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## Life

### Feeling exhausted in the morning? You're not alone

By Stephanie Gaspar, Online Feature Writer  
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Photo Courtesy of List Universe

Go to school, do homework, help the homeless, go to swim practice, eat, study, and do more homework. With a schedule like this, sleep does not rank high in a typical Whitman student's daily life.

Teenagers need about nine hours of sleep each night to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Studies, however, show the standard teenager gets an average of only seven hours. To convey the importance of sleep and help students improve their sleep schedules, sleep doctor Helene Emsellem spoke to a full audience of Whitman and Pyle parents Feb. 5 in the Whitman media center, while her assistant spoke to students in the chorus room.

Emsellem, a certified sleep doctor and neurologist, speaks on behalf of the National Sleep Foundation. Although her clinical practice focuses on all ages, her personal interest lies in teen sleep and its effects. Emsellem spends most of her time seeing patients with sleep disorders, running a laboratory and conducting clinical research for new treatments for sleep disorders.

Emsellem gives several talks and interviews each month in order to inform young audiences about the basics of sleep and its importance. "When I talk to teens I generally talk about sleep needs and requirements, what sleep is doing for you, the relationship between sleep and learning, sleep and mood, sleep and weight control, and sleep and how you look."

Bekki Sims, Whitman parent and co-chair of the Whitman Stress Busters committee, requested that Emsellem speak at Whitman about the effects of inadequate sleep. "When you start becoming deficient in sleep-and usually that happens as each week goes on from so many nights of successive studying-you can see that you learn less well because things just don't sink in the same and you become more frustrated," she says. "It's sort of like a mad cycle."

The gap between how much sleep students need and how much they get is enormous, Emsellem says. According to 2004 NSF Sleep in America, 20 percent of teenagers get the recommended nine hours a night but 90 percent of parents believe their children get enough sleep on school nights.

Emsellem, author of "Snooze or Lose," wrote her book as a sleep resource for parents and teenagers. "We found that trying to get sleep education in the health and science curriculum was very difficult," she says. "We set up an outreach program for my staff to go to schools anytime anybody wanted us, but we found it was very difficult to get invited because teachers didn't have time for us."

Emsellem says high school courses focus too much time on sex education and don't place enough emphasis on the effects of sleep. "My kids had sex education that was mind-boggling when they were in school, and yet the health curriculum really doesn't include much of anything about sleep. There's a huge amount of room for improvement here for education and the more you know the better you can manage your time and survive."

#### Some additional tips from Dr. Emsellem:

- Minimize light exposure at night and optimize it in the morning
- Set an electronics-off time before bed
- Indulge yourself in a little bit of a wind-down time
- Avoid caffeine and naps past 4 pm
- Train sleep behaviors by having a bedtime routine
- Leave about 20 minutes after studying or TV to relax

Despite the importance of sleep in everyone's lives, it was not until recently that the medical field officially acknowledged it as a medical study. "It was not recognized by the AMA specialty of medicine until last year," Emsellem says. "It's a real problem because you spend a third of your life asleep, and doctors don't spend any time learning about it or how to help you with it."

Not getting enough sleep negatively affects teen's daily lives. When people don't get enough sleep, they have difficulty with focus, attention and concentration. There is also delayed visual and auditory reaction time, impaired

motor function and immune system, and frequent headaches.

Emsellem and Sims especially oppose early high school openings. "I think that teens are really challenged by the school system here in Montgomery County with a very early start time, completely inconsistent with both teens' underlying circadian rhythms and sleep wave cycles," Emsellem says. "It makes it very hard for you to get the sleep you need."

Unfortunately, people cannot make up for lost sleep. As to not disrupt circadian light and dark influences, teens should not sleep later than two hours past weekday morning wakeup time on weekend mornings, Emsellem says.

Parent Lori Cohen learned the importance of teens getting eight to ten hours of sleep each night, and feels the school system must understand it too. "It's difficult implementing recommended sleep hours when the school isn't doing anything about changing the start time."

In order to cope with these difficult schedules, students must manage their time better and recognize their body's limits, Sims says. "People in general need to learn to make choices. Sometimes you can't do everything. You can't do a sport, take a dance class, and take three AP's and go to bed at a reasonable time."

Freshman Clara McCreery, who attended the presentation with Emsellem's assistant, is one of the many students at Whitman who feels overworked and sleep deprived. "I don't get enough sleep," she says. "Nobody gets enough sleep."

Whitman Stress Busters committee helps provide reality checks to students and parents by educating them, Sims says. "We try to educate parents as to what's real for students versus the high pace that some parents and kids think they need to live all the time just to get into school. We try to make high school a place for learning and not just a place to try and get into college."

Visit [www.snoozeorlose.com](http://www.snoozeorlose.com), Emsellem's website on teen sleep, for more tips and information.

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