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The Power of Sleep: Unlocking Memory Through Rest

In our busy lives, we often sacrifice sleep. We need a good night's sleep for good physical and mental health. Sleep is critical for helping our brains sort, consolidate, and store memories.

Researchers have shown that a good night's sleep is vital for memory formation. Sleeping less than six hours can impair our ability to form and consolidate memories. Experts say most adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each night. During sleep, our brains go through an active process to decide which daily activities to keep and which to discard. This process is called memory encoding and consolidation.

Some of the information in our daily lives is stored in "short-term" memory. These pieces of information may be a phone number that you may only need to recall once, or they could be information you will remember for the rest of your life. Sleep is one of the ways your brain helps to decide whether or not the information is valuable enough to be stored in your "long-term" memory or discarded.

Sleep helps our brains perform these storage tasks. Converting newly acquired information from our short-term to long-term memory is called consolidation. While sleeping, consolidation begins without the incessant barrage of external information. During sleep, your brain goes through different stages, transitioning from light to deep several times per night. During these cycles, your brain performs its restorative work and creates memories. Those 7 to 9 hours of sleep are highly productive.

As we get older, getting a good night's rest becomes harder, and we are more prone to experience insomnia. Many things can interfere with our ability to get a good night's sleep, including chronic illness, some prescription medications, lack of exercise, stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation.

There are things you can do to help improve your chances of getting a good night's rest. Below are a few examples:

- Use your bedroom for sleep and sex only. Avoid reading, conversation, or watching television.

- Exercise in the afternoon or early evening, not within a few hours of bedtime.

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol for at least 3 to 4 hours before bed.

- Try to go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning.

- If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed and participate in a quiet, relaxing activity. Go back to bed when you are sleepy.

- Don't eat a heavy meal right before bedtime.

- Keep your room at a steady temperature (not too warm).

In a fast-paced, busy world, remember that getting a good night's sleep is one of our best defenses to ensure good health. Happy dreaming.