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Not feeling happy? Get some sleep

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Australians may live in "the lucky country", but we would be a whole lot happier if we could just get more sleep, says a leading psychologist.

And those in their thirties and forties should pay particular attention to this advice, being the category most in need of bed rest - and most in need of a happiness boost.



Those in the 35 to 44 age band are the least content and, on the whole, the most knackered.
JESSICA SHAPIRO

"Sleep deprivation has a huge impact on our happiness levels," says Dr Anthony Grant, who backs up his belief with an online survey he has devised to calculate our happiness score out of 100 depending on a wide range of factors, including sleep.

The Happily Healthy Project, which has already been taken by almost 60,000 Australians, shows an average score of 62.4 for the 56 per cent of Aussies who

sleep between seven and eight hours a night, compared to 52.8 for the 36 per cent of us who sleep less than seven hours a night.

The national average is 59.

Grant, director of the coaching psychology unit at the University of Sydney - who is also known for his TV show *Making Australia Happy*, which screened on the ABC at the end of the last year - says those in the 35 to 44 age band are the least content (scoring an average of 56) and, on the whole, the most knackered.

Those above 65, meanwhile, are the happiest segment of society - and, uncoincidentally, probably the best rested.

People in the 35 to 44 age range are often raising young children, but they are also trying to maintain an active social life while establishing solid careers.

All of this can take priority over sleeping time, he says, so it's no coincidence that they are the least content age band.

But it's not just those in their thirties and forties who let their corporate life interfere with their sleep, adds Grant, who describes sleep deprivation as "an unrecognised epidemic" in the corporate world.

"It's not unusual for middle-management upwards to be at work by 8am and then to put in a 12-hour day ... and then we take work home with us on our laptops or smartphones."

This is where the sleep problems really start, he says, because our brains are still ticking over when we hit the hay.

Quentin, 24, is one such exhausted professional. Working in sales for a Sydney-based coal mining company, he works from 7am to 7pm in the office and then has to be on call by phone "most hours of the day and night", which means he finds it hard to switch off before bed and averages around five hours sleep each night.

"I struggle to clear my head so that I can actually go to sleep. I always feel a bit tired and run-down."

Like many Australians, it may not be until Quentin is nearing retirement that he finally slows down and gets some well-needed rest. And if he has children one day, they will hopefully be giving him some peace by then, too.

These are the reasons why the over 65s are scoring the highest numbers in the Happy Healthy Project, says Grant, with an average score of around 66.

"The older you get the happier you get, with a few ups and downs along the way," says Grant, who is also co-author with Alison Leigh of *Eight Steps to Happiness: The Science of Getting Happy*.

"When you get to 60, hopefully the kids have left home, hopefully you've got fairly stable in your financial issues and you finally get some peace, get to enjoy your hobbies - and you get some sleep."

Grant says our bodies become accustomed to being sleep deprived, which means we don't realise how much our poor shut-eye is affecting our physical and mental

health.

While we all go through periods of sleeping well and less well, there are a few signs that suggest poor sleep is affecting your health.

These include waking up a few hours after you've fallen asleep with a resentment or anger about something; feeling like you want to sleep too much in the afternoon; feeling depressed if you don't sleep well for a few nights; relying on sleeping pills or alcohol to relax you in the evening; or falling asleep too quickly - in less than five minutes.

The two things Grant says would make a huge difference to the happiness levels and "ease of sleep" for the average Australian are: helping others and a positive attitude.

"In our consumerist society we think we can purchase happiness but we can't reinvent ourselves through the products we buy," he says.

"We need to think less about going out and buying happiness and more about giving it away."

In attempt to be more positive, Grant suggests people take an inventory of their day when they go to bed.

"Lie back in bed and take a few moments to run through in your mind what happened in the day, what pleasurable things you did, how you helped other people and then write down three good things that you're really grateful for about the day."

And perhaps we would also do well to remember that, with our beautiful landscape, fantastic resources and facilities, and Aussie mateship and connectedness, he adds, we really do live in the lucky country.

TIPS TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

- Avoid a hot bath or shower before bed as the body needs to cool down before it can sleep
- Exercise vigorously in the late afternoon or early evening (not just before bed - see above)
- Don't nap too late in the day. A short nap of 10 to 20 minutes during the day, however, can be very beneficial (more than 20 minutes will leave you feeling tired)
- Cut down on alcohol and caffeinated drinks, particularly before bed
- Only go to bed if you feel sleepy
- Don't use the computer just before bed; an activity such as reading is more relaxing for the mind
- Don't eat too late as your body will be busy digesting
- Maintain a regular sleeping pattern

- Blank out light and noise pollution (if you can't shut out the noise, wear ear plugs)
- If you can't sleep, the best thing to do is get up, go to another room and do something else like read a book until you feel sleepy again, says Grant. You need to have a positive association with your bedroom, he adds. "You don't want to see it as a torture chamber."

To determine your happiness score, visit www.happily-healthy.com.au

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