

THE COURAGE TO NAP

by Frank Roman MD JD



To my embarrassment a few months ago, the new president of Affinity Medical Center, Mr. Michael Reichfield caught me napping in the middle of the afternoon in one of the bedrooms of the sleep center. Barefooted and with my gelled hair disarrayed only on one side (yes I'm still gelling) I tried to explain to Mr. Reichfield the scientific benefits in terms of work performance of taking a nap during the day. I also explained to him that I was giving an important lecture that evening for my friend Laura Bender in Columbus, Ohio a four hour round trip drive. He was very gracious but don't think he believed the scientific validity of my explanation. Unfortunately in the United States napping has been in general viewed as a sign of weakness. In our society we measure success not only in terms of dollars and cents but how many consecutive hours we work in a day.

I had to protect my reputation as a hard working physician, which started under the previous hospital's president. On several occasions the previous president had commented to me and other people how impressed he was that no matter how early he arrived in the morning or how late he left at night, my car was always in the parking lot. I conveniently did not explain to him that one of the orthopedic surgeons who came in at 5 a.m. every day had the same color and make of car as I did. Moreover, I also conveniently left out the fact that I would frequently nap after 5 p.m. in the sleep center before going home or making rounds in the different sleep centers in town.

Nonetheless, I started my search to protect my right to nap.

Some prominent and famous people in recent history including Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein were habitual nappers. In contrast, Thomas Edison criticized sleep as a waste of time but frequently was caught napping in a nook or closet by his associates. Our current president, George W. Bush, is known to be a regular afternoon napper. Ronald Reagan would also have frequent spontaneous naps, unfortunately during cabinet meetings. However, this is not limited to republicans, as Linden B. Johnson was a great napper and our immediate past president, William J. Clinton, took great pride in working late into the night developing policy averaging only four hours of sleep but supplementing it with naps during the day.

In general, daytime naps are common in many cultures where the heat of the sun makes it unbearable to work in the afternoon. The practice of a siesta is popular in Spain and some Latin American countries, Asia, and Africa. In contrast, in the United States where a siesta is not cultural in nature, a survey conducted by The National Sleep Foundation in 2005, 55% of the respondents admitted to taking on average at least one nap during the week and 35% reported taking two or more naps each week. However my sense is that these naps occurred predominantly during the week-end to compensate for the self-imposed chronic sleep deprivation that many of us struggle with during the workweek.

My research also found an interesting editorial by Dr. Peretz Lavie in *Sleep* 2005; 28 (3): page 298-299 where he summarized that siesta cultures tend to be concentrated between the two latitudes 23.27° north of the equator, the Tropic of Cancer, and south of the equator, the Tropic of Capricorn, predominantly in agricultural societies.

What was most striking, at least to me, in this editorial were the negative effects of napping. Some of the highlights included an association between habitual practice of siesta and coronary artery disease reported in a population base case control study in Costa Rica, a country where napping is widely practiced. On the other hand, data from two case control studies in Greek men of all ages suggested protective effects of afternoon rests or naps against coronary artery disease. The findings from the Greek studies have not been confirmed and contradict the recent reports of increased cardiovascular mortality associated with daytime sleepiness or napping. In China, where the incidence of coronary artery disease is very low compared to western societies, napping is an age-old custom. In Okinawa, Japan 50% of the elderly known as the "Prefecture of Long Life" also practice napping. But what really got my attention was Dr. Lavie's reference to past history where the ill effects of the after lunch napping had been widely condemned in Greek, medieval, and renaissance medical sources. He also found the dictum *somnum fuge meridianum* which means do not take a siesta after lunch. He found one scholar from the Middle Ages who warned that one should not go to sleep shortly after eating but should wait approximately 3-4 hours after a meal. "One should not sleep during the day". I thought this rule applied only to swimming.

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and then gently wakes you just one third of an hour later. Later on in the advertisement there is a disclaimer and a statement regarding the lack of FDA approval and lack of peer reviewed scientific studies.

Despite the conflicting information I have provided I would like to end with the positive benefits of an afternoon nap. One study from Australia by Brooks and Lack looked at the benefits of different length naps. The study revealed that the five minute nap produced few benefits in comparison with a no nap control. However the ten minute nap produced immediate improvements in all outcome measures including sleep latency, subjective sleepiness, fatigue, vigor, and cognitive performance with some of these benefits maintained for as long as 155 minutes. However, a 30 minute nap produced a period of impaired alertness and performance suggesting sleep inertia followed later on by improvements also lasting up to 155 minutes after the nap. Based on the information we have at this time, we recommend a short afternoon nap to improve well being and performance. Taking some poetic license and hopefully not infringing on any trademarks, "to perform strong, nap strong" just don't get caught.

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Certainly a person as disturbed as Cho doesn't get that way overnight. But high schools tend to remain silent about their troubled students, understandably just breathing a huge sigh of relief when they graduate and are gone - only to have them surface later at our nation's colleges and universities. Besides, once they're of age, legal concerns limit what a school can do when a student is suspected of being mentally ill.

Perhaps locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen, within days of the Virginia Tech tragedy, two pieces of relevant legislation were introduced: Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) introduced a bill to ensure that all colleges and universities develop emergency response procedures and campus notification systems; Congressman Tim Murphy (R-PA) proposed a bill that will allow schools and universities to share a student's mental health information. They're not law yet, but at least we're thinking ahead.

This unspeakable tragedy could have happened anywhere - your church on a Sunday morning or your local Wal-Mart on a Saturday afternoon. But it didn't. It happened on a college campus. One like where so many of us work and where parents take for granted the safety of their college-aged kids.

Any teacher reading this can relate: there's that student who's really weird; then there's that loner; or the student who, for any number of reasons, makes the whole class feel uncomfortable just by his or her mere presence. Quite frankly, all we really want is for them to just go away. Cho Seung-Hui did not go away, at least not until he took 33 innocent lives with him.

All of us who've built our careers in education can only stop and think....Go, but for the grace of God...

Sandy McCleaster RRT is a veteran therapist and educator recently retired as the program director of the Passaic Community College Respiratory Care Program. Sandy is still actively involved in her state society and in writing and lecturing on topics pertinent to the Respiratory Care profession.

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