Welcome back to our series on brain-based learning, performance enhancement, and the American Dream! The last article emphasized the importance of nutrition, and its value in maximizing health and our brain potential. In this article, we will focus on sleep - not just from a health perspective, which we will cover - but also how we can put our sleep time to good use. From pre-biblical times, people have always had a fascination with sleep and what its true function is. From the Sumerian and biblical texts, Homer and the alchemists, going forward all the way to William Shakespeare and his famous quote in Hamlet’s act 3, scene 1: “To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there’s the rub,” sleep, dreams, (death, omens, messages from higher powers…) have all been associated with and a fascination to our cultures.

Well, you may ask, what do we really know about the physiology of sleep and dreams and can we enhance daily performance? The answer to the former is very little, despite...
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several decades of intense sleep research; and the answer to the latter, ironically, is a fair amount.

The science of sleep and dreaming has certainly had a convoluted path over the past 110 years. Sigmund Freud first came to prominence with his “Interpretation of Dreams,” published in 1899, in which he postulated that dreams were a form of unconscious wish fulfillment, and evolved to resolve an intra-psychic conflict of some sort. Whilst Freud, using psychoanalysis, attempted to help clients resolve these conflicts with the aid of dream interpretation, his equally famous follower, Carl Jung, interpreted dreams to arise from the collective unconscious, a well-spring of all consciousness, if you will; and put his patients on the couch attempting to help them understand themselves in relation to this greater force. Nevertheless, while the first part of the 20th century was marked by the “person-alization” of dreams, the second half of the 20th century was the exact antithesis. The hypoth-esis pioneered by Nobelist Francis Crick (who unraveled the secrets of DNA) stated that we actually dream to forget. In other words, he hypothesized that dreams are an attempt to remove the “cognitive debris” that we accumulate during our waking lives. Crick went so far as to say that without this process our memory process would become chaotic.

With such a large diathesis in opinion regarding sleep and dreams, what can we really deduce that is factual and practical? Essentially there are two forms of sleep. The first is Non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep, which consists of four stages constituting 75% of sleep time. The second form is Rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, in which our muscles lose tone and our respira-tion changes rapidly. REM sleep is when we have our most vivid dreams. Individual sleep requirements vary widely between six and ten hours per night in adults. Understandably many insomniacs (it is estimated that up to 50% of adults in the US at some stage experience insomnia) get particularly anxious when, periodically, sleep-related researchers, for mysterious reasons, quantify eight hours as an absolute requirement for sleep each night. The problem with this idea is that sleep is not like bicycling; you cannot sleep more through practice. Granted, sleep hygiene is vital; go to sleep the same time each night, rise the same time each day even if one has not had a great night’s sleep; avoid alcohol, caffeine and vigorous exercise at least six hours prior to bedtime and check with your physician as to whether any medication could be causing a sleep problem. Once in bed, if you find you are not asleep after 20 minutes, go to another room, read something relaxing in low lighting until tired. Finally, remember the words of Nobel Prize winner Walter Rudolph Hess: “If you are unable to sleep, enjoy the sen-sation of relaxation, knowing that you are still getting some benefit. This decrease in anxiety will help sleep to come naturally.” What Hess was referring to is that all causes of insomnia can, of course, be exacerbated by anxiety. An anxiety-related insomnia, now known as psychophysiological insomnia, occurs when cortisol and other stress hormones chronically aggravate the insomnia. Nonetheless, with the best habits in the world, many of us will never sleep the oft recommended eight hours each night (but we might well outlive and in some cases be more productive than those who do).

If sleep hygiene enables us to modify our behavior to get to sleep and ideally stay asleep, can we make our sleep work for us? The answer is absolutely yes. Joseph Rossman, formerly of the United States Patent and Trademark Office, interviewed hundreds of the world’s greatest inventors, most of whom subscribed to the importance of outlining a problem in one’s mind just prior to falling asleep. The subjects then reported allowing pleasant, relaxing thoughts to permeate their minds so as to enable sleep. Subsequently, many subjects excitedly informed Rossman how often they would wake in the morning (or even before) with the elusive solution well in hand. Taking this one step further, Dr Stephen LaBerge, former sleep researcher at Stanford University, pioneered research in the field of lucid dreaming, defined by the ability to actively engage in our dreams. Next time when you are uncertain whether you are dreaming, allow yourself to play a larger role in that dreamlike state; and you may surprise yourself at how you recapture this child-like “dream magic.” If nothing else, lucid dreaming is certainly one of the few antidotes to the adult years of battling reality in the trenches. Research suggests, however, that lucid dreaming can produce surprisingly positive results in terms of dealing with unresolved problems. Whether one subscribes to the theories of Freud or Crick, dreaming is the cheapest, most practical, and safest way to be in any place at any time. Until next time, dream big!

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