Source: The Straits Times, Page B11
Date: 14 March 2021

Most people acknowledge that sleep, something we spend a quarter to a third of our lives on, is in need of improvement, but the collective will to shift accustomed lifestyles to make time for sleep is weak, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

ScienceTalk

Chance for S'pore to relook attitudes on sleep, use of time

Pandemic offers reason to restructure way these issues are managed

Michael Chee

Most people today acknowledge that sleep, something we spend a quarter to a third of our lives on, is in need of improvement.

However, not unlike New Year resolutions to exercise more and/or eat more healthily, mental notes to self about sleep quickly fall aside on the ceaseless treadmill of news, work, social obligations and activities.

This year, however, the annually recurring parade of sleep tips, foods, hacks, beds, aromas and diagnostic tests merits a relook.

The far-reaching impact of Covid-19 on everyone gives us reason to re-examine societal attitudes to sleep and act with the same resolve we collectively threw at the virus.

It makes much sense to pay attention to sleep because over time, it will have greater impact on health, well-being and the economy than Covid-19.

Societies that have done better in the pandemic paid attention to scientific findings.

Thoughtful governments like Singapore's anticipated the danger of Covid-19 and worked with the public to contain its damage.

Some politicians elsewhere dressed up the inconvenient truth, proposed untenable quick fixes and skirted the issue until it became simply too catastrophic to ignore.

We should take a leaf from our success at dealing with Covid-19 and transfer this to managing sleep, productivity and well-being.

Science says that we need to pay attention to sleep.

Secondary school students in Singapore report sleeping an average of 6½ hours on weeknights.

Empirical data collected here indicates that this quantity of nocturnal sleep is insufficient for optimal vigilance performance.

Eight hours a night suffice but fewer than 15 per cent of Singapore students achieve this.

Speed of processing and, critically, mood are also consistently affected by successive nights of inadequate sleep.

Visual information is more slowly captured, distractions are harder to suppress, and temporary information storage capacity is lower when we are sleep-deprived.

Adequate sleep is important for memory encoding. Sleep-restricted students show improved memory when allowed to nap. Insufficient sleep blunts the willingness to deploy cognitive effort to perform tasks.

In sum, and contrary to popular thinking, higher cognitive performance can be achieved by setting aside time to obtain sufficient sleep.

Although electronic devices undoubtedly take up users' time, feeling the need to complete homework before going to sleep is a dominant reason why our students sleep later, and less.

Although sleep is sacrificed in the belief that it is for a better life, available data indicates that higher-performing students sleep earlier (and more adequately).

Our analysis of a United States-based data set indicates that students who better comply with both sleep and screen time recommendations achieve higher cognitive test scores.

Contemporary provisions made for employee wellness indicate recognition of the benefits of preventive measures.

However, just like improving diet and exercise, it is difficult to translate good intentions into behavioural change.

Transforming sleep is not unlike facing climate change.

Most people recognise it is a problem, but the collective will to shift accustomed lifestyles to make time for sleep is weak.

The disruption wrought by the pandemic has given us an opportunity to explore alternative ways of living and working.

Covid-19 lockdowns reduced commute times by about 110 minutes, affording the repurposing of that time for things we had less time for in the past.

For workers whose jobs were mostly not under threat during the lockdown, reduced commuting provided opportunities to allocate the time saved to family activities, exercise or sleep.

However, data indicates only a fractional increase in sleep duration of 17 minutes.

What are some of the pushbacks to changing mindsets?

The erosion of boundaries between work and personal time – the widespread expectation that one needs to be contactable and be able to answer e-mails after office hours – reduces the amount of time to recuperate mentally and physically.

Elite athletes know that improvement and maintenance of high performance requires balancing workload and rest periods.

The metabolic benefits of intermittent fasting speak to the same idea – that physiological systems cannot be constantly put under load without consequences.

To these ends, some countries have already enacted "right to disconnect" laws restricting employee contact for work reasons after office hours.

There was a parliamentary debate in Singapore about such a law to mitigate burnout and health issues.

Commentaries in the media indicate that currently, many office workers and leaders are engaged in serial Zoom meetings well into the evening.

While these can be attributed to having to deal with business uncertainties and how to adapt, the disruption should also have provided opportunities to examine how to work more efficiently.

In the case of home-based learning, anecdotal reports suggest significant diversity in how students coped.

Weaker ones showed a need for learning habits to be strengthened through face-to-face interaction, while stronger ones zoomed along.

Schools seem to have responded by uniformly raising official school contact time across the board instead of allowing this to be more adaptive.

In the future, many more students everywhere will be relying on remote learning, so creative approaches beyond pedagogy to deal with problems as well as opportunities are required.

The pandemic uncovered significant weaknesses in the governance and social fabric of some Western societies.

While these societies command thought leadership and control of many key intellectual assets, the handling of Covid-19 has shown remarkable gaps in their ability to transform good ideas into outcomes.

Singapore's ability to commit to a cause and then execute well should be extended to the realm of managing time use, work-life balance and sleep in a manner that allows its citizens to benefit.

New businesses and opportunities for thought leadership could arise from taking up this challenge.

The way that work is being restructured and education reconfigured provides a golden opportunity to transform how we value sleep, and incorporate good sleep habits into efforts to enable Singapore to emerge stronger from the pandemic.

stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

Speed of processing and, critically, mood are also consistently affected by successive nights of inadequate sleep. Visual information is more slowly captured, distractions are harder to suppress, and temporary information storage capacity is lower when we are sleep-deprived. Adequate sleep is important for memory encoding. Sleep-restricted students show improved memory when allowed to nap. Insufficient sleep blunts the willingness to deploy cognitive effort to perform tasks.

About the author

Professor Michael Chee is director of the Centre for Sleep and Cognition at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.
Permission required for reproduction