

# FOCUS

WINTER 2009

## ...A Long Winter's Nap

What if there were a safe, nontoxic, simple, free way to increase your alertness...boost your creativity...improve your memory...reduce your stress...and even reduce your risk for heart disease, all in just 20 minutes a day? There is. It's called a nap.

### NAPPING WITHOUT GUILT

In our work-driven, activity-driven society, the hardest part of taking a nap is getting past that little voice in your head telling you that napping is a sign of laziness. **Reality:** People who nap tend to be more productive, not less. When you allow yourself that brief period of rest and re-freshment, you wake up alert and energized, ready to be active for the rest of the day. The time you spend sleeping is more than made up for by the improved work or activity time a nap can give you. Instead of a nap, you could just have coffee or another form of caffeine to perk yourself up, but a nap is a better idea. Caffeine makes you more alert but it doesn't give you any of the other benefits of napping. **Example:** Napping enhances performance on a wide range of memory tests. Studies show that a 90-minute nap is as good as a full night's sleep for improving your memory.

### THE SLEEP CYCLE

To understand why napping can be so valuable, it helps to understand the basic concept of the sleep cycle and how it applies to both nighttime sleeping and daytime napping. Through the night, your sleep moves through a consistent pattern of four distinct phases...**Stage 1.** This occurs when you're just falling asleep and generally lasts for only a few minutes. Your structured thinking gradually gives way to dreamlike imagery. **Stage 2.** After you've fallen asleep, stage 2 sleep takes over. During this time, many parts of your brain are less active, but stage 2 sleep is the sleep that restores alertness and helps consolidate motor learning—anything that involves muscle movements such as dancing or driving. **Stage 3.** When you move into stage 3 sleep, your brain waves slow down, so much so that this is also called slow-wave sleep (SWS). In SWS, your body repairs itself because growth hormone is secreted during this phase, which helps with muscle fiber growth and repair as well as bone growth—basically, the antidote to cortisol, a stress hormone—and consolidates memory, such as new information you've just learned (a phone number, for example) so that you'll remember. **Stage**



**4.** During stage 4, you move into rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, or dreaming. REM sleep is when you consolidate more complex information and learning, such as a vocabulary list in a foreign language. In the course of the night, you generally go through stage 1 sleep only once, just as you fall asleep. After that, you cycle through stage 2, stage 3 (SWS) and stage 4 (REM) sleep several times through the night. Each cycle takes about 90 minutes. Of that, about 60% is spent in stage 2 sleep. The amount of time spent in SWS and REM sleep varies through the cycles.

### YOUR OPTIMUM NAP

Most people feel a natural lull in their energy levels sometime during the afternoon. That's the natural time for napping. In many countries,

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*Wishing your family PEACE during this Holiday Season. May your New Year be filled with JOY and WELLNESS!*



## A Long Winter's Nap (continued from front page)

*“Many people who start taking daytime naps report that they fall asleep more easily at bedtime and feel more refreshed in the morning.”*

the traditional siesta happens at this time. Ideally, because one sleep cycle takes about 90 minutes, you would nap for that long and awaken feeling refreshed and alert. Not too many of us can imagine a full 90 minutes in the middle of the day however, and not everyone feels the need to nap that long. To choose the best nap length for you, decide what you want to get from your nap....**Stage 2 nap.** Reduces sleepiness, heightens alertness, increases concentration, enhances motor performance and elevates mood. **Sleep for:** 15 to 20 minutes. **Stage 3 (SWS) nap.** Clears away useless information, improves conscious memory recall and restores and repairs tissues. **Sleep for:** 60 minutes. **Stage 4 (REM sleep) nap.** Increases creativity, improves perceptual and sensory processing, and improves memory for complex information. **Sleep for:** 90 minutes.

