Sleep: Dr Heather L. Herington On Why You Should Make Getting A Good Night's Sleep A Major Priority In Your Life, And How You Can Make That Happen

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Getting a good night's sleep has so many physical, emotional, and mental benefits. Yet with all of the distractions that demand our attention, going to sleep on time and getting enough rest has become extremely elusive to many of us. Why is sleep so important and how can we make it a priority?

In this interview series called "Sleep: Why You Should Make Getting A Good Night's Sleep A Major Priority In Your Life, And How You Can Make That Happen" we are talking to medical and wellness professionals, sleep specialists, and business leaders who sell sleep accessories to share insights from their knowledge and experience about how to make getting a good night's sleep a priority in your life.

As part of this interview series, we had the pleasure to interview Dr Heather Herington. A naturopathic medical doctor for over thirty years specializing in PTS/trauma, she is also a writer (novels, nonfiction (medical), musicals, radio plays) and performer. Her latest book is Surviving a Viral Pandemic, and upcoming is Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS. Her second novel, The Sting of Absence, is also relevant for these times with its focus on ethnic cleansing and epidemics.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to ‘get to know you’. Can you tell us a bit about your background and your backstory?

I have been a naturopathic medical doctor for over thirty years specializing in PTS/trauma, initially due to the Archdiocese of Vancouver. As a child growing up in Montreal I learned early on what it was like to have serious issues with sleep. My father rocked the house with his snoring and would wake up in the middle of the night to have a smoke. He also develpoed Adult Onset Diabetes. My mother, on the other hand, could sleep through anything even with her addiction to chocolate. These bits later informed my practice, wondering why some people don’t sleep well while others close their eyes and poof! they’re off. Questions of how much sleep do people need, how deeply to function optimally, are their differences in genetics or personalities, what to do about crowded thoughts and nagging feelings, how to use natural methods to induce sleep and so on rattled my brain for years. Also a writer and performer, I extend the definition of healing modalities to include the expressive arts, and this is so important in understanding sleep patterns. We all have a story to tell and telling it can make a huge difference to our well-being. With all that I love to do, it is imperative I manage my own sleep and this, of course, has helped me to address my patients’ insomnia in a truly holistic manner. Maximizing sleep at this time in history has never been more difficult to achieve yet it has never been more important.

Can you share a story with us about what brought you to this particular career path?

I have always loved nature. After high school I went to Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick but didn’t graduate as it was the 70s and I was keen to survive and thrive in the wilderness. I moved to Cape Breton Island and after building an eight sided log house (now that was a great place to sleep — no WIFI, no sirens, not even any electricity to create some type of motorized noise) and having a daughter, I ended up with a philandering husband and left, ultimately graduating Dalhousie University with a BS in Biology. Summers I was lucky to work at Camp Discovery, learning from psychologists and psychiatrists who had trained or been influenced by Wilhelm Reich, the psychiatrist who in the 1930s coined the term body-mind connection. This experience pushed me in the direction of a more integrated approach in healthcare and after graduating Bastyr University in Seattle (then John Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine) I used both my naturopathic medical training as well as my time with the camp professionals to treat a wide range of physical, mental and/or emotional disturbances that often included sleep problems.

Can you share with our readers a bit about why you are an authority in the sleep and wellness fields? In your opinion, what is your unique contribution to the world of wellness?

Sleep in my opinion is the number one place to begin a journey to wellness. It can make or break a person. Treating people with PTS/trauma as well as my own journey forced me to consider all angles of this common disorder in these modern times. I learned early in my training that allergies can be a big deal in insomnia, snoring, even sleep apnea. Worry, with stress on the adrenals and/or the heart, also interfere with quality of sleep. Crowded thoughts and the frustration of this need to be addressed. Therefore acknowledging emotional disturbances before going to sleep is essential otherwise your brain can wake you up to find a solution to what’s troubling you. Personally, I began experiencing poor sleep after my daughter was born and with the sleeplessness gene from my dad I have been happy to investigate sleeplessness, learning many techniques, ideas and biomarkers that can lead to the break in the chain to gain deep sleep. Nutrient deficiencies, inflammatory foods, hormones or neurotransmitters imbalance as well as emotional disruption can all interfere with that coveted deep and restful sleep and need to be sorted through individually.

Is there a particular book that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?

