



Suicide and the Health Risks of Lack of Sleep

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As a sleep researcher, I find myself speaking with a wide variety of audiences about the importance of sleep. Across these audiences, whether a group of healthcare professionals, or individuals from the community, a few things are constant. First, a sizable number of them will have caffeinated drinks regardless of the time of day. Second, all of them will agree with me from the outset, that sleep is important. Despite this agreement, only a small minority of the audience will be getting the 7-8 hours of sleep recommended by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. There are many good reasons for this, as we all lead busy lives, have tight deadlines, and have other ways to justify missing the sleep.



Health Impacts of Lack of Sleep

Sleep deprivation has a much larger impact on us than most realize. In a landmark study, [Van Dongen and colleagues](#) examined the cognitive performance of individuals at different levels of sleep deprivation. Remarkably, they found that *individuals who had six hours of sleep per night over a period of 14 days showed the same cognitive impairments as participants who had not been allowed to sleep for two full days!* In fact, the only difference between the groups was that the group that had not been allowed to sleep for two days knew they were impaired, whereas the group receiving six hours per night were completely unaware of their impairment. Think about that: sleeping just one hour less than the recommended minimum was associated with meaningful cognitive deficits. Sleep deprivation has been shown to be associated with [increased aggression](#), reduced ability to [tolerate frustration](#), deficits in [moral reasoning](#), and even [auto crashes](#) and [suicide risk](#).

Sleep Deprivation and Suicide Risk

Specific to suicide, prior research has found short sleep duration and sleep deprivation to be associated with suicide attempts in [both military](#) and [civilian](#) samples. In a [large sample obtained from the National Comorbidity Survey](#), short sleep duration was found to be associated with 2.5 times greater risk of suicidal ideation and 3.0 times greater risk of suicide attempt. Further, in a [study of returning Operation Iraqi Freedom soldiers](#), 72% of whom slept 6 or fewer hours per night, short sleep duration was found to be associated with several negative outcomes, including significant symptoms of PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and suicide attempts. Although very much in its infancy, there are data suggesting that [treating sleep disorders](#) may [reduce suicide risk](#).

In addition, nightmares (defined as disturbing, visual dream sequences that lead to a startled awakening) have been shown to be associated with: [suicidal ideation](#); [non-fatal suicide attempts](#) as well as [deaths by suicide](#). To learn more about this topic, please watch the archived recording of a recent webinar I presented in, "[Nightmares and Suicide: Empirical Evidence and Intervention with Imagery Rehearsal Therapy](#)."

Positive Impacts of Adequate Sleep

We already discussed the negative outcomes, but what about the positive? First, getting enough sleep will help you [do more](#). You read that right, you will be more productive if you allow yourself to sleep. The increased productivity comes from several sources. First, those who get more sleep [get sick less often](#), have fewer injuries, and miss fewer days of work. Further, research suggests that those who [work 40-50 hours per week are more productive](#) than those who work more hours, on average. Those extra hours of work may feel like they are helping, but in actuality they are making us *less* productive.

Therefore, I invite you to prioritize your sleep. In fact, not doing so puts both you and others at risk.

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