Article #1

Sleep and Learning

Did you know sleep helps you learn? Sleep is more important than what has been commonly believed. An increasing amount of animal and human research shows that sleep helps us secure our memories and improve our ability to learn.

But so many Americans skimp on shut eye! The National Sleep Foundation surveyed approximately 1,000 people. Almost one-third of them reported getting less than seven hours of sleep per night during the week.

Scientists have long debated the importance of sleep, especially in learning. Recent studies indicate sleep particularly assists procedural memories, a type of memory that is required to learn skills. If you'd like to improve your performance on a video game, a gymnastics move, or playing the piano, get some sleep.

To come to this conclusion, researchers trained people to complete a memory-based task and then determined if sleep boosted their results. For example, participants learned a sequence on a keyboard. Group 1 trained in the morning and was tested on the sequence 12 hours later. They showed no significant improvement. However, the next day, after at least seven hours of sleep, they had improved by almost 20%. Group 2 trained at night, went to sleep, and in the morning were also 20% better. After 12 hours they had not improved any more. This seemed to show that sleep, not time, helped them to learn.

Even a nap in the middle of the day may benefit learning. Researchers divided participants into three groups and taught them a complex memory task that was more and more difficult over four sessions. Group One became worse after every session. Group Two had a half hour nap after session two and their scores remained the same. Group Three had an hour nap and showed improvement. Sleep helped!

Researchers have more plans in store for future studies to solidify the role of sleep in learning. Just in case, it's probably a good idea to turn off the screen and catch some zzzz's.