

Early risers rule

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In the second of a three-part series on our increasingly sleepless society, the National Post's Anne Marie Owens examines how the busy and powerful dismiss sleep as a frivolous trifle and consider it a barrier to success.

The cult of sleeplessness as a measure of success looms large in the business world and among the politically powerful.

Condoleezza Rice gets up at 4.30 a.m. wherever she is in the world to exercise before beginning her workday. Her boss, George W. Bush, is also an early riser. Margaret Thatcher always maintained she required just four hours of sleep a night.

Read any profile of a powerful CEO and it will likely describe how the subject awakes well before dawn and begins their workday by 7 a.m. at the latest.

When Irwin Simon arrives at his Long Island office at 9 a.m. most mornings, it might as well be midday for him, as he has already packed four hours of work into his business day.

The Canadian-born businessman, who heads the billion-dollar health food giant Hain Celestial Group, awakes at 5 a.m. and immediately gets to work at his Manhattan home, going through e-mails and calling operations in Europe and Asia. He prays, walks the dog and exercises -- all before his children wake up at around 7 a.m. He usually squeezes in a breakfast meeting in Manhattan before heading out to Long Island.

"I have always been an early riser. As you can see, I accomplish a lot in four hours and now feel pumped for the remainder of the day," says Mr. Simon, who grew up in Glace Bay, N.S., and now works 75 to 100 hours a week running the business, which produces such organic staples as Rice Dream soy drinks and Celestial Seasonings.

The moral superiority of the early riser has been in place ever since Benjamin Franklin coined the maxim about such habits making a man "healthy, wealthy and wise." But now more than ever, in a 24/7 society where technology means the workday never has to end, sleep is dismissed as a frivolous trifle often eschewed by the busiest and richest.

But how to reconcile this cult of sleeplessness with research that shows even subtle levels of sleep disturbance and slight reductions in sleep time lead to cumulative deficits in brain physiology and performance?

Those engaged in high-performance realms such as business and politics will suggest they have a lower need for sleep than most, but the rhetoric goes even further: cutting back on sleep is often touted as a critical tool to getting the job done.

Parliamentarian Garth Turner, a Conservative MP known for his hectic pace, typically works



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Martha Stewart: "I find that when you have a real interest in life and a curious life that sleep is not the most important thing."

until 1 a.m. or 2 and is always up by 5 a.m. His first face-to-face meetings start at around 7 a.m. on Parliament Hill, and the workday goes until midnight. Then there are e-mails, office business and his own blogging to keep up.

"It's a very intensive job. There just isn't much of a window for sleep," he says.

It is a schedule he maintains even when the House is not in session: "It becomes a normal routine. Once your body gets accustomed to it, that's what works. I can't fathom spending a third of your life unconscious."

Martha Stewart, who says she requires only four hours of sleep each night, once told an interviewer: "I don't need a lot of sleep. I find that when you have a real interest in life and a curious life that sleep is not the most important thing."

When Fortune magazine compiled its roster of "Super-Achievers" recently, the diverse group of a dozen business leaders shared a common approach to sleep: Each talked about getting up early, 5 a.m. or earlier, or getting by on four to six hours of sleep a night.

Dennis Parass, owner and president of a specialty engineering firm, believes there is actually something inherent in the job that requires people in leadership positions to be early risers.

"At that level, you're dealing with things that are complex, that don't require an immediate response, but benefit from reflection. That's what that sleep time is for," says Mr. Parass, the entrepreneurial engineer who turned Ontario's Handling Specialty into a multi-million-dollar international operation behind such diverse projects as aircraft lifts and the underwater hydraulic lift system for Cirque du Soleil's O in Las Vegas.

"When you set your mind on a problem, you might set it aside at the end of the night, but your brain will still be working on it. You'll go to bed with those problems in your mind. One of the advantages of being a morning person is that when you wake up, your mind will be focused and you'll have a clear idea of what to do."

This notion of subconsciously using sleep time to carry on with the day's business is a revelation about the primacy of work, but there have always been those who remain doubtful about the claims of early risers.

Even as Mrs. Thatcher boasted about her reduced need for sleep, her detractors declared she was often caught napping during political business.

Researchers investigating the habits of supposed non-sleepers have uncovered the secret sleep-ins, long naps and weekend recuperations of some avowedly early risers. One recent California study used motion sensors attached to the subjects' wrists to record the lag between the time they said they awoke and the time they actually got out of bed.

Sleep researcher Kimberly Cote says it is a myth perpetuated by entire categories of occupations -- such as medical doctors, airline pilots, politicians -- that some people are simply unaffected by a lack of sleep.

She has been trying to calibrate the impact of sleep deprivation on various aspects of performance and has found that even subtle disruptions in sleep -- where total sleep time is not reduced -- can lead to impairments in alertness and attention.

"Absolutely everyone, if you're not getting the sleep you need, eventually it will affect you. If you have a sleep debt, you will fail more often at tasks and for longer, more frequent lapses," says Dr. Cote, who runs the Sleep Research Laboratory at Ontario's Brock University.

Research has found continued lack of sleep significantly impairs the part of the brain that controls language, memory, planning and sense of time. Studies have shown that even after staying awake for 17 hours (picture a 5 a.m. riser at 10 p.m.), the decrease in task

performance and reaction time is akin to what accompanies a blood alcohol level of two glasses of wine.

"Sleep is a behaviour, similar to diet and exercise," says Dr. Cote. "We know it's good for us, but we don't always do what's good for us."

Nora Spinks, who runs Work Life Harmony Enterprises in Toronto, says it is common for business people to sacrifice sleep for work, even among those who say finding a work-life balance is important to them.

"This morning, I got four e-mails sent to me between 1.30 a.m. and 4 a.m., all of them people who are executives who were doing work, oddly enough, related to better work/life quality," she said in a recent session. "I wonder if any of them saw the irony in that."

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TOMORROW

PART III

It's called co-sleeping: the trend of letting children into their parents' bed is now so prevalent that even those most opposed -- including prominent sleep experts -- are grudgingly accepting the practice.

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