The Body Has a Head by Gustav Eckstein from all the way back in the 70s made a huge impact on my understanding of health. My father had it in his study and at first I though it was a funny title but once I understood the body-mind connection and became curious about all the various functions of the body and the relationships to the mind it made so much sense. Our body has a mind, this connection is so obvious after all these years but many people don’t understand how the emotions and the brain and what you eat and think all get stirred together into the pot. What is manifested demands a thorough understanding of what a person eats or thinks or feels to get the best outcome.

Do you have a favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Do you have a story about

how that was relevant in your life or your work?

Regarding sleep and, honestly, so many other things that can get in the way of optimal aliveness: NEVER GIVE UP…If you can dream of anything I believe in time it can be done and there will be many ways to do it.

Achieving the goal of optimal sleep is something a person may have to work at these days and it can take months to really tune in to their deeper selves. Apparently our brain is only 5% conscious, that means we are dealing with 95% that comes from the subconscious. That's a lot of possibilities of what may be getting in the way. Some times it's a story or an event that cannot be erased as hard as one may scrub. Digging down into that takes time and hence NEVER GIVE UP on good health like sleep or finding your place in the world (which will also help sleep patterns).

Ok, thank you for all that. Now let's move to the main focus of our interview. Let's start with the basics. How much sleep should an adult get? Is there a difference between people who are young, middle-aged, or elderly?

I know people who function well on two hours! It's extraordinary. And I know people who could sleep twelve if their spouse would let them. I think ultimately there are so many factors involved and we are individual in this need. It's up to us to figure this out. For me, it's 81/2 to 9. Children need 10–12 hours a night, middle-aged like me about 8 and it is said elderly people can sleep 5–6 hours a night comfortably although in my experience most elders want 7–9. There are so many factors in this and there is no "one size to fit all" answer.

Is the amount of hours the main criteria, or the time that you go to bed? For example, if there was a hypothetical choice between getting to bed at 10PM and getting up at 4AM, for a total of 6 hours, or going to bed at 2AM and getting up at 10AM for a total of 8 hours, is one a better choice for your health? Can you explain?

Research points to the ideal time of going to bed at 9 pm, even 8 pm but no later than 10 pm, but I think if someone can sleep in to 10 am then those eight hours seem to be the equivalent of six and waking up at four. The body does have an extraordinary resiliency but that is based on habit, maintaining a daily schedule. What the body hates is irregularity. It seems to be able to adapt to almost anything (not always a good thing!)

The organs in our body have their own clock and the pineal gland that secretes melatonin may be the major consideration so let's talk about that for a moment. The pineal gland is located in the brain, underneath the cerebral cortex where the tho hemispheres of the brain come together. With a very rich supply of blood it is highly susceptible to toxins and stress. And because it is responsible for regulating our circadian rhythm and is influenced by our neurotransmitters and hormones we need to optimize its function otherwise it can calcify or at least clog up. The glymphatic system — waste disposal for our brain during the night — means we need to eliminate toxins and stress during the day for it to work properly and not lead to abnormal sleep patterns. Research shows that clogged glymph can create major health conditions, including neurological diseases. That's why sleep is so very very important. It's all about detox, clearing away waste.

As an expert, this might be obvious to you, but I think it would be instructive to articulate this for our readers. Let's imagine a hypothetical 35 year old adult who was not getting enough sleep. After working diligently at it for 6 months he or she began to sleep well and got the requisite hours of sleep. How will this person's life improve? Can you help articulate some of the benefits this person will see after starting to get enough sleep? Can you explain?

Oh my, so much: energy levels, mood, attitude, patience, ability to feel joy and not be so easily disturbed by outside influences others or simply managing their own level of anxiety or other emotion. Then there's better digestion, (good sleep makes the good bacteria happy, optimizing our immune response), hormonal balance, whether the major stress hormone cortisol or the reproductive hormones, these will balance so much faster with proper sleep. And as noted brain function is affected and can lead to neurological diseases. Detox pathways all over the body must be addressed — liver, kidneys, skin — so toxins can be excreted systemically as well as through the glymphatic system at night. As well the person's nervous system could have been in dominant sympathetic mode due to poor sleep and that could have led to a host of problems including adrenal or thyroid conditions as well as more serious neurological diseases that are not so easily treated. Again sleep can make or break a person's health!

