

★WELCOA's News & Views

Getting a Good Night's Sleep, Digital Detox & Mindfulness

A WELCOA Expert Interview with Brian Luke Seaward, Ph.D.



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An Expert Interview with
BRIAN LUKE SEAWARD, PH.D.

ABOUT **DR. BRIAN LUKE SEAWARD**



Brian Luke Seaward is a renowned and respected international expert in the fields of stress management, mind-body-spirit healing and corporate health promotion. Additionally, he is an award-winning author, photographer, teacher, celebrated film director/producer and much sought after inspirational speaker. He currently serves as the Executive Director of the Paramount Wellness Institute in Boulder, CO. Dr. Seaward can be reached via his website, www.brianlukeseaward.net.

ABOUT **RYAN PICARELLA, MS, SPHR**



As WELCOA's President, Ryan brings immense knowledge and insight from his career that spans over a decade in the health and wellness industry. He is a national speaker, healthcare consultant, and has designed and executed award winning wellness programs. Known for his innovative and pragmatic approach to worksite wellness, Ryan looks forward to furthering the WELCOA mission and vision and continuing to position the organization for success for the future.

Ryan Picarella can be reached at rpicarella@welcoa.org.

How many hours of sleep do we need for optimal performance? What is keeping us from getting a good night's sleep? What is the impact on employee stress? Learn how to help employees improve their sleep and lower their stress in this expert interview with stress expert Dr. Brian Luke Seaward. The good news is that the solution may be right in front of our faces (literally).



Q1 Can you provide us with a background on why sleep is so important to our overall health and wellbeing?

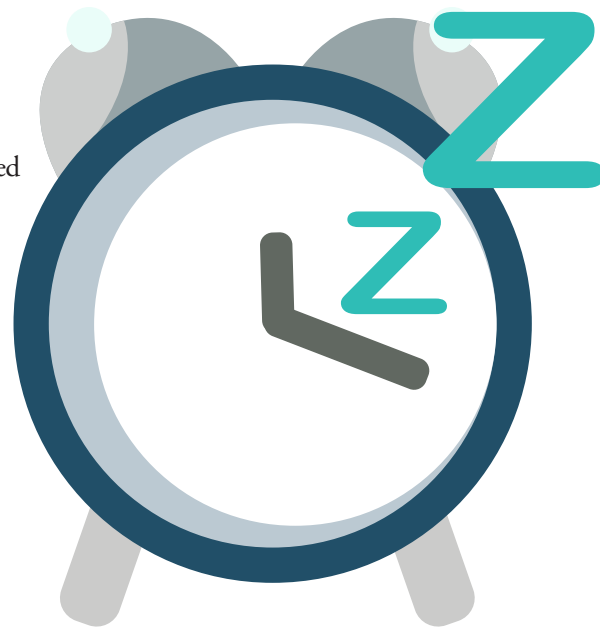
Dr. Brian Luke Seaward: So much attention in wellness is placed on the hours that we are awake (and what we do when we are awake, such as work, exercise and eating habits). Yet, we spend roughly a third of each day, our lives in fact, sleeping. Few wellness practitioners, and far fewer people in general, place any emphasis on this aspect in wellness programming. Insomnia is a *huge* wellness issue in America. Over 50% of Americans claim not to get a good night's sleep on a regular basis and estimates suggest that most people (including children) do not get enough sleep each night.

Sleep loss has both short term and long-term implications at the worksite. With regard to short-term aspects, poor sleep (quality and quantity) results in loss of attention span, poor reaction time, poor decision-making, miscommunications, lethargy and fatigue. Many work-related accidents are directly tied to poor sleep. The long-term implications are even more daunting. Research now reveals that poor sleep quality is associated with a suppressed immune system, obesity and very likely heart disease and many forms of cancer.

Q2 Why do you think so many of us are not sleeping well or sleeping enough?

BLS: Over the past several decades in the American culture, sleep is considered to be a luxury rather than a necessity. As such, many people tend to shave off sleep time on either end of the night to do other things (such as catch up on work, surf the internet, or watch television). Eight hours of sleep is considered to be the gold standard for optimal sleep wellness, yet many people "seem" to get by with 5-6 hours each night. Then there are those people who don't sleep at all during the night. This all adds up to poor sleep management.

