Wake up to benefits of napping

Are nappers lazy, or just good at following natural patterns of rest?

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Sleeping on the job has a negative connotation for many people. It implies laziness, a lack of productivity. Accusing an employee of sleeping on the job is tantamount to labeling him or her as a drain on the company, a valueless employee.

But, according to Sara Mednick, sleeping on the job (or after the job, or on a break from the job) can actually be beneficial, for both employees and companies. Mednick, 34, is the author of the book "Take a Nap! Change Your Life" (Workman Publishing Co., $12.95), which argues that grabbing a few winks during the day can make a person more alert, boost creativity and improve stamina, motor skills and accuracy. Mednick, also an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California at San Diego, began researching the value of the nap while a graduate student at Harvard University. Attending a lecture on the connection between sleep and memory got her thinking about her dad, and one of his favorite hobbies.

"I realized that people like my dad were great nappers, and there are lots of people who swear by naps," Mednick said.

She decided to look and see if any studies had been done on the benefits of regular napping. But she found almost nothing. "There was this huge hole in the subject of sleep," Mednick said.

So, she decided to fill it, and began researching the impact, if any, that napping had on memory, performance and the like. Her results were impressive. "Every time I did a study, it showed performance after a nap was as good as performance after a full night's sleep," Mednick said.

She also did some firsthand research on the benefit of short-term shuteye. Before she began studying napping, Mednick used to boost her energy during the day the old fashioned way — with caffeine.

But, for the sake of science, she took a brief snooze on a couch in one of the offices at her school. "I felt great," she said.

It's common knowledge that most Americans get significantly less than the recommended eight hours of sleep each night. But, Mednick said, even in well-rested people, energy typically flags in the late afternoon. Many people use coffee or other caffeinated beverages to recharge, she said, but napping is probably the way we're supposed to reinvigorate our bodies. "We just don't have the endurance to last 16 hours," Mednick said. "We're probably made to take a break in the middle of the day."

Dmitry Lvovski, director of the sleep center at Bridgeport Hospital, agreed. He said most people tend to feel run down between the hours of 1 and 5 p.m., and a quick nap can make you more refreshed. "If you take a nap, you kind of unload that need for sleep, and you feel more awake," he said. In addition to increased productivity, Mednick found that napping had a number of health benefits as well. It contributes to weight loss, for example. Tired people often reach for sugary snacks to recharge. Eliminate the exhaustion, and you could lessen your craving for a candy bar. Fatigue also can increase your risk of a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems, so napping can keep your heart healthy.

And, contrary to popular belief, Mednick found that napping didn't interfere with a person's ability to sleep at night. So you can snooze during the day, and not pay a penalty when you hit the pillow at night.

Though Mednick defined a nap as a period of sleep anywhere between 5 minutes and 90 minutes, she said the best naps are generally between 15 and 20 minutes. That way, you wake up during a light sleep, meaning you won't be groggy afterwards.

Whatever the length, Mednick's research raises a practical question. In this busy world, when do you even find time to take a nap?

There are many possibilities, Mednick said. For instance, if you have an appointment during the day, plan to arrive about 15 minutes early and have a quick catnap before your meeting. Or, if you can sneak away during the day, you can find a nap oasis in the local library. If need be, Mednick said, you can even nap right after work, before you start your evening tasks.

Mednick is also trying to make workplaces more nap friendly. Earlier this year, she used employees at the New York-based Workman Publishing, which published her book, as part of a napping experiment. She broke employees into two groups. For one month, members of one group napped during the day, while the other didn't. In the second month, she swapped the groups. Non-nappers from the first month became nappers in the second, and vice versa. She used the study to determine a number of things about napping behaviors, including the impact on nocturnal sleep.

Not only did this research back up her other studies, and further prove the benefits of napping, but, the company has since allowed employees to take naps during the day if they so choose.

Mednick said she plans to encourage more companies and universities to institute nap times. Her goal, she said, is to get a major corporation like Google behind her nap initiative, thus inspiring other, smaller companies to follow suit. However, she said, "I haven't really worked it out yet."

Locally, few if any Connecticut companies have a designated naptime for employees. David Lewis is president of OperationsInc, a Stamford-based human resources outsourcing and consulting firm. Lewis said OperationsInc works with more than 100 companies, and he doesn't know of any that have a napping program.

In fact, he said, in more than 20 years of working in the human resources industry, the only mention he's ever heard of napping on the job is the "Seinfeld" episode in which George has a sleeping compartment built into his desk at work.

Though Lewis said it makes sense that a quick snooze could refresh workers and make them more effective, there are several logistical problems with allowing workplace nap times. First, there's the question of where employees would sleep. Would companies have to build a special "nap room" to accommodate snoozing workers?

Also, would there be some sort of sleep schedule, in which workers were assigned a certain time to catch their z's?

"I'm not questioning the validity of providing people the opportunity to recharge during the day," Lewis said. "But I wouldn't have any idea how to address implementing a plan or program."