UNDERSTANDING SLEEP

We are constantly reminded by experts on the importance of sleep and its benefits on our overall health, how it aids in recovery, and we just need to sleep more and sleep better. But what is sleep and why is it important? What's happening to our body while we sleep and why should we worry about it?

Simply put, sleep is the time for your body to recover from all the stress you have exposed it to. The more time and focus we dedicate to improving the quality of our sleep, the greater chance our body has of fully recovering from these stresses. Full recovery not only means damage has been healed, but it also means we grow stronger as a result.

Stress and sleep are inversely related to each other: greater stress placed on your body results in decreased quality of sleep. Less sleep results in greater stress on the body. Stress comes in many shapes and sizes, some harmful and some helpful. Stress can be physical or mental, but all stress has one thing in common: the body needs adequate time to recover from it. If we do not offer the body adequate time and focus to recover, it will never fully heal, and we will not grow stronger as a result. With sleep and stress going hand in hand, we must improve both to reap the full benefits of the recovery process.
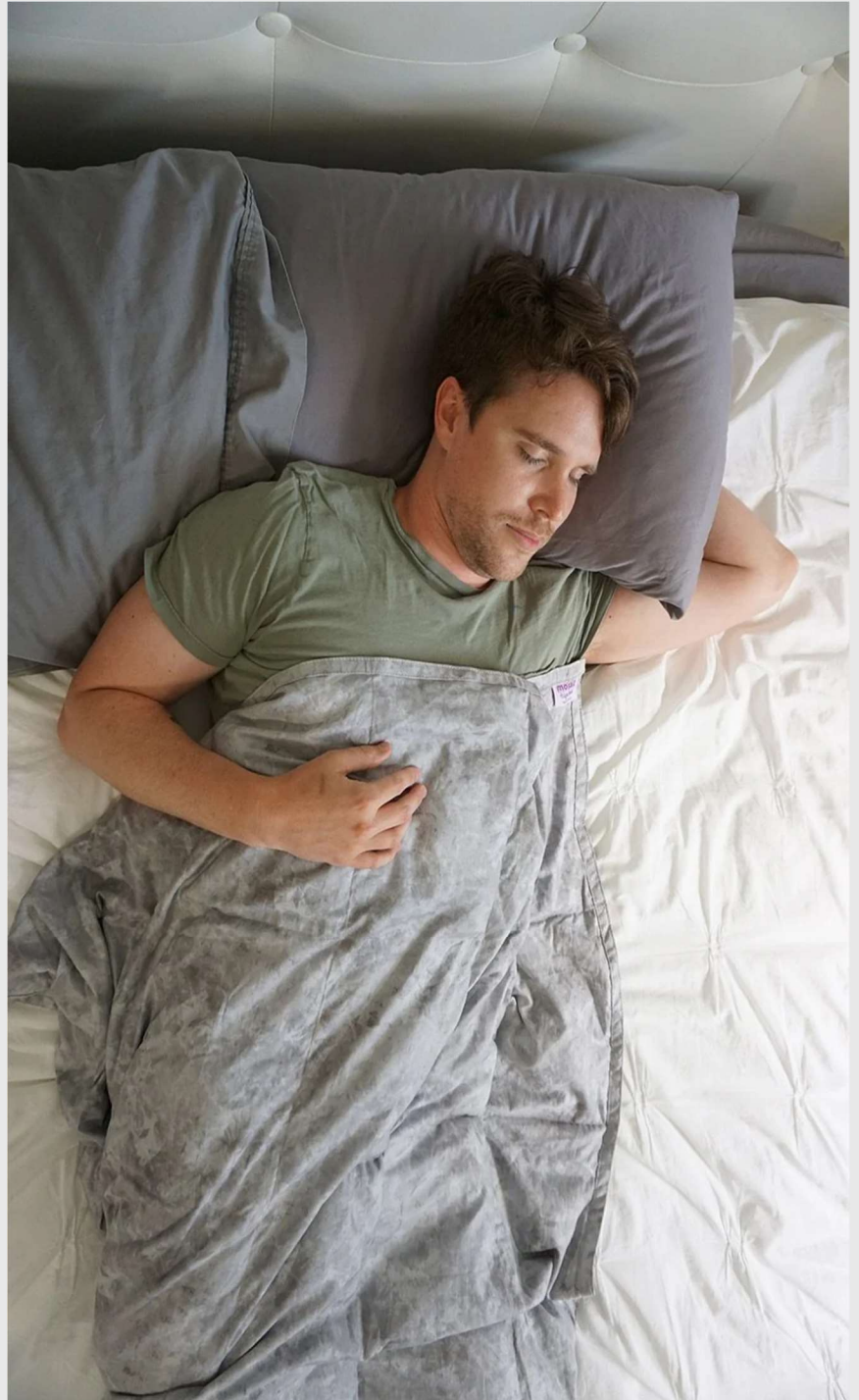
THE IMPACTS OF STRESS

