

Wake up to the dangers of sleep deprivation

If it were to be reported that some famous and fateful decision had been taken when the decision-makers were drunk, the very thought would be considered scandalous. Such people (we would protest) must hold their responsibilities pretty lightly. We would feel cheated and undermined if we felt that our masters had not done all they could to keep their wits about them.

Yet there exists a vast body of evidence that another, non-chemical, agent of stupefaction can lead to inferior and erratic judgment or eccentric decision-making. It is called tiredness. Fatigue stupefies. Sleep deprivation makes monkeys of the best of us. It is within the experience of everyone reading this column that sleeplessness can be the author of perfectly idiotic behaviour and of misjudgments both large and small.

And if commonsense and personal experience were not enough, there is a weight of patient scientific observation and analysis, all backing the absolute certainty that shortage of sleep is a problem of the utmost seriousness to individuals and to society. This is no longer a guess. It has been proven. If you doubt it, look at figures for traffic accidents, broken down by time of day; look at workplace accidents; look at the Exxon Valdez disaster.

Unlike drugs, sleep deprivation offers no compensating pleasures. It can be easily, simply and cheaply remedied and the means is obvious.

Yet we all but ignore these truths. Meanwhile, we regard the mixing of work and alcohol as irresponsible. We give short shrift to those who claim they can adequately exercise their responsibilities while under the influence of alcohol because we know that, though this may be true for most of the time, sooner or later — at the wheel, at the lathe, in the boardroom or on the Floor of the House — will come a moment when every faculty is needed and cool, measured judgment vital. When we drink we forfeit that edge.

It is just the same with sleep deprivation, yet, except in a couple of specialised fields, little social or professional stigma attaches to the individual who cuts his corners in this way. Sometimes he is even admired for keeping going.

I write this in the Soutpansberg Mountains in the Limpopo region of South Africa, thousands of miles from every care and hugely refreshed by the separation.

But more than anything I am refreshed by a week of sleeping properly and for long enough at night. It helps that there is no electricity here.

The difference this sleep is making to my good humour, mental concentration, calm judgment and physical wellbeing is unmistakable. By sheer coincidence, I have with me a recent book about sleep — *Counting Sheep: The Science and Pleasures of Sleep and Dreams*, by Paul Martin — a persuasive and informative study, but one which tells us what we already know, if only we think honestly about it. The book, and the African sojourn, have made me think honestly about it, and I can see that the transformation of not only my mood but my competence is simply explained, and that this explanation can be applied to many other episodes in my life.

Like every little boy, I used to react with fury when my mother said "you're just tired", but, in common with every other little boy or girl now grown up, I should recognise that she was usually right. I am beginning to understand how much this matters.

Ten days ago both my long sight and my short sight seemed to be slipping. I was struggling for words. Names kept eluding me. I noticed during radio and television interviews that my reactions were slower. I could not find the right phrase or argument in time. Little things — stupid little things — were irritating me disproportionately. Confronting perfectly do-able lists of things to be done, I would become irrationally dismayed. I was easily deflated. I kept despairing.

Nor was this only mental. A sort of turning-point arrived when the sight of a long escalator on the Underground, broken as usual, triggered in me a sudden, tremendous rage. Climbing it, the effort of putting one foot in front of the other seemed to overwhelm me, though I knew very well that I was capable of sprinting up, two steps at a time. What was wrong with me? I thought. Am I ill?

It did strike me even then that

since returning six weeks ago from the Algerian Sahara where, sleeping under the stars, we had risen with the sun every morning (and been asleep by ten every night), I had got into the habit of waking before seven but failed to continue the habit of an early bedtime. I had been sleeping five or six hours a night for more than a month. And I was losing my edge. Everyone does.

Everyone. Margaret Thatcher, I know, was legendary for her four hours sleep per night. But I worked for her when she was Leader of the Opposition; and later, when she was Prime Minister, I was in the Commons with her as a backbench MP; and I would make two observations on the legend.

First, it was more like five hours than four. Secondly, she was over much of that period an exhausted woman. Adrenaline and caffeine may have charged her and the occasional whisky fuelled her, but blazing eyes, forcefulness and drive are not inconsistent with exhaustion. To watch her bringing another rapturous Tory conference to its feet, or hectoring another television interviewer, may have been to see nothing but energy and drive. But stand right up close to her in a division lobby, her eyes inches from yours during those short spells (which counted with her as wasted time) when she was

not actually driving anything or anyone (herself included) and you saw staring eyes and a blank face devastated by tiredness. If she achieved what she did operating at only 80 per cent, what miscalculations might she have avoided, what wounded colleagues turned into enemies by her sudden anger born of weariness, might she have kept as friends, had she been enjoying eight hours' sleep and firing on all cylinders?

Lady Thatcher is only an extreme example of the folly of admiring sleep deprivation: a cult that has made admirable what ought to be regarded as reckless and sloppy.

That a shortage of sleep dulls our senses, blunts our memory, slows our reactions, slurs creativity and lateral thinking, stunts cell-replace-

ment (and, in children, growth), depresses our immune system, skews emotional balance, shortens patience and temper, wearies our muscles, robs us of optimism and steals good humour — and all this to a striking degree — has been thoroughly established by more than a century of research. Sleep starvation pushed to its limit will kill every bird and mammal within weeks — faster than food starvation.

Why this is so remains highly speculative. All we can be sure of is that sleep must perform one or more vital functions that the evolutionary process has proved unable to satisfy in any other way. That sleep must be an inescapable process is proved by this simple reflection: every animal save those which have no predators is tremendously disadvantaged by the dropping of guard which must come with sleep, yet natural selection has never hit upon an alternative.

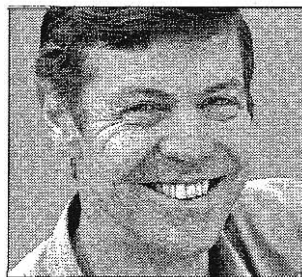
At the extremes, and in circumstances of heroism, the willingness and capacity to work with little or no sleep is indeed admirable and can prove critical. It is the generalisation from the heroic particular to the humdrum universal that turns an occasional virtue into a daily vice.

The story of human combat brings from the battlefield habits that would not be sensible on a bus. There are plenty of practices that it would be heroic to adopt if you had to, but which it would be stupid to attempt if you did not. Working every day until you drop is one of them.

And not because your work is not important, but because it is. As the sun sets over the African plain it occurs to me that staying up too late too often is a sign not of fortitude but of weakness. It is a kind of personal indiscipline, an indulging ourselves with more waking hours than our minds and bodies can handle. It is sloppy. It is lazy. It is unintelligent.

We could change. Attitudes to drinking and driving have changed sharply within a generation. Attitudes to not sleeping and driving are changing already. Attitudes to not sleeping and working are just beginning to change, and have done so already in a few small, key areas such as piloting. A change in attitudes to not sleeping and living should be the ultimate prize.

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