

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

The way you're working is not working. The old school approach of sacrificing your personal life for professional gain has succeeded only in breeding a workplace culture of overwork, disengagement, and burnout. Welcome to the Work Less, Produce More podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Lisa Belanger, CEO of ConsciousWorks consulting and expert in proactive mental health and performance in the workplace. My goal is to teach leaders to consciously build their workplace culture. Whether you're leading five people or 500, the dynamics you set in your workplace matter. We will cover essential skills to live and lead sustainable work, leveraging the latest research on how to work and maybe even more importantly, learning how to unwork. This podcast will help you work sustainably, lean in and enjoy it with the support of an inspired and fulfilled team. While there's no one answer each episode, I will explore with a guest expert considerations, ideas, and tools you need to create work life integration that fuels your drive instead of draining your ambition.

On this week's podcast, we have a guest speaking about the topic I was most interested in when I started this podcast: sleep, probably because I'm so absolutely terrible at it. But of course it has such an impact on our cognition, on our creativity, on our innovation, on our memory, pretty much everything the brain does. Why do we tend to undervalue it so much? Jonathan Charest is the director of the Athlete Sleep Services and a behavioral sleep medicine specialist at the Center for Sleep & Human Performance. He works to develop an optimized sleep for athletes, both at the regional and international level. I have no doubt he can give us some pointers on how to increase our own performance so let's dive in.

Today, we're going to talk about sleep and how about relates to our performance and then of course, how it relates to rest. So my first question is how does sleep affect what we do during the day? So when we think of our work task, everything from creativity, innovation, focus, productivity memory, does sleep matter?

Jonathan Charest:

Well, essentially sleep does matter. In fact, it is the foundational piece of all of the aforementioned variables. So going from productivity, creativity, rest, recovery, you can put them all in the same basket. You finish your day and you begin your day with sleep and if you don't have proper sleep and you know how this works, you only need one poor night of sleep to remind you how good and important sleep is. And when you have a poor night, suboptimal night, doesn't need to be a sleepless night, you know that your mood will be impacted, your motivation will be impacted. You don't think clearly, you have more of a tendency to have a foggy head so this will be detrimental to your productivity. And so that just shows you how important sleep will be in term of increment.

If you have only six hour of sleep each night, of course you can power through. This is the good old fashioned Canadian and American way of viewing things. Sleep is for the weak, the early birds gets the worm and you have all these so-called motto and the 5:00 AM club, that's probably the club I despise the most, it's so detrimental for the general population. All in all, what you really need is a good seven to nine hours of refreshing sleep. So it's not deep sleep, so deep sleep is a whole other definition of what sleep is. So it refers to level one, level two, and level three of the EEG, which is the recording of our brain. So when people use, "I need deep sleep," what do you truly need? What you need is in fact, refreshing sleep so you wake up and you are ready for the day that's coming for you. And then you will have the motivation, the brain juice in other word, to go after the task that are put upon yourself by either work, your social commitment, kids and all. So yeah, it does start with sleep.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

So I have a question for you because I know this to be true, seven to nine hours. I don't think I've ever gotten seven hours of sleep and I've even done sleep studies where you do sleep debt and you calculate over time. And I think realistically if I got six and a half hours, I'd be... And this is before kids, by the way, I think this is very important that I would consider that such a good sleep. Now, I do know that there's some independent variables between people, but recently flying so much, flights are always at the worst time of day, you're getting up at 4:00, you're getting up at 3:00. What should you be doing to make up that sleep? Should it be nap? Should you go to bed early? What would be ideal?

Jonathan Charest:

The ideal would be to establish what's your baseline, so essentially what I'm referring to now is how much sleep do you need to function? Then a six hour to function, I will not dispute that. Sure, you can function on six hour, but I will never buy that you are optimal.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Exactly.

Jonathan Charest:

And then after that, it's how do you need to be optimal? So now we have the first layer, I'm functioning at six. I can power through, fair enough. Good for you, that's your choice. Then after that I need seven. I need 8, 9, 10, let's say, and we have a baseline of total sleep time. Following that, we need the timing. So a 9:00 to 5:00 sleeper, an 11:00 to 7:00 sleeper, a midnight to 8:00 sleeper to me are all equal. There is not a better window of sleep, there is your own window. So early birds and night owl.

So if you try to make a night owl sleep between 9:00 and 5:00, you will greatly disappoint your sleeper. He will not be able to initiate sleep and then you will believe he's a poor sleeper which in fact is far from being the case. So when you have established how long you need and when you need, so you have the duration of your sleep and the timing of when you will achieve optimal sleep. And from there, someone such as you that's traveling a lot so dealing with Circadian disturbance, you can start and shift as much as you can and prepare as much as you can in advance to actually influence your Circadian preference phase. So with blue blocking glasses, maybe an intervention with a fraction of what's usually consumer melatonin, so I'm referring to 0.5 to one milligram, please don't use 10 milligrams at home.