### NAPPING AND YOUR HEALTH

We know that lack of sleep is definitely bad for your health, but is napping good for it? That has actually been a hotly

debated question. Over the years, some studies seemed to show that people who often napped had a greater risk for death, especially from heart disease. A recent Harvard University study, however, strongly suggests the opposite. In the study, more than 23,000 people in Greece were followed for an average of 6.3 years. None of the individuals had a history of heart disease, stroke or cancer at the start of the study, and they ranged in age from 20 to 86. The results showed that the people who regularly napped for about 30 minutes at least three times a week had a 37% lower risk for death from heart disease than that of non-nappers. Taking a nap in the afternoon doesn't usually affect a person's ability to get to sleep at his/her normal bedtime or to sleep for the normal number of hours at night. In fact, many people who start taking daytime naps report that they fall asleep more easily at bedtime and

feel more refreshed in the morning. **Exception:** Don't nap within two to three hours of your usual bedtime—it could keep you from getting to sleep on schedule.



**Choose the length of your nap based upon your needs.**

### SLEEP AND AGE

Older adults find themselves waking up earlier than they used to and having trouble getting back to sleep. Shifting to an earlier wake-up time—and feeling the need for an earlier bedtime—is a natural part of the changes in body rhythm that come with aging. Rather than fighting your body's normal needs, accept them. A great way to make up for the lost sleep and help yourself stay up later? Take a nap!

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## How to Keep Your Cool

Ever feel like blowing up—or melting down? Whether it's due to cramped living quarters or cranky coworkers, almost everyone feels stressed occasionally. **Mindfulness** is a technique rooted in Buddhist tradition. It can calm and focus the mind, slow the heart rate, reduce the need for oxygen and quickly ease muscle tension. Here are the basics... **Assess what's happening**—not in the situation, but within yourself. Are your hands shaking? Head pounding? Recognizing these signs for what they are—normal responses to stress—reduces their power to upset you further.

**Be compassionate toward yourself.** Instead of a judgmental rebuke (“Crying again? Big bay!”), silently say, “My body is giving me a message. I will listen and learn from it.” **Shift our focus.** Rather than fretting about a physiological response that you can't control, such as a flushed face or choked voice, concentrate on one you can control—your breathing. Slow, deep, rhythmic inhalations and exhalations help you to regain a sense of mastery over your physical reactions.

**Reconnect with your body**—and disconnect from the crisis around you. Take a quick walk, do some yoga poses in the restroom, or simply close your eyes and gently massage your temples for a few moments. **Take action.** Consciously free your mind from resentful or hopeless thoughts. Reflect calmly on specific solutions that will allow you to regain control over the situation—and yourself.

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# How to Affair-Proof Your Marriage

It seems that every week we learn about another politician, sports star or celebrity caught having an extramarital affair. But public figures are hardly the only ones guilty of infidelity. Surveys show that between 40% and 60% of husbands and between 30% and 50% of wives will be unfaithful at some point during their marriages. Loneliness is the most common cause of infidelity. Almost everyone who enters into a marriage does so intending to remain faithful to his/her part, but long-term relationships are difficult. Partners often drift apart. The romance and the excitement of the initial period eventually ends. Many people do not know how to recover the closeness of a relationship once it fades, so they look outside the marriage for the fulfillment that they no longer receive at home. The secret to a fulfilling and faithful long-term marriage is maintaining “emotional intimacy:—openness, trust, communication and caring between partners. When spouses feel this intimate closeness, they are unlikely to cheat. Emotional intimacy is not just one skill—it is a combination of several different abilities....

## SELF-INTIMACY

In order to have an emotionally intimate relationship with someone else, you first must understand your own emotions. Men in particular tend to pay insufficient attention to their emotions. **What to do:** Take one to two minutes a few times a day to ask yourself three questions—What emotions am I feeling right now? What specific situation is causing me to feel these emotions? What, if anything, do I need to do about this situation to

take care of myself? **Example:** I’m feeling anger...I’m feeling this way because the guy cut me off the highway...The best thing I can do to take care of myself is let the anger go. Run through these questions two or three times each day for 60 days and you will become much more aware of, and in charge of, your own emotions.

## CONFLICT INTIMACY

All couples fight, but couples with emotionally intimate marriages fight productively. They don’t just try to win arguments—they listen to their partners and come to understand their points of view, even if they do not agree.

