



Sleep Health: An Essential Component of Self-Care

by Kenda Riggs

“Sleep is the best medication.”

~ Dalai Lama

With the new year upon us, many teachers often think about ways to do things differently or how to become a healthier version of themselves. Common new year's resolutions tend to center around self-care and having a more balanced lifestyle. Many of you will make new year's resolutions with a goal of having better work-life integration in your lives. However, as teachers, you are empathic individuals, whereby teaching is your vocation. These goals should be viewed as part of your overall health and wellness, rather than a resolution to be conquered. Although well-intentioned, schedules and increased demands of work and family responsibilities can often interfere with long-term follow through with new year's resolutions or intentions. This can often result in a sense of failure or letdown. As you recognize the importance of self-care and being the healthiest version of yourselves, some of you may continue to do good self-care because it is integrated into your lives. For others, self-care may be one of the first areas to go when stress builds.

Sleep Health

Sleep health is an essential component of self-care and is the foundation for good health. Sleep is important as it provides physical energy restoration, improved information processing, mood regulation, strengthens the immune system, and cleanses the brain of toxins. It is important to recognize that sleep for the mind and body is a necessity of life, and it is just as important as food. Sleep and rest can help your body fight diseases and illnesses, and help you get well faster. Sleep is also necessary for learning and memory.

With the layers of accumulative personal and professional stressors in the early winter months of teaching, it can be very easy to become fatigued with exhaustion, and many teachers often report sleep interruption as being one of the impacts they experience because of stress. Research has shown that if your sleep is interrupted, it can have a profound effect on performance, and can

compromise your immune system. Sleep deprivation can negatively affect focus and concentration and can lead to mistakes happening. Lack of sleep can make you feel more emotional and irritable, and you often cannot think clearly resulting in brain fog. Ultimately, stress can impact your quality of sleep, which directly affects your overall quality of health and well-being. Therefore, a sustainable goal that is important to integrate into your routine for health and wellness should focus on adequate sleep.

Improving Sleep Health

Good regular sleep habits are important to have on a nightly basis, so that in times of increased personal or professional stress, sleep disturbances or insomnia related to stress does not become a chronic problem. In addition to trying to find ways to reduce the stress you are experiencing, here are some helpful tips to improve your overall sleep health and wellness.

- **Waking the Same Time Each Day** (even on weekends and holidays)

Sleeping in makes it harder to fall asleep the following night, therefore, this behavior can completely change your sleep routine. Even though it may initially feel good to 'catch up' on missed sleep the first day, your sleep schedule becomes altered which impacts when you do have to return to a regular workday with an early rise.

- **Bright Light in the Mornings**

Light helps with alertness, as it resets your circadian rhythm which are the times you naturally want to wake up and go to sleep. Natural light through opening your curtains or blinds in your windows when you awake, momentarily stepping outdoors to breathe in the fresh air, or using an energy light while getting ready in the mornings can help.

- **Avoid Naps or Over Consumption of Caffeine/Energy Drinks**

For most people, it is not harmful to consume up to 400 mg of caffeine per day. However, overconsumption of caffeine can cause health

problems such as restlessness, shakiness, and insomnia. It is important to remember that it is normal to feel sleepy mid-afternoon. If you give yourself time, the afternoon lull will pass. Drink cold clear water to cleanse your system and to feel alert.

• **Release Your Thoughts**

Worry thoughts can consume us. Take a few minutes to write them out, journal in the evening or before bed, and take a few minutes to organize your 'to-do' list in your planner. You can also talk with a supportive partner, friend, family member, or counsellor. Activities such as yoga, mindfulness and meditation can help with relaxing your mind, and helps with staying present and in-the-moment.

• **Schedule 'Down Time' Before Bed**

Your body and mind need time to prepare for sleep. In the 60-90 minutes before bed time, engage in activities that are sedentary and relaxing. This means putting aside electronics such as iPhone or iPad, taking a warm bath, or listening to an audiobook or calming music. Train your mind to calm and settle before going to sleep.

• **Create a Comfort Haven**

Make your bedroom a comfortable place with dim lighting, and ensure your bed is comfy and cozy. A weighted blanket on your bed can help. Your bedroom should be a place of calm, quiet and relaxation. Ensure you do not bring any work into your bedroom, as this can cause your mind to wind up versus down. Ensure there is no television on and organize your clothing and belongings. For some, a soothing sound machine can provide calming background noise to help with sleeping.

• **Don't 'Try' to Sleep**

The more we try to sleep, the more frustrated we get and the harder it becomes to fall asleep. Lying awake watching the minutes and hours on a clock pass, while feeling exhausted and unable to sleep, is not helpful. Instead of trying to fall asleep, get out of bed and go to another room to do something quiet and sedentary, like listening to soft music, an audio book or podcast, meditation, or do some deep breathing until you feel sleepy.

When Sleep Disruption Becomes Chronic

Most times, with focused intervention and deliberate sleep health self-care, sleep disruption can resolve on its own. However, if insomnia continues for more than a two-week period, you should get help by contacting your physician. If sleep disruption continues to persist with insomnia for more than three months, other clinical interventions should be explored. Chronic sleep deprivation causes inflammation, decreases immunity, and increases

the risk of chronic diseases. It can also cause hormonal difficulties, as well as lead to long term mood disorders like depression and anxiety. It is important to seek help. As well, if you have trouble with breathing at night, you could have a condition called sleep apnea, which can cause loud snoring and excessive drowsiness during waking hours. It would be important to seek medical consultation in this circumstance.

Under the EAP for Teachers program, there are therapists who specifically deal with chronic insomnia, prolonged sleep disruption, or sleep disorders. If the strategies for improving sleep health are not helpful for you, there may be an underlying cause to your sleep issue that needs to be explored.

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“Prioritizing sleep is good self-love.”

~ Danielle Laporte



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