And if you have a strategy, then you can minimize the burden of traveling east, west, north, south and that would be how I would approach it and this is how we approach it here at the clinic with patient that you have requirement of traveling is we will not lie to you. You will have sleep disruption, sleep restriction, but does that mean you should sleep only four hour? Absolutely not. Having said that, earlier bedtime does not necessarily mean better because if you have to wake up at 4:00, but you're that night owl, and you say, "Well, 4:00, I should be in bed by 8:00. 8:00 to 4:00, that's eight hour." You'll be in bed between probably 8:00 and 11, just tossing and turning, getting frustrated. So you're not helping yourself achieve a good night of sleep. And then after that, napping will be your best strategy. Napping should never replace your sleep, it should be a compliment of your sleep. So if someone should, such as you said, you mentioned 6.5 hour throughout the night. If we add a half hour napping time, you reach your seven hour a day which we will be very satisfied with.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

That makes complete sense to me and of course I try to do that. And even I find even a five minute, 10 minute nap is helpful. I don't nap well but when I do, and I'm not going to lie actually right before your

call in, my first nap and I don't know how long, and it was amazing. And I do think this is so important. We have these ideals and then we throw a child's sleep pattern on top of it and it's so frustrating to me because when I first became a mom, they'd be like, "Sleep when your baby sleeps." I'm like, first of all, that's not how I work. I can't just lay down and fall asleep. There needs to be that sleep pressure and that tiredness. Two, should I do the dishes when the baby does the dishes too? When are we going to get these other life things done? Then in theory, you could be like, "Oh, your sleep's so much more important." But if you're laying there thinking about these things that just disrupts it. So is there any thought beyond getting rid of the child that we can do to help with sleep during this time? And I know even for myself, my daughter's two and a half and she'll still get up one time per night that I find incredibly challenging.

Jonathan Charest:

With young parents, and I'm being one of those.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I like that you called young parent, not a parent of young children. I'm a young parent. I like that.

Jonathan Charest:

When you're a young parent with young children, including my son, my son is seven month old, you realize that whatever you're going to read such as sleep when a baby sleep is so highly frustrating. For those who can nap when the baby naps, absolutely. I would say, you know what? This would be the low hanging fruit, take it. It will be beneficial. For the other half or even the vast majority of parents and especially young moms that cannot initiate sleep in the morning in the afternoon, or whenever the baby naps because of work, they don't have that year long maternity leave, they have still a house to run, there may be a older kid. Then the stress comes into play.

So now how do we distribute sleep? To me, when I discuss with young parents, it's taking that pressure down one notch or two. You still want to protect your bulk of your night whenever possible. If you breastfeed you know it's every two, three hours, there is no going around this. Then you try to nap as much as you can. If you don't breastfeed, baby still needs their bottle throughout the night. Is it two, is it three, is it even four? So the idea will always be you are the parent, you know what is best for you and you know what is best for the baby. I'm referring also to co-sleeping. Lots of people say, "Don't co sleep," this is highly cultural.

In that sense, if you sleep better when the baby is in the same room, I'm sure the baby's also sleeping better. So now you're both winning on the side of sleep. So just to summarize, it's reduce the stress and the pressure to, "I need to sleep when the baby sleep," you're not the same sleeper. Baby can sleep after being away for two hour, you can't. If you grab it whenever it is offered to you and eventually it's a team effort. There's no such thing as to me as sleep or nap when the baby naps, it's so frustrating.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I think you phrased that so well, just relieving the pressure I think from, and I'll take it a little bit further. You talked about co-sleeping even breastfeeding, what that needs to be, but I'm somebody that as soon as I wake up for the first time in the night, I'm up. So it doesn't matter if that's three hours after I fell asleep originally, I'm just awake. So my husband and I took shift work, we had to so we could both have a bulk sleep at some point and figure it out from there, but I love this idea of just letting what should happen go and figure out what works for you and what works for your family. And also wanted to note

that this is a benefit of the remote hybrid workforce, especially for new parents is that potential of nap during the day to allow for that, the top up of sleep like you talked about, can we just get a little bit more to add to our base? Ideally you get it in your base but if we could add on to that in periods of high travel, of new parenting, of whatever it might be.

Jonathan Charest:

Most definitely. It's important as you mentioned, if you can share the, I'm not sure it's the right choice of word, but the burden of the night with the partner.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

No, at nighttime, it is burden.