**What to do:** When you are at odds with your spouse, try an established technique called *Initiator to Inquirer* or *I to I*. One spouse serves as “initiator.” This spouse raises a troubling issue and shares his feelings and opinions on the matter. The initiator presents these thoughts as his perspective on the situation, not as the only way to look at it. **Example:** The wife is the initiator, says, “I felt hurt because it seemed to me as if you intentionally were trying to hurt my feelings,” rather than “You intentionally hurt my feelings.” The other spouse’s role is “inquirer.” He is to repeat back the substance of what the initiator has said to show that he has heard and understood. The inquirer then asks questions that aid in understanding. The inquirer is not allowed to question the validity of the initiator’s feelings. When the desire to do so arises (and it will), the inquirer should silently remind himself that “this is not about me...it is only about my partner’s perspective on the situa-

tion, and it is important for me to understand this perspective.” when the initiator has had her say, the partners can switch roles. Avoid distractions during *I to I* time, and do not try this when one or both of you are exhausted. This will not be a comfortable process at first, particularly if lots of negative feelings exist between you and your spouse. If you practice it two or three times each week for about 20 minutes at a time, it can become a very useful process for working through the marital conflicts that could lead to unhappiness. You and your partner will get good at fighting productively, which will end up bringing you closer.

## AFFECTION INTIMACY

Being in love with your partner is not enough to prevent infidelity. You also must show your love and affection in the ways that your partner needs. Even a well-meaning spouse can run into trouble if he fails to realize that the type of affection he is providing is not the type that his partner desires. Types of marital affection include...**Verbal.** How often do you tell your partner that you love him? How often do you express your gratitude for the things your partner does for you. **Actions.** How often do you do things just because your partner enjoys having them done? This might include buying a gift or doing some favor or chore for the partner that goes beyond your normal responsibilities. **Physical (nonsexual).** How often do you hold hands, hug or kiss your partner? How often do you provide foot massage or back rubs? **Sexual.** How often do you have sex with your



partner? **What to do:** Do not assume that your partner desires the same types of affection that you do or that you know what your partner needs because you have been together for years. Come right out and ask your partner what types of affection he/she would like you to provide more often. Get specifics. Then communicate your own needs. Do not take it personally if your partner says you have not shown enough affection. This reflects the partner’s personal affection needs, not your own shortcomings. **Example:** A man thinks he shows his wife plenty of affection by buying gifts, holding hands, and helping around the house. His wife feels he is never affectionate, because she wants verbal affection and he never says “I love you.” If you fail to provide the types and amounts of affection that your partner considers appropriate, your spouse may stray. Provide the desired affection, and your spouse is less likely to seek it from others.

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## Rub Away Your Pain: Feel-Good Pain Relief Trick

Ever notice how having your arm lightly stroked feels really calming? Stroke a cat's head and you will hear purring. People – and some animals – like to be stroked and now a group of Swedish researchers at the University of Gothenburg have discovered why this feels so pleasurable. They also uncovered evidence of how this simple act might someday be harnessed for pain control.

An earlier study showed that we have a separate sensory system in the skin that carries the perception and pleasure of being touched to the brain. The nerve fibers in this system are called "CT-afferents" (C being a label for "very slow" and T meaning tactile). These researchers took this finding a step further, discovering that the pleasure signals evoked by stroking skin lightly bypass other types of messages traveling from the same area to the brain. This discovery may open the door to a new – and entirely pleasant way to control pain.

Johan Wessberg, MD, PhD, an associate professor of physiology at the University, emphasizes that research is the first step toward an application that remains speculative. He states that it is "well grounded in current theories about brain mechanisms for pain"

and that he and his colleagues have started a new study to investigate the potential of these interactions among pleasant touch, CT afferents and pain.

If you are interested in giving it a try in the real world right away, it's helpful to know that in humans the pleasure paths of the CT-afferent system are located on the hairy skin of the arms, hands, legs and face. Go ahead and lightly rub these areas on yourself or someone else, using a very light, soft touch. Dr. Wessberg noted that the longer the stroking took place, the happier the study participants became. At worst, it feels good – at best, we may someday learn how to use it for specific pain relief.

**Johan Wessberg, MD, PhD, associate professor of physiology at the University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden.**