

Air traffic controllers aren't alone in nodding off at work. Too many of us are forgoing rest, to major ill effect.



Losing more than sleep

By **Helena Oliviero**
holiviero@ajc.com

At first, Dee Stewart's sleep deprivation showed up in subtle ways. She whitened away entire days trying to edit single pages of her new book. She was more on edge, not her normal "joke-y jokey" self.

But then, after several weeks of getting by on just three or four hours of sleep a night, she found herself inexplicably deleting entire chapters of her book, and staggering through the aisles of a grocery store, un-

able to remember what she was there for.

Her strategy for juggling a busy family life and completing her book on deadline was forgo sleep, finish a book — but it was backfiring.

An annual checkup confirmed her lack of sleep was taking its toll, even causing heart problems.

So Stewart flipped a switch in her bedroom — and her life — to make sleep priority No. 1.

"I now prepare for sleep just like I prepare for the day," said Stewart of Cov-

ington. "There is no TV, no computer in my bedroom anymore. There's fresh flowers, new bedding like a hotel, and it's my serene oasis. I get seven or eight hours now every night, and I feel like a different person."

Ahh, sleep, glorious sleep. Most Americans need between 7½ and 8 hours of sleep every night, with doctors insisting a good night's rest is just as important to overall health as diet and exercise.

Sleep continued on E10

Healthy and wise sleep habits

Atlanta-based psychiatrist Dr. Tracey Marks, author of the new book "Master Your Sleep," offers the following tips for a good bedtime routine:

Stick to it: Set a consistent bedtime every night.

Set a routine: Start the countdown an hour before by putting on pajamas and brushing teeth. Thirty minutes before bed, do something relaxing that helps you sleep, such as read or listen to music.

Turn it off: No coffee six hours before bedtime, no alcohol four hours before bedtime, no exercise two hours before bedtime and no electronics one hour before bedtime.



Many fight their need for shuteye

Sleep

continued from E1

But many Americans fight the need for rest. Our modern-day, wired, 24/7 lifestyle doesn't offer a natural transition from working to relaxing.

Instead, many Americans find themselves hovered over a computer at the light of the moon, checking their Blackberry at all hours of the night or up way past their bedtime on Facebook. Worrying about keeping a job and paying the bills doesn't exactly set the mood for slumber either.

And in some cases, the result of a lack of rest is potentially catastrophic. In recent weeks, there have been reports of at least five air traffic controllers across the country falling asleep on the job, leading to changes in their nighttime scheduling.

'Profound' consequences

Yet being well-rested is not just about being able to land planes safely or saving someone's life in the ER. Getting enough Z's is the key for staying awake during meetings, driving a car without being drowsy, having a quick reaction time, writing a concise e-mail, even being pleasant. Of course, working at night poses particular challenges when our bodies are not designed to be on the clock in complete darkness.

A growing body of research suggests too little sleep for long enough (two or more weeks) can cause severe cognitive impairment. Sleeping six hours or less for an extended period of time, in fact, has the cognitive equivalence of being legally drunk.

And just like it's hard for people to know when they've had too much to drink, it can be hard for people to realize just how much a lack of sleep is affecting them.

Dr. Scott Lebowitz, medical director of the Piedmont Sleep Disorders Center, said the impact of too little sleep affects every facet of some-

one's life — from physical health and mental capabilities to a person's emotional health and relationships with loved ones.

Atlanta-based psychiatrist Dr. Tracey Marks said economic woes are one factor keeping people up at night.

"People are worrying about things and they are feeling the weight of the world on them," said Marks. "It's very hard for them to relax and fall asleep."

Those people can find themselves in a vicious cycle, she said, not getting enough sleep, then working longer days because their productivity is hampered.

Technology is eating away at our sleep patterns, too, with virtually every adult surveyed by the National Sleep Foundation routinely using some kind of electronics, such as a TV or computer, within an hour before bed. Both the light from the computer or TV and stimulation from online chatter can make it harder to get shuteye.

Corey Nolan, 25, who works in social media and is a publicist, has a computer in his bedroom, which doubles as a home office. Having it within arm's reach makes it ever-so-easy for him to click it on if he feels a burst of inspiration in the middle of the night. It also means he's sleeping five hours on a good night. Nolan became a night owl back in college, and it has been a hard habit to break.

Nolan considers himself health-conscious. He's serious about eating healthy, and he's an avid runner. He knows getting sleep is important, but it's often at odds with his burning desire to be productive.

"Sometimes, I will wake up at 3 a.m. and want to clean out my closet," he said.

But he recognizes it's time for change.

"I have been actively thinking about this, about making it a priority," he said. "And there have been times when I have not been as productive, and I have needed to go back and correct something."

For now, he sneaks in occasional power naps, especially around 3 p.m., when he feels like he's hit a wall. He'll set his alarm and indulge himself for ... 10 minutes.

Lebowitz said people need to draw a line between work time and time to relax and sleep.

one's life — from physical health and mental capabilities to a person's emotional health and relationships with loved ones.

"The reality is the consequences of sleep loss can be profound, yet our society seems to look at sleep as a luxury, and it's almost a badge of honor to pull an all-nighter working," said Lebowitz.

Technology a culprit

About 4 of every 10 Americans say they rarely or never get a good night's sleep on weeknights, according to the National Sleep Foundation. A report by the Centers for Dis-

"Sleep should be a nightly vacation."

Dr. Scott Lebowitz

Medical director of the Piedmont Sleep Disorders Center

Sleep solutions vary

People's sleep habits vary widely. These two metro Atlantans exemplify that:

Jacob Hawkins, Decatur

Hawkins sleeps between five and six hours a night during the week, and fills up on coffee to keep him awake and going. A lot of coffee: as many as 12 cups in one day. On the weekends, he fills up on sleep, letting his body sleep until noon or dozing off on the couch while watching golf. Either way, the account supervisor with a public relations company tries to maximize his rest, sipping a cup of chamomile tea before he goes to bed and running a fan for white noise.

Sandy Dalis, Atlanta

A nutrition coach, Dalis is serious about getting eight hours of sleep every night. She sticks to a regular nighttime ritual of winding down one hour before going to bed. She unplugs, dims the lights and listens to relaxing music. To block out all light, she wears a sleep mask. Getting enough sleep is also something she preaches when meeting with new clients. "When I first meet with clients, they think I am going to talk to them about fish and broccoli. Instead, the first thing I tell them to do is get a good night's rest and sleep eight hours," said Dalis.

ly vacation," he said. "That means turning off the stimuli of life. ... Closing the door to your bedroom is like closing the book on your day. And when you close that door, the stresses and the worries of your life need to stay outside the door and you can start the detachment and you drift off."

Reprive brings rest

In April, on the eve of her deadline, Stewart asked her editor for more time for her romantic comedy/mystery book. She was granted an extension until mid-June.

After hanging up the phone, Stewart celebrated by climbing into bed and letting herself sleep and sleep.

Since then, the 38-year-old writer looks forward to getting into comfy flannel Hello Kitty pajamas and escaping into her sleeping sanctuary.

Feeling well-rested, she said she has been more productive, more mentally sharp and more like her "jokey jokey" self.

As far as her June deadline for her book, she's on track to beat it — easily.