

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

16 May 2013

Sleeping for learning



Rob: Hello, I'm Rob and this is 6 Minute English and I'm joined this week by Finn. Hello Finn.

Finn: Hello Rob.

Rob: This week, we're discussing sleep. New research has shown that not getting enough sleep – or **sleep deprivation** – can have a negative effect on our ability to learn. We're going to talk about that today and explore some sleep-related language.

Finn: So Rob, are you saying the more sleep I get, the cleverer I will be?

Rob: Not exactly - but we could put that to the test now by seeing if you know the answer to this week's question. This is about Randy Gardner, who holds the world record for the longest period of time without sleep. Do you know how long he stayed awake for? Was it:

- a) 5 days
- b) 8 days
- c) 11 days

Finn: Rob, I'm going to go for the ambitious c) 11 days without sleep.

Rob: Well, I'll let you know the answer at the end of the programme, if you can stay awake that long! Now, let's talk more about this link between sleep and the ability to learn. Researchers from Boston College in the USA have found the lack of sleep is a significant – so important – factor in lowering the achievement of school pupils. The findings could be relevant to any of us who are trying to learn something.

Finn: That's true. The most interesting fact is that it is more of a problem in affluent countries – so wealthier countries such as the United States, England, France and Saudi Arabia.

Rob: Students here are more affected by influences from their home life.

Finn: You're talking about computers and TVs in their bedrooms and using smartphones?

Rob: Yes, they're tempted by all this technology instead of just **getting their heads down** and having a good night's sleep. The survey found 80% of 13 and 14-year-olds in the US were identified by their teachers as being affected by lack of sleep. The international average was 57%.

Finn: Let's hear from William Myers who is the Principal at South River High School in the United States. He says this is a challenge for teachers. What other word does he use to mean 'lacking in energy'?

William Myers, Principal at South River High School:

If we didn't make our classes more engaging, we would see a decline in our performance. We would see that school-wide, and in many of our classes, we would see students who were lethargic, sleepy, maybe heads down at the end of the day. So we have to put a lot of work into keeping them alert and keeping them excited about school.

Rob: That's quite a challenge then! He says classes have to be engaging, so interesting and exciting, to stop students getting sleepy and lacking in energy – the word he used was **lethargic**.

Finn: Yes, this research looked at the link between the amount students sleep and their test results. Not surprisingly it found children with more sleep achieve higher test results in maths, science and reading. There is a lesson there for all of us – I think I'll just shut my eyes, Rob, and have **40 winks**.

Rob: You mean a short, light sleep? Can you wait until the end of the programme please? Scientists believe the lack of sleep causes your brain **to run on empty**. It struggles to absorb and retain ideas.

Finn: Actually, scientists say that there are more serious problems with students staying up late before they **hit the sack** - or got to bed – as we can hear from the BBC's Jane O'Brien. Can you identify what they are?

Jane O'Brien, BBC reporter:

Here at the Children's National Medical Centre, doctors are seeing more and more sleep-deprived kids, and it's not just affecting their school work. It's linked to obesity, mood swings and behaviour problems. In fact it's putting their long-term health at risk.

Finn: So, the lack of sleep can also lead to health problems such as obesity – that’s when someone is dangerously overweight – and to **mood swings** – that’s changes in how someone feels or behaves. So, what is the solution to all of this?

Rob: Well the school day in some countries start later, allowing teenagers a bit of a lie in. And others have a break in the afternoon – like **a siesta**. But the real solution is for students **to turn in** – or go to bed – earlier.

Finn: This research has also highlighted another problem. Because teachers are simplifying their lessons to take account of the **tetchy** – or grumpy – students, there’s concern that pupils who are getting enough sleep are losing out in these adjusted lessons. So everyone suffers. OK, well before I go for a lie down please could you let me know the answer to today’s question, Rob?

Rob: Of course. Earlier I asked you about Randy Gardner, who holds the world record for the longest period of time without sleep. I asked you if you knew how long he stayed awake for?

Finn: And I said c) 11 days, 11 long days.

Rob: And you were right. He stayed awake for that incredible 11 days back in 1965. Randy was actually functioning quite well at the end of his research and he could still beat the scientist at pinball. Well, it’s almost time to go but before we do, Finn could you remind us of some of the words we’ve heard today.

Finn: Yes. We heard:

sleep deprivation

getting their heads down

lethargic

forty winks

to run on empty

hit the sack

mood swings

a siesta

to turn in

tetchy

Rob: Well, that's all we have time for today. Time for a doze Finn!

Both: I think so. Bye.

Vocabulary and definitions

sleep deprivation	not getting enough sleep
getting their heads down	going to sleep
lethargic	lacking in energy
forty winks	a brief and light sleep
to run on empty	to continue working when you have no energy or enthusiasm
hit the sack	go to bed
mood swings	regular changes in how you feel or behave
a siesta	a short sleep after lunch (particularly in hot countries)
to turn in	to go to bed
tetchy	grumpy, unhappy

Read and listen to the story online:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/2013/05/130516_6min_sleep.shtml

More on this story:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22209818>