Over **50% of Americans claim not to get a good night's sleep** on a regular basis and estimates suggest that most people (including children) **do not get enough sleep each night.**



Q3 We all know that there is a strong connection between stress and a poor night's sleep but can you explain exactly why that link exists?

BLS: The sleep literature is fascinating. There are many reasons why people do not get a good night's sleep including sleep hygiene, medications, menopause, prostate issues, sleep apnea, evening snacks, out of synch bio-rhythms or "jet lag", light pollution, acid reflux, and chronic pain. However, stress—emotional stress—is associated with more than 50 percent of all sleep-related problems and it is very common. Where does stress fit in? People often find themselves lying awake at night worrying about finances, health, health care, childcare, eldercare, and job security; the list of stressors is nearly endless. I would have to say that based on some new research from the American Psychological Association's 2015 Report on Stress, what really keeps most people up at night deals with the anxiety of financial matters.

“Stress—**emotional stress**—is associated with **more than 50 percent** of all sleep-related problems and it is very common.”

Q4 You mentioned "Sleep Hygiene." Can you explain what that is?

BLS: Sleep hygiene is the term given to understand our typical sleep environment. Ideally, the bedroom should be devoid of things that tend to interrupt a good night's sleep, including street noise, room temperature, light, televisions, computers, partners who snore loudly, even pets on the bed. Sleep experts recommend that good sleep hygiene includes the most conducive ambience to promote quality sleep. More than just a comfortable mattress, good sleep hygiene includes a cool, quiet, dark room. The National Sleep Foundation goes as far as to say that, due to the invasion of technology in our lives, we should keep our bedroom a tech-free zone.



Q5 Aside from stress, what else is known to disrupt a good night's sleep?

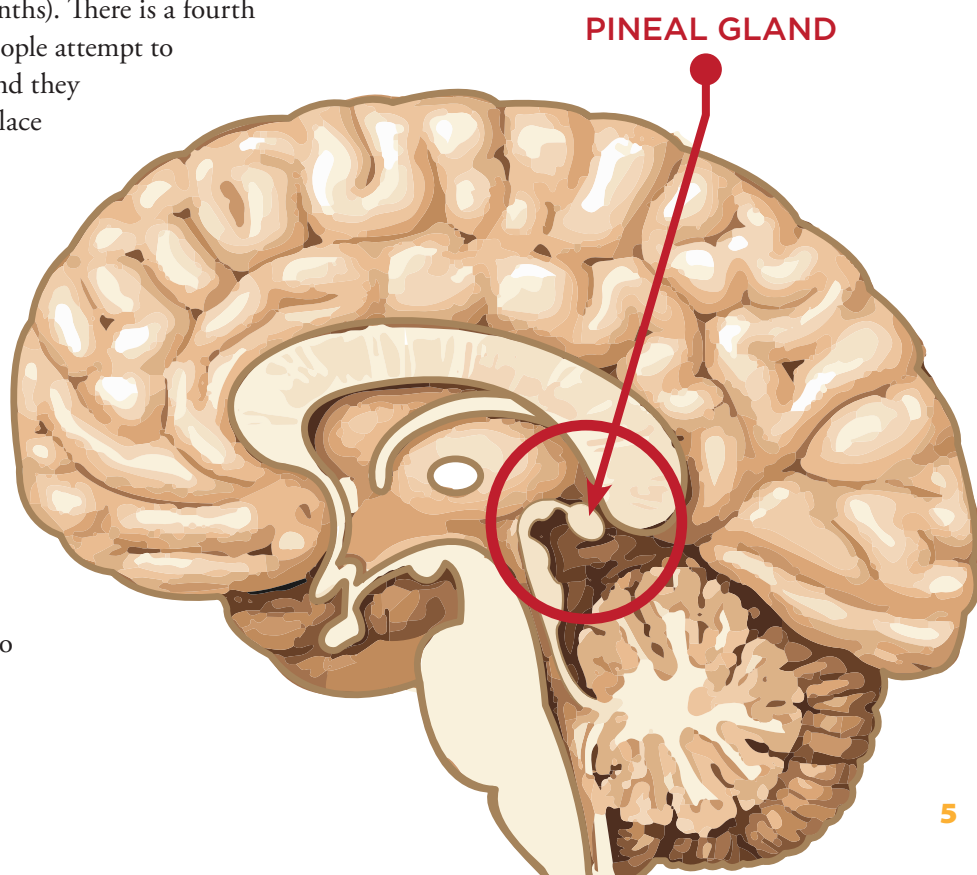
BLS: People are not going to want to hear this, but the newest issue with poor sleep is the nonstop use of cell phones and screen technology. The portion of the brain that regulates sleep is the pineal gland. It is the pineal gland that creates and secretes melatonin, also known as the sleep hormone, as natural light diminishes. Research now substantiates that the light (specifically the blue spectrum) from these screen devices is registered in the pineal gland during the evening hours, in essence, shutting off the production of melatonin. There is also the concern that microwaves from cell phones can cause damage to the pineal gland as well. One danger is with kids who take their smart phones to bed and text all night into the wee hours. Not only are these kids not sleeping, but we could argue about the impact on brain development.

