Mental Fatigue:
Sleep Difficulties in College and University Students

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A study published by Hicks and Pellegrini found that in 1969 college students had 7.5 hours of sleep per night and by 1989 they had only 6.5 hours (as cited in Brown, Buboltz, & Soper, 2006, p. 231). Students’ academic, extra-curricular, work, and interpersonal commitments often lead to irregular bedtimes and reduced length of sleep. Chronic lack of sleep can result in fatigue, poor health, and influence students’ academic success. This paper will examine the impact of sleep deprivation on college students and outline preventative strategies.

Literature Review

Fatigue is defined as “a feeling of being extremely tired, usually because of hard work or exercise” (Fatigue, 2005, p. 559) and insomnia is defined as “difficulty initiating or maintaining sleep” (Sleep, 2011, para. 1). Researchers normally use standardized surveys or questionnaires such as the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS), National Sleep Foundation's Sleep Diary and the Fatigue Severity Scale (FSS) to measure fatigue or evaluate sleep habits. Brown, Buboltz and Soper (2006) note that sacrificing sleep leads to “increased health concerns, irritability, depression, fatigue, and attention and concentration difficulties, along with poor academic performance” (p. 231). Furthermore, a study of 160 students in Taiwan using the PSQI, ESS and FSS indicates that sleep quality depends on the regularity of bedtimes and the daily length of sleep (Kang & Chen, 2009, abstract). Another study by Brooks, Girgenti and Mills (2009) reveals that out of 147 students, 43.5% experienced symptoms of depression at some point in their life and 38% had trouble sleeping (para. 1). According to some reports, approximately 20% of students have abused prescription medications such as Ritalin or Adderall in order to increase concentration or focus on academic tasks such as studying or writing essays (Andrew, 2005, para. 4).


