleep comes naturally. Common sense can also help you sleep. Eliminating stimulants like caffeine and nicotine is an obvious strategy. But television and even reading can also act as stimulants. If you are using your bed as an office, give it up. Working, eating and any activities other than sleeping and sex in your bed can create a chronic pattern of sleeplessness. And naps, while rejuvenating, need to be limited to 30 minutes or less. Extraneous noise, lights (even on a clock), pets or children who jump on you, or a room that is too warm are obvious sources of trouble.

When I ran a stress disorders clinic, my suggestion was for patients to get into bed, say their prayers if that was part of their practice, then do a progressive muscle relaxation exercise, starting with the muscles of the head and working down to the feet. If they were still awake at the end of the relaxation, it was a perfect time to meditate. The experts agree, though, that if you can't fall asleep within twenty minutes, it is best to get up and do something relaxing, like take a hot bath or drink a glass of herbal tea or warm milk, until you feel drowsy and ready to try again. Some people fall asleep easily, but then awaken in the middle of the night or in the very early morning. Relaxation and meditation are wonderful practices for these times as well. For complete instructions on progressive muscle relaxation, meditation and other stress-reducers, you might enjoy reading my New York Times bestseller, *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* which was based on the clinical programs that I directed at two Harvard affiliated teaching hospitals.

Good luck and sweet dreams!