

Opinion

The Importance Of Rest To Academic Success

Written by Emily Hauge | March 27, 2017 11:08 PM



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“If I go to bed right now and fall asleep in the next seven minutes I will get exactly six hours of sleep.” Sound familiar? I know the science. I know that a lack of sleep reduces my cognitive ability enormously, while simultaneously blurring my ability to see the deficit. I’d venture to guess this isn’t news to you either. But why do we find it so hard to prioritize something as basic as sleep? My mom used to say that whatever you need to do will expand to fill whatever time you have. She was right — somehow, even on the weeks when my workload is manageable, I still find myself allocating my body its hours of sleep like I’m Ebenezer Scrooge begrudging Bob Cratchit a Christmas morning off.

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While my research lab on campus does look at how lack of sleep affects us, I don't have to be a scientist to know I need sleep. So why am I okay with cognitively and emotionally crippling myself? I can blame technology, busyness, or my workload, but I think it's deeper than that. As a culture, it's not just sleep that we struggle to prioritize: it's rest. Sleep is at least a biologically busy time, but the idea of rest is inescapably unproductive. Productivity and progress are the mantras of the American way, but somehow, while the machines we are making become bigger and better and faster, we are forgetting that we aren't machines. Our value is not increased by our production and efficiency. We know this, but we're stuck in the assembly line and feel we must compete — so we grab another coffee after five hours of sleep and wear the deprivation as a badge of dedication to compensate for the fact that we are actually telling ourselves that what we can do is more valuable than what we can be. Coffee works okay to get stuff done. To be someone, we need sleep — and rest.

I had to ask Google for a definition of rest: to “cease work or movement to relax, refresh oneself, or recover strength.” When in the last time you rested? I'm not asking when is the last time you meant to do homework and watched Netflix instead. When did you plan to spend time in a way that refreshed you and helped you recover your strength? Maybe Netflix does relax and refresh you, but to truly take advantage of it, psychology tells us that the mindset matters. Procrastination is an escape mechanism we engage in when we feel like we can't win; rest is a tactical technique we employ when we know how to fight well, and they look very different. When I procrastinate, I'm much more likely to waste time on Pinterest or eat junk because I need comfort to compensate for the fact that I am telling myself I don't deserve to rest and can never do enough. When I plan time to rest, I am telling myself that my value is independent of my productivity level. What I plan for rest looks very different than what happens when I reach a point where I need to escape.

What does it look like to plan rest? We each have to decide. As students at William and Mary, this is going to feel unnatural. Let's be real, administration only allows us to double major because if it was up to us, we would quadruple major. I'm certainly not suggesting you drop your second major, but rather that we start by setting boundaries for ourselves, like with any healthy relationship. Let's think about what gives us life, set aside time to do it and not stand ourselves up. As rumor has it, the

word “rest” comes from the Old Norse word for “league” or “mile,” the “distance after one rests.” How many miles has it been since you rested? Perhaps we need to ask ourselves where we should stop, rather than how long we can go without stopping.

Our culture sees sleep as inconvenient and rest as weakness, and our health is suffering, but we can decide to be different.

This is hard. Setting boundaries always is. I’m writing this after a long week of exams where I didn’t do the best job at prioritizing my sleep or rest, but I’m better than I once was. I’ve come to the point where the challenge excites me because rest is rebellious. Despite our complaints about how hard it is here, I know us to be a campus of students that loves a good challenge — especially when it’s a little rebellious. Our culture sees sleep as inconvenient and rest as weakness, and our health is suffering, but we can decide to be different. It can start with the moment we catch ourselves bragging in the Swemromas line about how many hours of sleep we didn’t get. When we refuse to celebrate deprivation as dedication, when we prioritize sleep, we validate our humanity. When we take time to step out of the assembly line and rest in glorious unproductivity, we reclaim our identity. And that, paradoxically, is quite productive indeed.

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