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Sleep: Some Suggestions

You tap your energies best when you get enough and the right kind of sleep. But what is that? You're the doctor here. I refuse to advise anybody how to sleep or when to take naps. For sleep is a total adjustment of mind and body; and we can understand its cycles only when we know intimately the personality of the sleeper. It is an expression and adjustment of the entire individual, just as are diet and exercise and mental work. Rules are treacherous, if taken literally. Here is one of the weakest aspects of school-taught hygiene today. Those who teach it fail to make due allowances for individual differences. They convert gross statistical tendencies into iron-clad "laws of health."

In his useful little book, "Psychology in Daily Life," Carl E. Seashore tells how the physical director at Yale set him right in the matter of sleep. Seashore had been feeling tired through the day and went to the director for advice. The director told him that a "Christian gentleman always took a nap at noon." Seashore tried it and found that it worked beautifully. He increased his efficiency and good spirits. No drugs nor

diet! Just a fifteen-minute doze! So, with the sincere desire of helping mankind, Seashore passed the glad tidings along in his book. There he suggests the following rule:

"Cut short the long, light sleep of the late morning hours and substitute a short sleep at some favorable time during the day. Fifteen minutes of sleep after the heaviest work and the main meal of the day will count more for efficiency than five times fifteen minutes of sleep in the morning."

No doubt this is an excellent procedure for thousands of people. They try it and find it is good. But it is madness for thousands of others. Seashore and the physical director do not realize that sleep patterns vary enormously from individual to individual. They do not realize that such differences, while largely caused by infantile and vocational habits, are also rooted in the subtlest of physiological differences, such as the basal metabolism, the individual nerve and muscle tone, and the individual digestive pattern.

The matter is too intricate to dilate upon here. Enough to say that I have found, both in myself and in others whose sleep patterns I have studied, no surer way to ruin the whole day than to take a nap during it. I am not talking theory but bitter experience when I say that my effort to apply the foregoing rule to myself caused me more indigestion, mental depression and general inefficiency during the months of trial than anything else I ever did, save influenza. Out of sixty

days when I checked on the results of the midday nap, fifty-four of them found me totally unable to read, think, or do any other kind of brain work for five or six hours after the nap. And some friends who made the same trial had similar, though not so extreme, bad results.

The traditional rule of eight hours of sleep may not fit your case at all. Some people require much more, especially in winter. Many get along easily on four or five hours. Studies of women operators in high-grade factories show that every increase in the length of sleep from five to nine hours improves the workers' output measurably. Naturally, the greatest improvement occurs as sleeping is prolonged from five hours nightly up to seven hours. Odd individual differences come to light here. Some women do worse on six hours' sleep than on five. But all of them do better on seven hours, still better on eight, and best of all on nine. Not a single case has been found, so far as I can ascertain, in which a worker did worse by lengthening sleep beyond seven hours.

On the other hand, Fred A. Moss has shown that normal people can be kept awake from sixty to eighty hours without noticeably reducing their ability to use their wits and muscles, except during the early stages of sleeplessness, when all the forces of habit rally against the effort to do something unusual.

Moss tested his subjects in automobile driving, among other things, and noted that the

crisis came between the forty-fifth and fiftieth hours. Then a man would fall asleep while at the wheel. Once through the fiftieth wide-awake hour, though, he would grow less drowsy and more skillful. In general, this agrees with both common opinion and similar evidence from other tests.

The striking fact emerging from all studies of sleep is this: they prove almost everything and anything. The conclusions and results are so various when not diametrically opposed that only one general conclusion is possible. There are no universal sleep habits or rules, *with the single exception that sleep follows complete muscular relaxation.*

Many people claim to be greatly disturbed by noises. The relation of the latter to sleep has lately been studied by H. M. Johnson and his colleagues at the Mellon Institute. Here are some of their findings.

As with all other stimuli, those which distract are those to which we attend. Many people claim that street traffic, for example, interferes with their sleep. Yet the investigators have found that although street noises are most abated between two and four-thirty in the morning, this is not the time when their subjects stir the least in sleep. Most of them, in fact, rest most quietly between three-quarters of an hour and an hour and a half after going to bed. And their deepest sleep, as a rule, falls during the hours of moderately noisy street traffic. Furthermore, Dr.

Kreidl and Dr. Herz of Vienna have found that deaf people do not rest more quietly than do people with normal hearing.

Under certain conditions, indeed, many people report that noise is an aid to sleep while quiet disturbs it. Thus with many city dwellers vacationing in the country whose sleep is disturbed by the "deafening silence." Often, too, deep sleep seems rather to accompany than to be prevented by increased intensity and volume of noise. In his own case, Johnson found that he slept well while living on an island where the noise of the pounding of breakers and the rustling of trees was fully fifty times as great as that of his usual environment.

Hence it seems probable that noise *in general* has little or no correlation with soundness of sleep. Whether it arouses you or not depends on the type of noise. Whether you are accustomed to it or not, whether you are slightly awake when you notice it, whether the bedding is too heavy or light, and whether the noise has any special relation to your own nature and habits—all this is decisive.