Q6 We've been talking about not getting enough sleep or high-quality sleep, but what characterizes insomnia?

BLS: Insomnia is a complex topic and as such, there are many types of sleep disorders. Some people simply cannot get to sleep at night. Others take forever to fall asleep, only to wake up and not be able to fall back asleep again. Some people (the light sleepers) wake up several times in the night. Simply stated, insomnia refers to poor sleep patterns over time. Sleep experts describe three types of insomnia. Acute (several days to weeks), Intermittent insomnia (several weeks to months), and Chronic insomnia (several months). There is a fourth category called "Rebound Insomnia," where people attempt to discontinue using a sleep medication only to find they cannot sleep without it. There is a time and a place for sleep medications, but the sleep experts I talked to when writing my new book about sleep said that this should always be a last resort, not the first.

If I could add one thing here, from a holistic mind-body-spirit perspective, which is my educational background, insomnia is not just an imbalance of brain chemistry, but, by and large, this is how it is looked at from our Western culture perspective. Many of the sleep medications have some serious side effects and interactive effects with other medications to consider.

Research now substantiates that the **light** (specifically the **blue spectrum**) from these **screen devices** is registered in the **pineal gland** during the evening hours, in essence, **shutting off the production of melatonin.**



Q7 Is light from phones and other devices the main way that technology is adversely affecting our sleep?

BLS: In addition to the light from screen devices, there is also electrical pollution (known in physics as ELF's which means Extremely Low Frequency vibrations) that also affects the pineal gland. We are all electromagnetic beings and are greatly influenced by these vibrations. I have come across research that links the microwave pulses from the WiFi router to decreased melatonin levels. For this reason, I recommend that people turn off their Wi-Fi routers at night before they go to sleep. By the way I highly recommend reading the classic book on this, *Cross Currents*, by Robert Becker, M.D. The book *Disconnect*, by Devra Davis is also an excellent resource.

Q8 You have popularized the term, "Digital Detox." What is digital toxicity and how do we detox?

BLS: We live in an amazing time in human history. Never before have we been exposed to so much sensory stimulation—all right at your fingertips with a few keystrokes or a click of the mouse. We are all trying to keep up with news events, people, friends, topics of interest and who knows what else through social media. A most apt metaphor for this sensory stimulation is like drinking water through a fire hose. All of this sensory stimulation in a 24/7 accessible, voyeuristic society can become overwhelming to the point of sensory bombardment. In stress management terms we call this *mental paralysis*; it is the freeze of the disengaged flight response. Sociologists are having a field day observing how people use and abuse screen technologies today. They even have a name for this abuse, *screen addictions*, and some call it the new social addiction. People think nothing of taking their smart phones and tablets to bed with them. The Internet has become a public service (like electricity or running water). It is not that technology is bad; it is how it is used that becomes problematic.

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Q9 So, how do we detox from digital overload?

