



How Labor Day Is Responsible for Healthy Sleeping

Labor Day is upon us. A long weekend right after the school year begins anew. No school, no work. No gifts to exchange or parties to attend. But did you know that labor movements are responsible for instituting a healthier structure for sleep in this country?

How Labor Unions Sought Eight Hours out of Balance

The origins of our “eight hours of sleep” seem to have been born from the Industrial Revolution. Around the end of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was a sea change in manufacturing and workers’ relations to their jobs. The economy shifted from agriculture to industrial, which meant working inside. The owners of manufacturing plants needed to run their factories 24/7 to maximize profits, and they did. The U.S. government tracked that a worker averaged 100 hours of work per week. (That’s a lot of work!) Per week that gave the average worker about 10 hours each day for both relaxation and sleeping.

It was Robert Owen, an idealistic British textile manufacturer, who arbitrarily advocated for the slogan: “eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.” Owen made a simple calculation with the twenty-four hours in a day, but there’s no particular evidence he had to back up his belief. Not many factory owners flocked to the idea, but the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions picked up the eight hours a day idea. The eight-hour workday became accepted notion once Ford Motor Company noticed that their workers got more done in eight-hour shifts than they did in ten- to sixteen-hour shifts. Congress codified one company’s policy with the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, which set a minimum wage and a maximum work hours per week.

The Rhythm of Sleep

The reason why workers were getting more done in eight hours than they were in 10 to 16 is due to the natural rises and falls in our energy levels. We constantly hear about the circadian rhythm without hearing much about the ultradian rhythm. Unlike the circadian rhythms, ultradian rhythms are cycles that operate on their own, independent of the time of day. In work productivity literature, you’ve probably read that humans should take a short break every 90 to 120 minutes. This is related to our ultradian rhythms. Your heart rate is another example of an ultradian rhythm. Humans need their heart to pump blood through their body a certain number of times during the day, but heart rates aren’t dialed into the second hand on your watch. Your need for sleep operates in a similar way.

Your body doesn’t need eight hours of sleep starting at a specific time in the night, but your sleep will need a certain number of sleep cycles at night so that you feel rested. Evidence points to four to five sleep cycles per night to obtain a restful amount of REM sleep, what is commonly referred to as “deep sleep.” And as we’ve previously mentioned, melatonin is an important sleep hormone that our body naturally releases at night. Given that the natural ultradian rhythm of energy for adults is about 90 minutes long, each sleep cycle lasts the same amount of time. But these are all average approximations as everyone’s individual ultradian rhythms vary in length.

True Benefit of Imposed Balance

So with little scientific evidence to support their requirement for a shorter workday, labor unions seem to have lucked into a standardized rhythm for human rest. The adoption of a daylight-hours workday was important for humans to work with their natural circadian rhythm of melatonin release. Nighttime sleep is so vital for proper body functioning that any consistent interruptions to sleep merit medical consultation. Ironically enough, healthcare workers are among the many labor groups that work atypical schedules, a fact which is known to increase the work injury risk for shifts longer than eight hours, shortened sleep durations, or even social isolation. Implementing eight hours of work meant that we would naturally see sleep as an important part of our work-life balance. It’s healthy for our bodies to be mostly dialed into the daytime-nighttime schedule of the Earth. Studies have shown that night-shift workers may suffer from more health issues than day-shift workers. Further, working more than eight hours is also linked to cardiovascular issues, depression, and high injury risk. But labor unions’ insistence on eight-hour workdays created the structure for our daily human rhythms to resume its healthy pace.

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