In America today, stress surrounds us in many forms. Some of these stresses are obvious, like financial issues, marital problems, or the death of loved ones. Some are actually quite helpful, like properly programmed resistance training or cardiovascular exercise. Being stuck in a constant loop of stress is something we refer to as chronic stress.

Think of stress as being chased by a bear. That's definitely a stressful situation. Your body is in a fight-or-flight mode and is only concerned with surviving. It is not worried about hunger, recovery, sex, or getting sleep for the next day. It is only worried about the bear. Once it has escaped the bear, only then can it focus on other issues at hand. The problem is that many people are stuck in a chronic loop of being chased by the bear: chronic stress.

This constant activation of the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) leads to elevated blood pressure, or hypertension. Hypertension makes it more difficult for the heart to pump blood, increasing the risk of heart attack or stroke. Chronic stress can also lead to a condition known as hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysfunction. HPA axis dysfunction occurs when the body has been exposed to chronic stress for so long that cortisol, the stress hormone, is irregularly synthesized and released into the body. This results in many issues, but in this context, we need to understand cortisol has a negative impact on sleep performance.
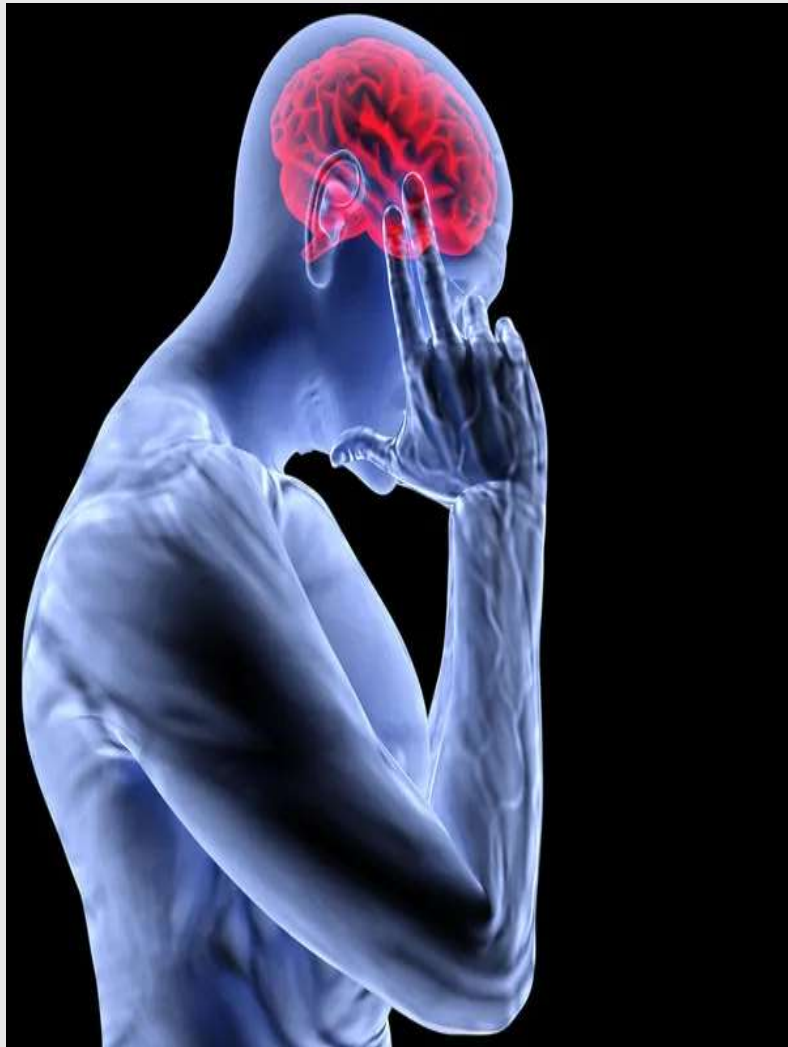
ESCAPING THE BEAR