Jonathan Charest:

At night-

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

During the day, it's a privilege. During the night, it is a burden. I agree with that completely.

Jonathan Charest:

From there, you look at the type of sleeper you are and the type of sleeper your husband is.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Yes.

Jonathan Charest:

If one is an early bird, then the night owl should take the first shift and vice versa. And I heard you saying that when I'm awake for the first time, then there's no going back to sleep. So that would be one of the things I would jump all over if a patient, a young mom mentioned that in the clinic is okay, so you cannot fall back asleep after the baby is being fed so that needs to be addressed because now you do not get enough sleep after only about of two, three hours. So why are you not able to resume sleep in the middle of the night within a 30, 45 minute? That's something that I would be looking at. I mean, making sure that you do understand that sleep is not something that we do, but rather something that happens to us.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Yes.

Jonathan Charest:

So if we focus-

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

But I'm a control enthusiast, it's what makes sleep so hard is I can't think myself to sleep, I literally do the opposite. And so this is one of the whole reasons for the podcast and for originally it was going to be, I was trying to do a four day work week. I'm a workaholic. So this was a big thing. My son broke his

arm so now I'm doing split shifts with work and hanging out with him all summer, which I'm very excited for, but it initiated that I'm so bad at breaks. I'm so bad at the working less part of it, so this is my challenge and this is my opportunity over the next few months is to really figure out, we're talking about it with sleep, but with everything else too, just to let go.

Jonathan Charest:

Yeah. The letting go so for sleep it's because when we focus too much on see, I need to sleep. The comparison I make is always with food. Whether or not you are hungry, you can eat. You will not sleep if you're not sleepy. So in the middle of the night, when sleep is not coming to you, you shift your focus on relaxation. What will bring my brain just a little slower so it will be in a good position to resync into sleep. And then I will work on relaxation strategies with the patient. Work is the same thing because now, well, while I sleep or while I nap, my competitor may be working so I will have to catch up on it. There's no such thing as less efficiency in sleep. So you're recharging your battery.

And there is that theory of BRAC, B-R-A-C, it's an ultradian rhythm. So that the rule is 90 over 20. You should always work no more than 90 minute and take a 20 minute break. And this is how our brain works for work. If we work over 90 straight minute, the work that will come out at the end of the 91st or whatever number of minute will be of lower quality. And then the following day, you will reread what you've done and say, "Well, I need to rewrite that thing.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Right.

Jonathan Charest:

It's of poor quality. So are you working more? Yes, you are. But are you doing high quality work? Absolutely not. Are you winning on time? No, because you have to redo the exact same thing that you push yourself to do yesterday instead of napping or just taking a break. A mental break is also very efficient in the workforce and we often forgot about a mental break.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I researched, actually that was my postdoc, micro breaks. So exactly that, how do we efficiently, effectively take time off during our work day? So when you're so busy, it's really nice to be relax in the evening and you have a seven month old, that's possible, and then it's not possible some nights, you're really playing with fire here. And with two toddlers, that's become impossible for me. So after work, weekends are actually just differently active. So what does that look like during the work day and how important that is? What I'm curious about, you are from France, correct?

Jonathan Charest:

Montreal.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Oh, you are from Montreal. So the cultural effects of work and non-work or unworking are so different. And I know as much as I know about Quebec, it is absolutely part of North America in a lot of ways, and then not part of North America in a lot of other ways in phenomenal ways. And so before the pandemic, it took my two and a half month old baby, six different countries over in Europe and looked at how they unwork. And so from your travels and from living in Quebec and then you're now in Calgary, what are

the differences you see and what would be recommendations if you could offer them to the rest of, I'm going to say North America, but you know what I mean. The North American belief system.

Jonathan Charest:

Essentially one of the biggest difference I see, my wife is from France. And when she moved here, one of the first things she mentioned is, "You only have three weeks vacation a year?" They start with a standard five weeks. For them, it's immensely important to take vacation. And if you move just a little south of France, you go to Spain, the siesta is still well implemented there. Are they less productive? Absolutely not. Are they more productive? That's remained to be seen. Are they more healthy from a mental perspective? Maybe, maybe not. We won't have these number, or maybe we do, but there is definitely something to look at.

Whenever we are working with European, from a sleep perspective, you see that scheduling is excessively important. They are not sacrificing their napping time or their rest time for a Zoom meeting, for writing a grant, for doing anything that's related to work. They do cherish their mental health and their off work time, and I think that's something we start to forget here. And I think maybe the younger generation, those who are pushing hard for a four day week work want that back. And you know what? I'm not against the idea. I think mental health is very important, lots of it has to do with the burden of what we put on our shoulder.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Yes.

