The power of sleep

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In our regular day, the first thing we often sacrifice is sleep. We give up minutes or hours of sleep for productivity, social obligations, or endless scrolling on our phones. Many of us think we have weekends to catch up on sleep, and there are even those who boast that they do not really need much sleep to function.

But science tells a different story — sleep is not just a passive state of rest, but an active process vital to every part of our health — from our brain to our immune system.

Many still ask: What is good sleep, exactly? The National Sleep Foundation based in the US defines "good sleep" as getting seven to nine hours of uninterrupted rest for adults, falling asleep within 20 minutes of lying down, staying asleep through the night, and waking up feeling refreshed. These qualities of sleep are more important than simply lying in bed for a set number of hours.

Good sleep is essential because it is when the body conducts vital maintenance. During deep sleep, cells repair themselves, tissues heal, and growth hormones are released. The immune system is strengthened to fight infections. The brain consolidates memories, processes emotions, and removes toxins. Studies show that those who consistently get less than six hours of sleep are more likely to develop heart disease, stroke, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and depression.

According to a Philippine National Nutrition Survey, about 46 percent of adult Filipinos report poor sleep quality, while nearly 32 percent sleep fewer than six hours per night.

These statistics should cause us to worry because chronic sleep deprivation also impairs judgment, weakens the immune system, and increases the risk of accidents—whether on the road or at work.

One clear example of sleep's critical role is its effect on driving. The World Health Organization cites drowsy driving as a major contributor to road crashes worldwide. Lack of sleep slows reaction time as much as alcohol intoxication. A driver awake for 18 hours can have impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent—enough to cause mistakes that can cost lives. So why is sleep so elusive? Stress is a major culprit. We worry about work, finances, relationships, or health and that can keep minds racing at night.

Also, the rise of digital devices has worsened the problem. The blue light from screens inhibits melatonin, the hormone that tells our body it's time to sleep, tricking our brain into staying awake, according to studies.

In a culture that often equates sleeplessness with dedication or toughness, we must remember: sleep is not a weakness. It is a fundamental pillar of good health.

Add to that noise (from television, neighbors, motor vehicles), uncomfortable beds, irregular schedules, caffeine or alcohol — to name only a few of the factors keeping a good sleep away.

But studies on sleep have enumerated proven ways to reclaim good sleep. First, keep a consistent sleep schedule: going to bed and waking up at the same time each day helps your body's circadian rhythm stay on track. A stable schedule trains your brain to feel sleepy and alert at predictable times.

Second, create a sleep-friendly environment. Make your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet. Use blackout curtains, eye masks, earplugs, or white noise machines to block disturbances. Invest in a comfortable mattress and pillows .

Third, develop a bedtime routine to signal your body that it's time to wind down. Avoid gadget screens for at least an hour before bed. Try reading a physical book, taking a warm shower, practicing deep breathing, or gentle stretching. These rituals help calm the mind and body, making it easier to fall asleep.

Still on sleep and gadgets, the results of a study released last April said people who spend more time looking at a screen in bed are more likely to report insomnia and sleep loss. The research is based on a Norwegian survey of more than 45,000 students.

The study said each additional hour of screen time was linked to a 63 percent increase in insomnia risk, and 24 minutes less sleep.

Fourth, be attentive to what you consume the whole day, especially at the end of the afternoon. Avoid caffeine after mid-afternoon, as it can stay in your system for six to eight hours. Alcohol brings on drowsiness that puts you to sleep, but it disrupts deep sleep later in the night.

Fifth, stay active during the day. Regular exercise helps you fall asleep faster and enjoy deeper sleep. Although the studies say you should avoid vigorous workouts within a few hours of bedtime as they can be too stimulating, this does not work for me. I walk with a cyber coach before midnight and I sleep well after the session.

Short naps of about 20 to 30 minutes can restore energy, but long or late-day naps can make falling asleep at night more difficult.

Those who are experiencing chronic insomnia or symptoms of sleep disorders such as sleep apnea — loud snoring, gasping for air, or excessive daytime sleepiness — consulting a doctor or sleep specialist is crucial. These conditions are treatable, and proper diagnosis can dramatically improve health and quality of life.

In a culture that often equates sleeplessness with dedication or toughness, we must remember: sleep is not a weakness. It is a fundamental pillar of good health, just like nutrition and exercise. By prioritizing restful sleep, we protect our hearts, sharpen our minds, stabilize our moods, and live longer, healthier lives.

Tonight — and every night — let us choose to rest well. Because tomorrow's success begins with today's sleep.