Can you ever truly escape the bear? No, life will always find a way to stress you out. There will always be some sort of stress in your life, which is healthy in moderation so don't stress about being stressed! That said, there are many ways we can mitigate, or even eliminate, unnecessary stresses in life:

1 **EXERCISE**

Although it sounds counterintuitive, exposing the body to moderate and controlled forms of stress every day is incredibly beneficial. Properly programmed resistance training or low-intensive forms of cardiovascular exercise have been shown to increase serotonin, which increases feelings of self-satisfaction while also reducing cortisol. Whether you spend 15-30 minutes each day in the gym practicing compound lifts, or simply going on a 30-minute walk, you will start to feel the effects of decreased stress over time.

2 **JOURNALING**

Journaling is a great tool to get your thoughts in front of you on paper. Studies have shown both expressive writing and daily gratitude are effective methods for dealing with trauma and mitigating stress. Journaling before bed is a great time to incorporate it into your routine.

3 **MEDITATION AND BREATHING EXERCISES**

Meditation before bed or first thing in the morning can increase efficiency of the brain while relieving stress. Coupling meditation with breathing exercises, like box breathing, can be an effective way to address anxiety and depression.

IMPROVING SLEEP QUALITY

While mitigating stress is a huge component to improving sleep quality, here are some helpful tips for improving sleep that you can start today:

1

GO TO BED AND WAKE UP AT THE SAME TIME EVERY DAY

Many people tend to have consistent sleep schedules on weekdays that correlate to their work schedules, but then they jet lag themselves on weekends by staying up late and sleeping in. Being consistent with the time you go to bed and the time you wake up every day has been shown to greatly improve sleep quality by addressing the circadian rhythm.

2

NO CAFFEINE AFTER NOON

Caffeine has been shown to impact sleep performance 8+ hours after consumption. Therefore, a good rule of thumb is to not consume caffeine after noon. We often use caffeine to hide the fact we don't sleep well, so would you really even "need your morning coffee" if you improved your sleep? And if you are one of those individuals who uses preworkout for your late-night gym sessions, consider replacing the caffeine with simple carbohydrates before your workout. The disruption of your sleep because of caffeine will impact your ability to build muscle.

3

LIMIT SCREEN TIME BEFORE BED

Phones and other electronic devices emit blue light that can impact sleep quality by decreasing melatonin production. Putting away electronic devices an hour before bed is an effective way to reduce the effects of blue light on your sleep. In the world of technology that we live in today, you can't always avoid your phone or laptop late at night. If you cannot avoid your devices, use dimming settings or blue light blocking glasses to limit exposure to blue light before bed.

This hour away from electronic devices is a great time to relieve stress by journaling, meditating, or sipping on some chamomile tea. If you're married or have kids, it's also a great time to connect with your partner or your kids and spend some quality time together without the distraction of technology.

4

DON'T DRINK WITHIN 2 HOURS BEFORE BEDTIME

Try to reach your daily water target before you get close to bedtime. The main reason for this is primarily to avoid needing to wake up to urinate in the middle of the night. Staying asleep without waking up will help optimize your sleep.

BUILDING HABITS

While you may read this and think it would be effective to install all of these changes in your life at once, it would be best to pick one action listed above and make it a habit. Then build on that routine one habit at a time. For example, take the next 2-3 weeks going to bed and waking up at the same time. Note any differences or changes you may feel. Since you only introduced the one habit, you know it was that change that made those differences. Once you do that consistently and it is part of your routine, then pick another habit to add on to your routine. It's not about how fast you improve your sleep quality, it's about how effectively you improve your sleep quality. Make it your goal to install habits in your life that you can do forever, not just as some 30-day challenge.