BLS: This is THE million-dollar wellness question. We can start by creating healthy boundaries with the use of these technologies. Again, technologies are not bad, it's how they are used that can be problematic. Set a media curfew like no smart phone use after 8:00 p.m. each night or no screen devices in the bedroom. Another idea is to get outside in nature without cell phones, GPS devices, iPods, etc.; this is a great way to re-calibrate your body's biorhythms or internal clock. And my favorite way to detox is with a daily habit of meditation.

Q10 Anybody involved in health promotion has heard about Mindfulness, which seems to be, in part, what you are describing. Where does mindfulness fit in and how does it correspond to digital detox and a good night's sleep?

BLS: Mindfulness meditation has become a popular way to add to one's work-life intelligence. Keeping in mind that there are many ways to meditate, mindfulness has gained a lot of traction through the popularity of Jon Kabat-Zinn and the research of Richard Davidson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mindfulness is a practice of living in the present moment rather than the past, which brings up feelings of guilt or frustration, or the future, which often creates anxiety or fear. In a culture defined by short attention spans, training your mind to focus on one thing without ricocheting all around is a form of mental stability. A practice of meditation allows one to be the calm in the storm, and mindfulness is now a popular way to meditate. Moreover, one of the great benefits of mindfulness is that, in addition to helping to lower resting heart rate and blood pressure, it also helps to promote a good night's sleep.

“**Mindfulness** is a practice of **living in the present moment** rather than the **past**, which brings up feelings of **guilt** or **frustration**, or the **future**, which often creates **anxiety** or **fear**.”

Looking for more resources on stress management?

Check out another great expert interview from Dr. Seaward.




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Q11 What is the thread between insomnia, digital toxicity and mindfulness?

BLS: In a word, ego! It is the ego that keeps the brain active all night with anxiety about past and future events. It is the ego's curiosity or voyeurism that is drawn to many of today's digital distractions, and it is the goal of meditation to domesticate the ego for mental, emotional and even spiritual wellbeing. We don't talk much about ego in wellness programming but we really should because it's the 9,000 pound elephant in the room that everyone ignores.

Q12 Any additional thoughts on stress, insomnia, and digital toxicity?

BLS: For some people, the word "meditation" may have some baggage with it, but that is so 20th century. Unless you have been living under a rock, you know that the digital age is here in full throttle. We have a choice: to be swept away by the repeated tsunamis of digital information or move to higher ground, which includes not only healthy boundaries, but incorporating a regular meditation practice. How can anyone live in this world today and stay grounded without employing either one of these wellness behaviors? As I often say, wellness is so much more than broccoli and aerobics, or in today's lingo, Kale and CrossFit.

I worked for several years as a sport psychologist with the Olympic Biathlon team. At that level of competition (stress) you need to be mentally fit as well as physically fit. I taught all kinds of relaxation techniques and coping strategies to Olympic athletes. These are critical practices for anyone hoping to compete at that caliber. We called all the non-physical training "mental training" and it included meditation because, at that level of competition, you need excellent concentration skills and the ability to focus. The same is true today for everyone. We live in a culture of distractions; no greater example exists today than our screen technologies. To navigate this world at optimal wellness, we each need to be able to focus. When you can do this, and do it well, you have taken the pebble from the hand of the master. 

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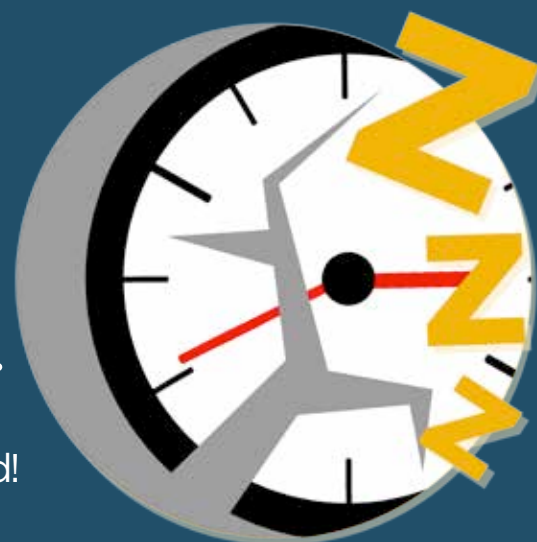
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