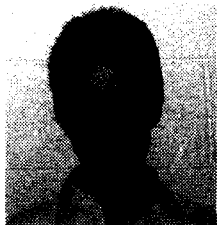


College students don't get enough sleep

Only 11 percent get the 8-10 hours per night recommended by physicians

BY RACHEL SHEPHERD
Capital Times Staff Reporter



Eight hours, that is the length of time it takes to fly to San Diego with one stop in Detroit, an average work day, and a recommended night's rest. However, eight hours to a college student can be anything but getting some zzzzz's.

"On average, I get about four to five hours of sleep a night," said Jen Anderson, elementary education major at Penn State Harrisburg (PSH). "My school work is my priority and I will stay up until it is finished."

Anderson is not alone. College students are among the most sleep-deprived people in the country. According to a 2001 study of students, only 11 percent have good sleep quality. The norm for a good rest is about 8 to 10 hours a night.

"Students can't afford to skip much sleep," said Linda Meashey, staff psychologist at PSH. "While the idea of time management and keeping a schedule can seem boring, the truth is we function best when we have a balance in our lives."

She says eight hours of sleep is not a bad guideline. She suggests monitoring how long you naturally sleep when you are not waking up to an alarm clock. Also, if you have daytime drowsiness she suggests going to bed a little earlier and see if your energy and performance improve.

Students say they just can not accomplish their sleep goals with the demands that are heaped on them in both their school and personal life. Dan Bink, networking major at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC), said, "With work, class and a personal life, my sleep alternates from about three to five hours on school nights and about 8 to 11 hours on weekends."

But students admit that the lack of sleep catches up with them. Bink says his sleeping schedule throws everything off and he usually ends up putting off work and things he needs to get done.

"I get about six hours of sleep a night and I don't function well at all," said Ashley Fisher, secondary education major at HACC. "I drive an hour to class at 7 a.m. and it is a constant battle to keep my eyes open. Then when my classes start, I am still fighting my urge to sleep."

Fisher resorts to 30 minute naps in between classes, which experts say aren't such a bad idea, as long as they don't exceed that time. Napping for long periods of time can make you drowsy and interfere with a good night's sleep.

These affects are all part of the many consequences of sleep deprivation. "Without enough sleep, your attention span is shorter, and you can become increasingly irritable," said Ida Friedman, director of the Cowell Student Health Center. "55 percent of drowsy driving fatalities occur under the age of 25. Sleep is a key to mood regulation, cognitive performance and health in general."

To those students who say they don't have enough time to sleep, Friedman says, "You don't have a choice." She explains that the brain never rests, even when you are asleep. It remains electrically and metabolically active, tending to its nighttime tasks as you snooze away.

"Recordings of the electrical impulses from the brain show two distinct kinds of sleep: REM (Rapid Eye Movement) or 'dream sleep' and NREM (Non-Rapid Eye Movement)," she says. Each one performs its own function: NREM helps you concentrate during the day and REM assists with short and long-term memory.

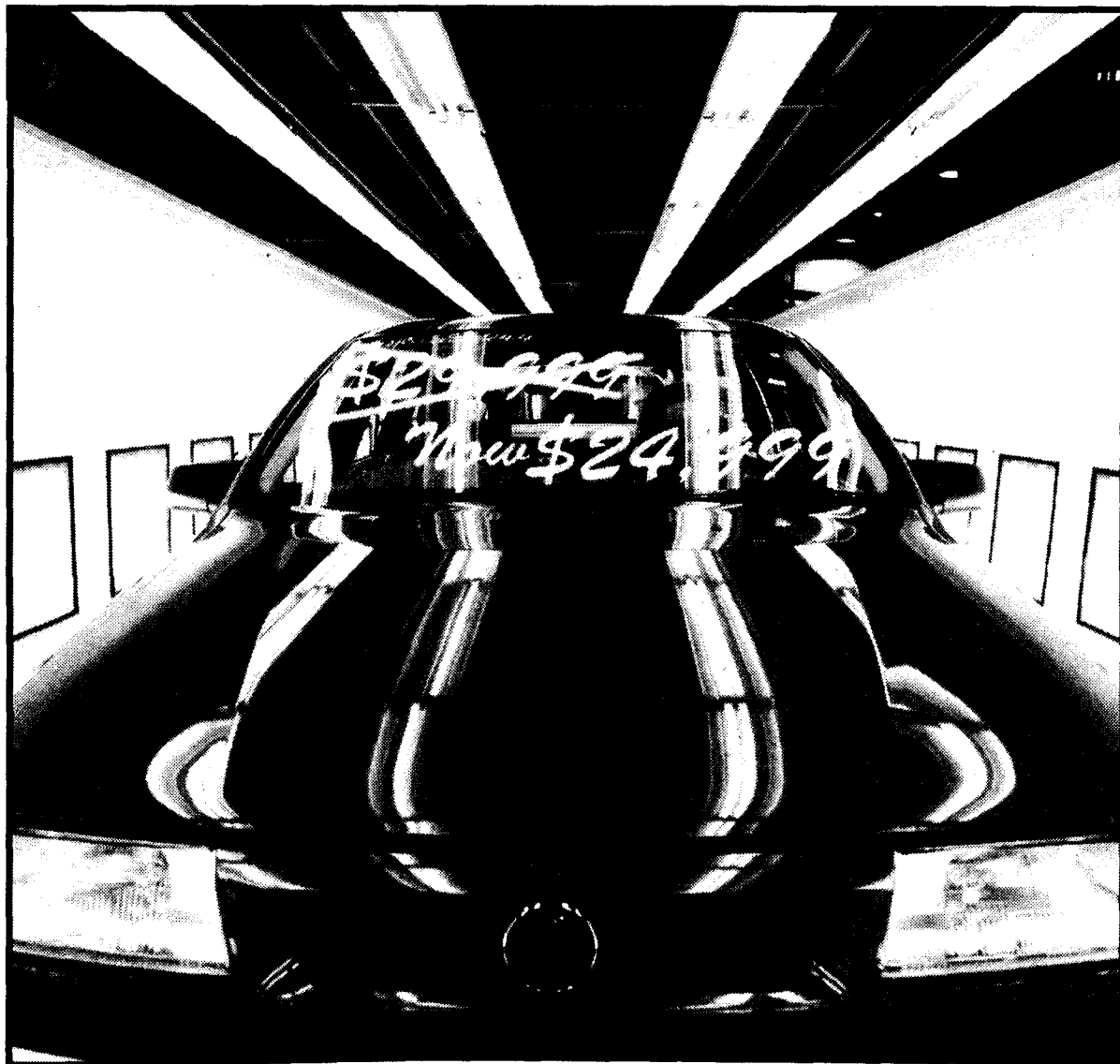
Experts say the best thing to do is to get sleep. To do that may take some added incentive and some discipline on the part of the student. Meashey suggests avoiding caffeine after noon and avoiding naps unless they help you sleep better at night.

"Aim for a regular routine," she said. "Wind down before bed. Turn off the phone and the computer... and anything else you may find stimulating." She also said that while alcohol may help you fall asleep, it interferes with the quality of sleep.

The aforementioned health problems are not caused by sleep deprivation, sleep difficulties are symptoms of those problems. For example, if you have insomnia that persists you should be checked out by a health care professional to see if there are other causes such as depression or anxiety.

Not to confuse things further, but sleep deprivation lowers immunity to all sorts of illness, but doesn't cause them per se. Maybe we should get those zzzzzzz's.

"Remember, sleep is an important indicator of health," said Meashey. "So if you are having sleep problems that continue for more than a brief period, see your health care provider."



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