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# The Case for Sleep—Sleep and Lawyers

**A**s a lawyer, you're probably no stranger to long hours, stressful deadlines, and the never-ending battle with your inbox. But there's one fight you may not even realize you're losing: the battle for good sleep. It turns out, those late nights poring over case files or getting that contract just perfect, might be doing more harm than good—not just to your health, but to your legal acumen as well. Sleep is critical and as lawyers, we should treat our bedtime as sacred as attorney-client privilege. While sleep might seem like just another item on our to-do list, it's probably the number one item that will help us accomplish our to-do-list. Why is sleep so important?

There are a few theories about why we sleep, but for lawyers, the most important ones go to how sleep affects our cognitive functions, restorative theory, information consolidation theory, and brain plasticity theory.

**RESTORATIVE THEORY:** Sleep forces your body to repair and restore itself. During sleep, especially deep sleep, your body undergoes critical processes like muscle growth, tissue repair, and the release of growth hormones. Your brain also gets to clear out waste products accumulated during waking hours. Without this downtime, your body and mind can't function at full capacity, making you as effective in the courtroom as a rusty gavel.

**INFORMATION CONSOLIDATION THEORY:** The legal equivalent of summarizing case law into a killer closing argument. During sleep, particularly REM sleep, your brain organizes and stores all the information you've absorbed during the day, making it easier to retrieve later. Studies have shown that sleep enhances memory retention, and that sleep deprivation impairs your ability to learn and remember new information. So, the next time you're cramming for a deposition or closing a deal, remember that skipping sleep might just lead to a deposition disaster or forgetting to file your UCCs!

**BRAIN PLASTICITY THEORY:** Building your brain muscle, this theory emphasizes sleep's role in brain plasticity—your brain's ability to adapt and change in response to new information and experiences. Sleep,

particularly REM sleep, is crucial for maintaining brain plasticity in adults.

For all these reasons, lawyers need to prioritize sleep. In fact, sleep isn't just one of the three pillars of health (alongside nutrition and exercise), it's the cornerstone that holds the other two up. Find yourself reaching for another cup of coffee or that fourth slice of pizza after a late night? Sleep deprivation might actually be the culprit. Poor sleep affects the hunger hormones ghrelin and leptin, leading to increased hunger and cravings for high-calorie, carbohydrate-rich foods. Beyond just appetite, lack of sleep can disrupt nutrient absorption and metabolic health, leading to impaired glucose metabolism, which increases the risk of developing insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. Lack of sleep isn't just a minor inconvenience—it's a probable carcinogen according to the World Health Organization. Not getting enough sleep, or enough quality sleep, raises your risk for heart and respiratory problems, and it can wreak havoc on your metabolism and immune system.

But don't we owe our clients our sleep? I grew up in the legal world where burning the midnight oil was a badge of honor. Blankets and pillows under my desk in case I needed to take a 30-minute power nap after pulling an "all-nighter." After all, my clients expect me to give it my all, can't I sleep when I'm dead? Even if you think your clients are more important than your health, the reality is that not only is your health paying a steeper price

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## THE CASE FOR SLEEP

for your lack of sleep but your clients might be too.

History is littered with tragedies attributed to lack of sleep—Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and even the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster all had sleep deprivation as a contributing factor. As lawyers, the stakes might not be as high as those catastrophes, but the consequences can still be impactful and for our clients, just as dire. Sleep deprivation can impair judgment, reduce productivity, and lead to mistakes that could cost your clients dearly. If you wouldn't want a sleep-deprived surgeon operating on you, why would you trust a sleep-deprived lawyer to handle your case?

So, how's your sleep? Are you guilty of sleep sacrifice or do you think you have mastered sleep? Look to the right of you, look to the left of you—one of the three of you aren't getting enough sleep! According to the CDC, one in three adults in the United States reports not getting enough sleep daily. The amount of sleep you need varies, but most adults require between 7-9 hours per night. Remember, there's a difference between how much sleep you get and how long you're in bed—quality matters just as much as quantity. To find out your sweet spot, consider a sleep tracker or try sleeping without an alarm (as you might on vacation) and see when your body naturally wakes up. If you're a chronic alarm snoozer, it's time to reassess your sleep habits.

If you are having problems falling asleep, be wary of the common "fixes" that should be overruled:

- **Using Alcohol as a Sleep Aid:** A nightcap might help you fall asleep faster, but it disrupts sleep later in the night, particularly REM sleep.
- **Relying on Sleep Medication Long-Term:** Sleep meds might work in the short term, but long-term use can lead to dependence, reduced effectiveness, and a host of side effects. Try to use sleep medication sparingly or in special circumstances such as overcoming jet lag.
- **Napping Late in the Day:** While a quick nap might seem like a good idea, napping too late can interfere with your nighttime sleep patterns, making it harder to fall asleep when you should. Naps can be powerful if they are short (aim for naps around twenty minutes) and early in the day (before 2 p.m.).
- **Using Screens in Bed:** You might think playing wordle or watching the news might help you sleep but the blue light from screens interferes with melatonin production, making it harder to fall asleep.
- **"Catching Up" on Sleep During Weekends:** While catching up on sleep occasionally can be beneficial, regularly doing so disrupts your sleep-wake cycle. In reality, you can't make up sleep by waiting for the weekend.

So what are some strategies that will hold up in the court of sleep hygiene:

- **Maintain a Consistent Sleep Schedule:** Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day—even on weekends—helps regulate your internal body clock. This regularity makes it easier to fall asleep and wake up refreshed,



setting you up for success both in and out of the courtroom.

- **Prioritize Exposure to Natural Light:** Spend time outdoors during the day to help regulate melatonin production and maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle. Sunlight is like the judge's gavel—keeping everything in order.
- **Create a Relaxing Bedtime Routine:** Establish a pre-sleep routine that includes relaxation techniques, such as reading (something not related to law!), meditation, or a warm bath. This signals to your body that it's time to wind down.
- **Optimize Your Sleep Environment:** Ensure your bedroom is conducive to sleep by maintaining a comfortable temperature (between 60-67°F is ideal), minimizing noise and light, and using a comfortable mattress and pillows. Treat your bed like your office—only the best tools will do.
- **Be Mindful of Food and Drink:** Avoid large meals, caffeine, and alcohol close to bedtime, as they can interfere with sleep. Think of it as preparing your case—avoid anything that could jeopardize your success.
- **Engage in Regular Physical Activity:** Exercise during the day can help improve sleep quality, but avoid vigorous workouts too close to bedtime.
- **Manage Stress:** Practice stress-reduction techniques such as deep breathing exercises, yoga, or mindfulness meditation to promote relaxation and better sleep. Managing client expectations will help manage your stress levels and both will help ensure a smoother sleep process.

In the world of law, every detail matters. The same goes for sleep. It's not just about clocking hours—it's about ensuring those hours are restful, restorative, and sufficient to keep you at the top of your game. Sustainable, healthy sleep practices are your best defense against the demands of the legal profession. Maintain a consistent sleep schedule, create a relaxing bedtime routine, and manage stress effectively. Remember, one-third of your life is spent in bed—make sure it's time well spent. The next time you're tempted to burn the midnight oil, consider this: your best legal strategy might just be getting a good night's sleep. ■

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