Many things provide benefits but they aren't necessarily a priority. Should we make getting a good night's sleep a major priority in our life? Can you explain what you mean?

It is the absolute priority. This modern world is conniving to destroy our need for rest and relaxation. We have to prioritize our ability to refresh and regenerate, especially our ventral vagus nerve. Otherwise our emotions can get the best of us and we don't function in a way we hope to. Porges' polyvagal theory is helpful here as he shows to function optimally we need our ventral vagus nerve in our parasympathetic nervous system to dominate. Otherwise we can get stuck in our sympathetic nervous system — fight or flight, and all that entails — or our dorsal ventral dominates and that means we are frozen, stuck in a rathole of fear. First step is detoxing our bodies so we allow our metabolism to balance, maximizing brain detoxification at night. So yes, sleep is the priority in any health recovery.

The truth is that most of us know that it's important to get better sleep. But while we know it intellectually, it's often difficult to put it into practice and make it a part of our daily habits. In your opinion what are the 3 main blockages that prevent us from taking the information that we all know, and integrating it into our lives? How should we remove those obstacles?

1. Runaway emotion. We need to identify the emotions, write them down, write a story or draw…some way to express.

2. Thinking, "I have too much to do, I have no time." Even "I'll sleep when I'm dead." (One of the dumbest things I've ever heard!) A person may have to force themselves to slow down: get a massage before bed, take a walk. This time is our time to rest, we need to find a way to make that happen.

3. Actual physical blockages or processes like hot flashes, environmental or food allergies, chronic pain and/or constipation need to be considered. Food and drink does keep folks up at night, no question. Caffeine comes from many sources, not just coffee. Also taking melatonin believing that in 30–60 minutes we will be asleep; melatonin can take hours to work. And it's not something you want to take regularly for a ggood night's sleep.

Do you think getting "good sleep" is more difficult today than it was in the past?

Absolutely. All you have to do is sleep in the country or wilderness to know that all of our devices with their EMFs, especially 5G, are harming our health and inhibiting our deep recovery that sleep allows. (Although there is such a thing as geographical hot spots that are apparently worse.) As well the modern world is full of toxins that harm; people seem not to understand that this is a huge factor in so many diseases and affects our sleep as I noted earlier. Allergies and addiction to highly refined carbs specially sugar are a modern day phenomenon that can lead to not just bad sleep but sleep apnea. Other factors include the lack of feeling safe in a world gone awry, the lack of community- so many people are alone as they wouldn't have been in the past, and of course all the critical voices that abound on social media. This is a trying time to say the least!

Ok. Here is the main question of our discussion. Can you please share "5 things you need to know to get the sleep you need and wake up refreshed and energized"? If you can, kindly share a story or example for each.

1. BRAIN — Optimize your brain detox system. Eat organic, eat less. Organic sheets and cosmetics and cleaning products and so on are essential…bottom line no toxins! Most people haven't heard of the glymph system but this is the brain's lymphatic system, the system that runs alonside our arteries and veins and acts as the brain's garbage disposal. If this is interrupted by poor sleep, stress or toxins, we can develop poor health conditions and disturbances that can lead to neurological diseases like Parkinson's or dementia or autism. I can feel if my brain has detoxed enough when I wake up in the morning and if not will take certain supplements to help detox or at least two glasses of alkaline water to maximize hydration.
2. TEMPERATURE of room — Our body wants a dark, cool room to sleep, otherwise our body temperature can rise even ever so slightly and affect deep rest. Our adrenals, the bellringers of disease in my view, can overheat and the whole HPA (hypothalamic- pituitary-adrenal system) axis and thus cortisol levels can be affected. Our body will wake us up to know this. Get a swamp cooler if A/C is not to your liking, or even a fan. Makes a huge difference. Or have a cold shower before bed. Perhaps if you are in good health go to bed without drying off from the shower or a dunk in a cold pool. Or put your feet in cold water with ice for five minutes. Hopefully this is not a nightly activity but it works and is great on those nights you can't fall back asleep and you have an important meeting or consultation first thing in the morning.
3. METABOLIC INFLUENCES — So much affects our metabolism and thus our sleep. Blood sugar, gut function, allergies, hormonal balance, worry, all can disturb our sleep-wake cycle, our circadian rhythm. Your circulation depends on a balance of these to work optimally to ensure adequate sleep, so each must be considered. Re: blood sugar — Did you

