THE CATALYST

Desperately Seeking Sleep

By: Suzanne Westover | Posted: November 4, 2025

This week, the “s” word is on everyone’s lips.

Did you get enough?

Overindulge?

What about quality? Better than usual, worse?

I’m talking, of course, about sleep.

In the wake of Sunday’s time change, which brings us from Daylight Saving Time to Standard Time, an already complicated topic becomes more so.

As a society, our understanding of sleep—and its impact on everything from memory to mental health—is growing. And yet, some of us still insist that eschewing sleep is a sign of productivity. The LinkedIn stars who promise billion-dollar ideas if only you can harness 20 “productive” hours in the day.

Then there are those so desperate to maximize rest that the pursuit itself becomes a vicious cycle of fatigue.

The billion dollar question – How far would you go for a good night’s sleep?

Sleep is a billion-dollar industry. In 2023, the “sleep economy” had an estimated value of over $100 billion, and that number is only projected to rise.[1] Think apps and tracking rings; special alarm clocks and weighted blankets; melatonin and memory foam mattresses.

Ironically, the glorification of sleep, and its flip side, commodification, may only add to the pressure felt by those for whom sleep is a distant dream.

A shift in thinking

Sleep should be universally accessible. After all, it’s free and readily available. But that line of thinking fails to consider sleep from a health equity lens.

Think about shift workers, whose circadian rhythms are thrown out of whack as a matter of course. Many years ago my husband was a young ship’s officer. The “Dog Watch[2]“is a rite of passage—keeping watch on a darkened bridge from 12 a.m. to 4 a.m. every “morning,” the witching hour when staying awake is a Herculean effort, fueled by strong coffee and stale donuts. Nurses, ER docs, first responders—all are familiar with the toll taken when your body clock is at

odds with the hours you punch in.

Parents of newborns will also relate.

I recall being a new mom to a preterm baby, having to set an agonizing alarm to wake her to feed every three hours, walking around in a state of debilitating exhaustion. But the implications go beyond simply being “tired.” From cognitive impairment, to emotional lability, to slower reaction times and trouble focusing—there’s a reason sleep deprivation is a form of torture.

It’s also a drain on the nation’s wallet. According to a 2022 study in Sleep Health[3], insomnia and associated symptoms cost the Canadian economy about $1.9 billion. That includes direct costs like doctor’s visits, sleeping pills and therapies, and indirect costs, like reduced productivity.

So what does good sleep actually look like?

Adults need seven to nine hours of good-quality, uninterrupted sleep per night. But it’s not just about logging hours. Good sleep cycles through deep sleep and REM stages. Dr. Diana McMillan, a professor at the University of Manitoba’s College of Nursing, describes one process as a “pressure washer for the brain.” During sleep, your brain literally cleans out metabolic waste through the glymphatic system.

Most adults cycle through sleep stages every 70 to 110 minutes, ideally getting four to five complete cycles per night. While occasional insomnia is perfectly normal, if you often don’t feel rested after a full night’s snooze, the sleep you are getting may not be restorative.

How can I sleep better tonight?

For those who want better sleep—who aren’t constrained by demanding work schedules yet don’t want to turn rest into a data-driven obsession—focus on consistency. Go to bed at the same time every night and create a wind-down ritual. Make your bedroom a sleep sanctuary with clean sheets and dark blinds. Avoid alcohol before bed, as it disrupts REM sleep.

Set tech boundaries: No TV in the bedroom, and definitely no laptops or tablets in bed. Blue light tricks your brain into thinking it's wake time. If your bedroom doubles as a home office, use a room divider to block work stress triggers.

Why do I still feel tired after eight hours?

Quality matters more than quantity. Health conditions like sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome, or anxiety disorders can hijack high-quality sleep.

Dr. Rébecca Robillard, director of clinical sleep research at the University of Ottawa, explains that even your "silent" phone might be sabotaging rest with subtle sounds that disturb restorative sleep without fully waking you. If you use your phone as an alarm, put it at a safe distance.

What about sleep-tracking technology?

Until fairly recently, our only sleep hack was counting sheep, which likely dates back to medieval shepherds.

But the advent of sophisticated sleep measurement metrics isn't strictly a good thing. Some people develop "orthosomnia"—an obsession with sleep data that actually worsens sleep. Dr. Robillard suggests taking sleep scores "with a big grain of salt," noting "If you feel like you slept better, you probably did." Your body is often a better judge than your smartwatch.

But what if good sleep feels impossible?

Here's where we need to discuss sleep equity. Not everyone has equal access to quality rest. The standard advice doesn't apply to shift workers, new parents, or people working multiple jobs. As Dr. Robillard notes: "Telling people they need to sleep more doesn't really resonate with a single mom who has two jobs and four kids."

Instead of "sleep shaming," we need to address systemic barriers. Some researchers suggest starting with daylight saving time policies, which are associated with surges in hospitalizations from accidents and self-harm.

When should I worry about my sleep?

Dr. McMillan's rule: "If you're having trouble sleeping or don't feel rested after a night's sleep for more than three months, talk to your primary care practitioner." Poor sleep can signal underlying health conditions and lead to serious long-term consequences including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mental health disorders.

If basic sleep hygiene isn't helping, consider Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I). Dr. Robillard emphasizes this should be "first-line treatment" before medications.

The bottom line

From Sleeping Beauty's hundred-year slumber to the Princess and the Pea's quest for perfect rest, our cultural stories have long recognized that sleep is both essential and elusive.

And while we've evolved from counting sheep to tracking REM cycles on our wrists, the fundamental human struggle with rest remains unchanged.

Sleep is finally getting respect as a health pillar alongside nutrition and exercise. The bidirectional relationship between sleep and mental health is compelling enough that experts are calling sleep a public health priority.

But here's the most important takeaway: be kind to yourself about sleep. Perfect sleep isn't always possible for everyone. Focus on what you can control, seek help when needed, and remember that even small improvements make a meaningful difference.

And let's not forget sleep's most ancient promise.

Tomorrow, we get to try again.

Further reading: Sleep and Mental Health – what's the connection?

1. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/costofliving/sleep-economy-personal-business-costs-1.7470221
2. The name itself is likely a literal translation from the Dutch or German, meaning "dog's time." As in only dogs should be awake at this hour.
3. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36319579/

Author: Suzanne Westover

An Ottawa writer and former speechwriter, and Manager of Communications at the Mental Health Commission of Canada. A homebody who always has her nose in a book, she bakes a mean lemon loaf (some would call her a one-dish wonder) and enjoys watching movies with her husband and 14-year-old daughter. Suzanne's time with the MHCC cemented her interest in mental health, and she remains a life-long learner on the subject.

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca