Staying awake for days on end — Unhealthy? [1]

Dear Alice,

Me and a few friends are planning on doing a fundraiser where we stay awake for five days straight. At first it was a great idea, but I started thinking about if there might be some serious damage to our bodies for staying awake that long. Will there be any long-term or short-term damage for staying awake for five days? If so, is it safer to stay awake for three or four days?

And how long can the body really go without sleep?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s great that you’re thinking about the impact of sleep deprivation before skipping out on getting a good night’s rest for five days. The research isn’t completely clear on how long the body can go without sleep, but the effects of sleep deprivation have been well studied. Generally speaking, staying up for five days straight would most likely have an impact on your emotional, psychological, and physical health. Knowing about these potential impacts and considering alternative fundraising activities may help you reduce the risk of health related issues resulting from lack of sleep.

Starting off with your noggin: research shows that sleep deprivation has dramatic effects on brain functioning, including impaired performance on high-level thinking tasks and shutting down of the brain's language center. As a result — if sleep deprivation continues — you may experience slowed or slurred speech, impaired hand-eye coordination, impaired memory, flattened emotional responses, apathy, and an inability to multi-task. Keep in mind, Reader, that these effects were studied among healthy males, so they may manifest or be felt differently in people with pre-existing heart complications, endocrine (hormone-related) conditions, neurological issues, metabolic (such as diabetes) diseases, or mental health conditions (such as depression or schizophrenia). In fact, sleep deprivation has been shown to trigger seizures with certain types of epilepsy and alter the severity of depression (in both positive and negative ways).

It’s not entirely clear how long a person can go without sleep, although a period of several days is probably the maximum — records have been set where individuals have stayed awake for eight
or more days. Though these people didn’t experience any serious medical consequences, they exhibited deficits in concentration, memory, and cognitive ability as the period of their sleep deprivation increased. If the fundraising activity is solely the feat of staying awake, you’ll likely not experience any long-term effects of sleep deprivation. However, since sleep deprivation is still stressful for the body, you may want to organize a shorter event or brainstorm some new ideas for your fundraiser. Instead of planning a marathon-style “you snooze, you lose” event, why not try another activity that may be just as interesting, fulfilling, and meaningful but involves less severe physical, emotional, and psychological effects? Some possibilities may be a jump rope-a-thon or a walk-a-thon where participants can earn funds by how much they jump rope or walk within a certain amount of time.

Another option you could consider if you need to stay awake to oversee the fundraiser (i.e. if you’re running a 24/7 event over several days), is that you and your friends sleep in shifts, so that you all have the chance to get some shut-eye while one or two people keep an eye on the event. Consuming moderate amounts of caffeine may be another strategy, which offers a temporary stimulant effect for mild fatigue. However, caffeine or other stimulants will most likely be of little help against severe sleep deprivation.

While the effects of sleep deprivation aren’t necessarily dangerous, when it’s paired with other behaviors that involve putting yourself or others at risk, such as driving and operating heavy machinery, it can be. So you may want to consider asking someone, who is well-rested, to give you a ride home after your fundraising event. In any case, focus on getting rest and returning to a normal sleep schedule after the event. To help you sleep better once you hit the hay, check out other shut-eye related Q&As in the [Sleep] section in the [Go Ask Alice!] archives.

Alice!
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