

Broken dreams

Modern life is squeezing dreams out of our sleep – with possibly serious consequences, finds Rowan Hooper

YOU know that feeling when someone wakes you up in the middle of a really good dream? There is a real sense of loss, like ending a TV episode on a cliffhanger. You want to jump back in, but no such luck.

That is me every morning. I have a baby sleeping in the same room and am wrenched awake early each day, often mid-dream.

That might sound like a trivial complaint. We tend to think of dream sleep as unimportant, the poor relative of vital and restorative deep sleep. But now it seems that dreams are much more than mystical night-time adventures. Recent research suggests that rapid eye movement (REM) sleep – when we have the most powerful dreams – is vital to learning and creativity, and promotes a healthy mind in a variety of ways. It isn't romantic whimsy to say that if we stifle our dreams, we aren't going to reach our potential.

Chronic dream deprivation isn't just a problem for people with small children. Going to bed drunk or stoned, taking various medications or even just using an alarm to wake up in the morning can all leave your dreams smothered. So, currently sleep deprived, I wanted to find out if missing out on dream sleep is as bad as it seems, and if so, what we can do to get our dreams back.

The idea that sleep is vital for good health is now so prevalent you would have to be sleepwalking through life to miss it. Not only

does scrimping on sleep leave you emotionally fraught and struggling to make decisions, it can also mess with your immune system, has been linked to metabolic diseases like obesity and type 2 diabetes, and is implicated in Alzheimer's disease and many mental health problems including depression.

Based on what we know about sleep, the US National Sleep Foundation recommends that adults should get between 7 and 9 hours per night. The problem is we don't. A 2015 survey found that only 35 per cent of people in the US were getting that amount. In the UK, 60 per cent of people report getting less than 7 hours a night. Our lack of sleep has been dubbed an emerging global epidemic.

Even so, we tend not to prioritise sleep as we might other aspects of our health. I used to think that if I managed to get a decent core of sleep – say, 6 hours – that would do the trick, because most of the health benefits of sleep have been linked to the deep sleep we get at the beginning of the night.

But as we probe deeper into the effects of sleep on health, that picture is changing. Some are even suggesting we are experiencing an epidemic of REM sleep loss. We aren't just sleep-deprived, says Rubin Naiman at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine in Tucson, we are dream-deprived.

To look at what's going on, let's start with my unwelcome, early morning wake-up call. ►



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