eat too much before going to sleep, have you not eaten enough during the day? Re: gut — Are you eating enough fermented food like sauerkraut, miso, kimchi, tempeh to make sure your gut flora is balanced with happy bacteria? Our gut needs to be happy as it holds the key to our immune system interacting with our brain. Re: allergies — Are you reacting to a food that causes inflammation in the body, say the nightshade family-potatoes, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers? It's best to get a food allergy test such as IgG, this measures a delayed hypersensitivity response. IgE is also helpful but being immediate most people know or sense these type of allergies. Re: happy hormones — check insulin, cortisol, reproductive hormones such as estrogen, progesterone and others to make sure all is in balance. Metabolic influences must be accounted for if insomnia is chronic and not just a one night stand. Bottom line our blood must be in harmony to promote optimal cellular function.

4. CURB RUNAWAY EMOTION. Most people can't sleep if they are upset or won't be able to fall back asleep in the middle of the night if up to go to the bathroom. Our mind may want us to know something or process our upset. I got in a lot of trouble when I wrote my first novel because getting up in the middle of the night was so delicious. I was recovering from a car accident and I ended up with a double whammy on my adrenal glands. Get a journal and write in it, or better yet write down upsetting moments when they happen during the day, don't hold them in. Express yourself safely. Exercise daily for this reason as well. Taking 15 minutes to write down what's bothering you may work, or may not… triggers, ideas and other stimulation can keep us up. Again, make a plan and see what works for you individually.
5. Manage devices with EMF, especially now with 5G. Frequency matters. There are necklaces and other products that can protect you. The truth is we don't know the effect of this jump in energy in terms of 5G or even 2G on our health and sleep but it certainly affects the sensitive (think canary in a coal mine). Get a faraday shield. Ground your bed with Earthing products. Earthing is an old concept/fact that can really help. I don't have stock in the only company that utilizes this physics' reality by grounding into the earth with sleep products but it really helps.

What would you advise someone who wakes up in the middle of the night and can't fall back to sleep?

There are many possibilities:

•Meditate, stretch, do yoga.

•Take a half tsp of Himalayan or sea salt. Or a trace mineral preferably liquid. You may want to eat an apple or another food as insomnia can be blood sugar related.

•Write what you are thinking and/or feeling, preferably not on a computer and limit to 15 minutes. (Wear glasses that block blue rays from any device including TV.)

•Take 500 mg Magnesium, best is glycinate.

•Drink chamomile tea.

•If none of that feels like a yawn coming on, stand under a cold shower or dip into a cold pool, this activates your ventral vagus nerve, helping to calm.

•Take a botanical medicine. Ashwagandha..helps both adrenals and thyroid. Or Valerian. Or Kava Kava or Scutellaria. So many. But try only one at a time.

•If you still can't get back to sleep Magnolia root helps lower cortisol. (Integrated Therapeutics hasCortisol Manager. Can be a lifesaver.)

•The Cold Water Cure is something I write about in my book *Transforming Trauma*. It can be an incredible force in sleeping well. Check out the athlete Wim Hoff, he has lots of videos explaining this simple but what can be a very difficult technique for many people. But the efffect can be monumental.

What are your thoughts about taking a nap during the day? Is that a good idea, or can it affect the ability to sleep well at night?

Research says no more that 25 minutes max, others say 10 minutes. Again opinion varies but I find if you stay within 20–25 minutes it can allow the adrenaline and /or cortisol to balance and can help sleep later on.

Wonderful. We are nearly done. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

Russell Brand, Lady Gaga. They are both very honest, very loving and very smart. And they aren't just lucky, they have authentic talent.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

Thank you. I have a podcast *Dr Heather Uncensored* that I started to advance the themes of my books, *Surviving a Viral Pandemic through the lens of a naturopathic medical doctor* and the upcoming *Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS.* My one act radio plays focus on health conditions — Graves Disease, PCOS — and are available on my website, drheatherherington.com, or on my podcast. I write musicals with my husband, Avi Noam Gross (composer and lyricist) and there are promos for these: *The Calling Hour* (for children), *Meshugeneh the Musical*, and the latest, *The Old Show (*promo upcoming). I can be reached at drheatherh@icloud.com. IG, Facebook, Twitter and Linked In: Dr Heather Herington.

This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!

Wellness

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