Sleep Mysteries continued from B1

Epoch Times: How much sleep do we need?

Dr. Horne: There are individual differences and natural variation around sleep. In the United States, over the last hundred years, the average amount of sleep people get is dropping, even in children. It really hasn’t changed very much.

But you have to judge sleep on its duration, because quality of sleep is just as important. For example, something like good quality sleep is far better than 10 hours of poor or interrupted sleep.

There are individual differences in how much sleep people need. For people who suffer from insomnia, the idea that they don’t get more sleep is they’re liable to suffer from obesity, cardiovascular disease, or whatever, can be a great way of understanding, but it really needs a more comprehensive research.

The biggest risk for people who are not getting enough sleep is being busy during the day, and the consequences of having an accident as a result of the sleepiness.

One of the most important factors to improve one’s sleep is peace of mind at bedtime. If you are not getting enough sleep, you should do something about it.

How much sleep do we need?

Dr. Horne: It seems to be fairly recent in our striving for seven or eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. It used to be fairly common to keep an eye on the clock, and you would go to sleep in the evening for two to three hours, then you’d get up for a while, and then you’d go back to bed for a second sleep.

An unbroken seven or eight hours of sleep is probably more associated with the industrial age. Electric lighting has affected our body clock to some extent, and our perception of time. A lot of evidence suggests that our shifting seven or eight hours of unbroken sleep at night is probably fairly recent in our history.

Are there any advantages to splitting our sleep?

Dr. Horne: Historically, one of the most common forms of insomnia is to wake up in the middle of the night for an hour or so and then not be able to fall back asleep. One wonders whether this is a phenomenon of older times.

We all have a dip in energy in the early afternoon, and because we’re probably naturally designed to have two sleep days, one long one at night and another one in the early to mid-morning. A nap in the afternoon can be beneficial for many people.

Epoch Times: We often hear concerns about not getting enough sleep, but can’t take more than we need?

Dr. Horne: One of the important things to consider is that one can’t sleep for pleasure, as well as for need. Like any biological function, you can indulge in it, in the same way we can eat too much food or have a drink too much. What’s important is not to allow your sleep to interfere with your usual function. It’s not simple to get rid of chronically, or for pleasure, but for purpose.

Epoch Times: Do you have any insights about dreams? What function do they serve?

Dr. Horne: Dreaming is something we don’t understand enough. We don’t dream and resolve our inner worries and conflicts as Freud suggested. But we’re right in that dreams are what we think. Dreams are a mirror of what you’re thinking, doing, and what is on your mind during wakefulness.

Dreams happen during REM sleep. REM sleep generates internal stimulation to keep you awake, but it is also carrying a tap open to listen for danger so you can wake up if necessary.

You can think of your brain as a computer. If you awaken during sleep, in the middle of the night, it takes time for the team to boot up. Whereas REM sleep is more like the sorting routine.

We dream about four times a night, for a total of about an hour and a half. We often have no record of these dreams unless we awaken quickly, but we can generally only recall the last few minutes of awake time.

Most dreaming occurs toward the end of the night. So by the time we’re in our third or fourth processes at the beginning, and as sleep progresses, it gets less and less vital. So whatever is more loaded toward the end of sleep, such as dreaming, is less important or essential.

Dreams are a phenomenon, but I think the only person who can interpret dreams is the dreamer himself. Someone else-who doesn’t know what you’ve been up to, what you’ve been thinking and doing, and what’s been on your mind-is going to have great difficulty understanding what a dream means.

Epoch Times: So if you dream of a mushroom, for example, this doesn’t universally symbolize the same thing for everybody?

Dr. Horne: Right, some people may dream of mushrooms because they enjoy mushroom soup. Other people might associate mushrooms with a nuclear cloud.

Epoch Times: What direction would you like to see research take?

Dr. Horne: I think there are areas where researchers spend too much time understanding sleep solely from a laboratory. Sleep is more flexible than we think. People who sleep a lot might be one group as compared to people who don’t. I think there needs to be more longitudinal sleep studies and less cross-sectional studies.

The reason we sleep is to avoid sleepiness in the daytime. But we need to think more broadly in our understanding of sleep beyond just alleviating sleepiness. How does sleep affect our cognitive function and our ability to think creatively? These are things that are difficult to measure.

There are probably too many ways to measure sleepiness, and we are attracted to the technology. But perhaps we should stop dogging a bit, and not be driven so much by things that are easy to measure.

Epoch Times: Do you have any insights about natural medicine, clinical nutrition, and author of “Fat Diet” and “Fat Girl Cookbook.” He operates one of the world’s largest natural health websites at DrAxe.com

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