Are You Getting Enough Sleep to #StayWoke?
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"Woke" is an expression of consciousness; in particular, critical consciousness. Popularized by the Black Lives Matter movement, this expression is special for the enormity of the message it conveys in such a small package. Woke people recognize and participate in the ongoing pursuit for social justice; condemn efforts to distract and confuse those in the struggle; and keep their eyes and ears open for and to the truth of our shared humanity and destiny. This particular expression of consciousness tends to be invoked with an external focus, which is entirely appropriate, but incomplete. Being woke has an internal component, as well: it's an invitation to do some self-examination, with a particular lens to one's privilege and position(s) with the power hierarchy of social identities.

In these days and weeks following the U.S. presidential election, the idea of being woke looms large for many of us. As we figure out our next move in pursuit of social justice, be mindful that this consciousness journey requires of a balance of contemplation and activism, both of which require a tremendous amount of energy. The good news is that our energy is renewable, but only so far as we're attending to self-care. Among other things, this includes getting a sufficient amount of the state that is the opposite of the literal meaning of the word *woke,* which is sleep. Unfortunately, study after study shows that we skimp on this most basic of needs much too often.

The National Sleep Foundation [recommends](#) seven to nine hours of sleep per night for adults age 26-64, but according to the [results](#) of a 2015 survey by *Huffington Post* and *Parade*, 38 percent of us are getting 5 hours or less sleep per night. To bring it home to our profession, the *ABA Journal* [reported](#) on analysis of the results of the National Health Interview Survey showing that lawyers receive the second lowest average hours of sleep among all occupations captured in the survey, beat out only by home health aides for fewest hours. While that may not come as a surprise, it matters for a lot of reasons. Some of them are obvious; for example, you may be familiar with that overwhelming exhaustion in every cell of your body after pulling an all-nighter or two. But how does failing to get enough sleep on a regular basis affect our well-being in ways that we're not even aware?

Chronic sleep deprivation has been linked to a wide array of serious medical conditions, including [cardiovascular disease](#), [diabetes](#), and even [cancer](#) by way of a weakened immune response. Poor sleep also contributes to [obesity](#), which is associated with some of the previously mentioned conditions. As discussed in detail in a [TED Talk](#) by neuroscientist Jeff Iliff, emerging research suggests sleep plays a critical role in eliminating brain waste associated in its accumulated form with Alzheimer's disease. If that's not enough to make you get some zzz's, consider this potential impact on your work: research shows that sleep plays an essential role in memory formation,

consolidation, and retrieval, as well as reaction time, all of which affects our ability to think on our feet.

So how can we improve upon our sleep habits so that we have the energy to live a woke life? Here are a few tips:

- Establish and follow a regular sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day, including weekends. Put the schedule on your calendar, along with everything else that's important to you. In addition, note that many fitness trackers will allow you to set an alert to remind you that it's time to head to bed.

- Create an optimal atmosphere for sleep by keeping your bedroom dark, quiet, and cool.

- Put the phone down! Add to that any tablets, computers, and other electronic devices with an LED screen. According to Sleep.org, the light emitting from these devices, known as blue light, interrupts the production of melatonin, a key regulator of our sleep/wake cycles. Sleep experts recommend quitting these devices at least 30 minutes before bed. It also helps to put your phone out of reach (or at least turning it face-down on your night stand).

- Take a nap. The National Sleep Foundation suggests that 20-30 minutes of napping has been shown to be an effective way to recharge your batteries without grogginess.

- Struggling to wind down? Try these two strategies:
  - Keep pen and paper nearby to write down the most pressing among the thoughts and worries that may be keeping you from falling asleep. Sure, you could put them in your phone (confession: I do, sometimes), but as noted earlier, you want to limit screen time at bedtime.
  - Breathe. Taking deep breaths and extending the exhale can help trigger the "rest-and-digest" response in your nervous system, causing you to relax. Check out this timely article to explore specific breathing exercises.

I know some of you are saying, "I'm too busy for this!" We all are, so I recommend starting small. Pick one or two of these sleep health tips, and try them out, one day at a time, for three weeks (it's been said that it takes 21 days to create a habit). At the end of those three weeks, observe how much more energy you have to "stay woke."

About the Blogger
Denise promotes connection within and without through a combination of diversity & inclusion advocacy and yoga and mindfulness teaching. She formerly practiced employment law, continues to work primarily with lawyers, and is proud to be a Resident Blogger for GWAC. She can be reached at denise@thestillcenter.com.