Dear Alice,

I would ideally love to maintain a consistent exercise routine. However, there are stretches of time during which I get very little sleep, due either to a hectic schedule or a lot of stress. During these times (sometimes one or two weeks), I find it almost impossible to go work out. I'm simply too fatigued (I don't drink caffeine because it disrupts my sleep— even one cup in the morning!). The result is that I start to get flabby and untoned, and I then I tend to fluctuate between almost-toned to back-to-flabby.

My question is, what is the relationship between sleep deprivation and exercise? When you are very tired and have been getting little sleep for several days, is it better to just take it easy and let your exercise program go, or is it better to persist and work out anyway, albeit at a lower intensity?

I have bouts of insomnia, so it's not too helpful to just say "try to get more sleep." Sometimes I just can't.

? Tired and Flabby

Answer

Dear Tired and Flabby,

Don't run yourself ragged! It seems that there is a larger issue here: not getting enough sleep. Sleep deprivation increases your risk of developing cognitive problems and chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity. Exercising every day is a great way to help you get back into a healthy sleep routine. In addition, regular exercise may help control weight, protect against certain health conditions and diseases, boost energy, improve your mood, and have a positive effect on your sex life (oh, baby!). However, research has shown that a lack of sleep can undermine the awesome health benefits of exercise.
Sleep affects important hormonal activity tied to appetite and therefore has a direct impact on your ability to lose weight (i.e. body fat). Leptin (a hormone secreted by our fat cells) and ghrelin (a hormone secreted in our stomachs) work like a checks and balances system in the body and control your feelings of fullness and hunger. When you don't get enough sleep, your leptin levels drop and your ghrelin levels rise. In other words, sleep deprivation makes you more likely to crave sugary, high-carb foods (thanks to higher levels of ghrelin) that have the potential to sabotage your diet. Finally, sleep releases growth hormone, which is extremely important for tissue repair - an important function when you're working your muscles.

Have you considered why you may be experiencing insomnia? For example, have you been under any added stress or feeling considerable anxiety? It may be helpful to try some relaxation exercises before bed, such as listening to a guided meditation, or perhaps taking a warm bath or listening to calm music. A walk after dinner may even help you wind down and start to focus on relaxing a bit in preparation for bedtime.

You can get more sleep! Here are some tips for upping your ZZZ score:

- Limit caffeine, alcohol, or nicotine close to your bedtime. These products have all been shown to interfere with sleep quality, which in turn may keep you awake at night.
- Limit naps to 20 to 30 minutes. Try to get your sleep at night, but, if napping during the day, keep 'em short and sweet to reduce grogginess and to maintain alertness and performance without disrupting your nighttime sleep.
- Exercise regularly, but try to finish up at least three hours before you plan to go to bed. While exercising daily is known to improve sleep quality exercising close to your bedtime may increase alertness, keeping you awake.
- Avoid late night eating. This may make you less comfortable when settling down for bed.
- Keep a regular bedtime schedule, even on weekends.
- Avoid exposing yourself to bright lights right before going to bed, such as bright computer and cell phone screens.
- Try to make sure your bed is used only for bedtime activities. Studying in your bed may cause your mind to associate your bed with work, thus cueing your mind to think about work instead of rest.
- Create a sleeping environment that is dark, quiet, cool, and comfortable.

Moral of the story: If you are very tired and have been getting little sleep for several days, your best bet is to hit the hay. Better to catch up on those zzz's than hit the gym or walking path sleep deprived and fuzzy-eyed. Exercise can help you stay toned and get back into a healthy sleeping pattern, but it's necessary to get enough sleep so you can actually reap the health benefits of exercise.
Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope [8]
Insomnia ? A disturbing sleep disturbance! [9]
Meditation [10]
Health benefits of yoga [11]
The downsides of sleep deprivation [12]

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Links