Jonathan Charest:

And of course it's a big restructuring here we're talking about, but essentially this will allow more time to wind down, reduce stress, reduce anxiety, increase your quality of life. All of that trickling down to most likely a better night of sleep because stress is reduced. So never forget there is a bidirectional relationship between stress and sleep. The more stressed you are, the less sleep you get and the less sleep you get, the more stressed you may be. To me, most of this is resume as a scheduling matter.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I'm a recovering academic myself and so I'm very highly aware of the pressures and the success metrics within academia, which are literally counterintuitive to sleep in a lot of ways and what we put expectations on and it's never about that unworking time. And it's really about, I remember somebody saying in my postdoc, no, it was in my PhD. They said, "It's not a successful day as a postdoc unless your eyes are hurting from reading." I fundamentally disagree with that. And what's so unfortunate is you're ignoring the science when you say things like that. And so I've started changing my language.

So I remember when I had my son, my first child, and I used to say to my husband, "I need more sleep." I started changing that language to humans need more sleep than this. And so starting to talk to academics even about what humans need to function well. It's not you, it's not a deficit of you or anything to do with you. It's literally the brain you have and it needs sleep, rest, unworking time, all these things. So any suggestions around language or communication to do with, and I'll say specifically to sleep, to just be like this isn't a you, it's not your 5:00 AM club. It's not your this or that. It's humans.

Jonathan Charest:

Everyone needs their sleep, that's for sure. And academic, it's a toxic environment from the productivity and mental wellbeing balance. You publish or you perish. Or yes, you don't have a successful day of a PhD or a postdoc if you don't bleed from your eyes from reading. All things that are very, very helpful for a young student. Essentially, I'm telling you that you will never reach what you're actually trying to aim at. What needs to change is we need to recognize that we are not computers. We need our rest and we need our off work moments that are purely to enjoy yourself. And that is also something I work a lot with my patient when it comes to sleep. Sleep trickles down to so many area of mental wellbeing, but mental wellbeing will also have an impact and a powerful impact on your sleep. If you're not anxious, you're enjoying your evenings, your days, and your week and your month.

Most likely you won't have a problem with sleep. You have a problem with sleep most of the time because you are having busy brain, intrusive thoughts. And this is all linked to stress and anxiety which is mostly linked to productivity at work and so on and so forth. So one thing that we work on a lot is please describe me your evening between supper time and bedtime. And lots of patients will say, "Well, I need to be very calm, very quiet so when I reach my bed, I will be in a state where I will be bored to death." And my answer to this is why would you bore yourself on purpose in the name of sleep? Don't get me wrong. Sleep is important, but just not that important. So essentially you're sleeping, you're starting your day for work, and then your day is shutting down because you need to protect your sleep and where's the mental health part in that?

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Where's the fun, where's the play, where's the interaction? Where's the-

Jonathan Charest:

Exactly.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Other things. That's a really good point. So I will admit to absolutely having intrusive thoughts and so started this awful behavior. And I am 100% aware it's awful from a sleep hygiene perspective, but I'll often have something either playing TV wise or podcast or something as I fall asleep and it aids to get me to sleep because it gets me out of my thought process. But sustainably, this is not great. So are there other ways to do this? Is there any suggestions you have from that perspective? I feel like this is a counseling session for me which was not what I was intending, but I do think it's pretty widespread that the idea of let's say Netflix or TV before bed, knowing that we shouldn't have those lights near us and how disruptive that is to our sleep.

Jonathan Charest:

Essentially, what you're trying to fight is the exposure to lights so that's one of the reason we hate the daylight saving time is way too much light exposure in the evening, and then we have the artificial light of our screen, which is the extension of our days. When I start working on the light exposure and screen exposure, everyone knows the rule of two hours before bed. You should put your screen down. And the reality to that is it is 2022, nobody does that anymore.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Yeah.

Jonathan Charest:

I mean, just live with this. This is a new reality, screen are not going anywhere. So one of the first thing is have realistic expectation and realistic goals. So we start with, there's no screen in the bedroom so there's not even a curve here to begin with. It's just, you want to scroll, you have enough energy to scroll? Then you're not sleepy. I don't want to see you in bed. Once this is routine, then we start implementing and introducing, can we have half hour of no screen time? And I will not go down into details as to why blue light is detrimental for your brain sleep. Most of you knows why.

So when you have intrusive thoughts and noise and distraction helps you, that's exactly what you're doing. You're distracting your brain. So I call that personally, the Netflix wall. So when you watch Netflix, you have a wall of Netflix that will suck all your attention to it. As soon as the episode is ending, that Netflix wall is also going down letting free course to all your intrusive thoughts. So you've been distracted, but you've never truly assessed your thought proactively. So this is not relaxation, it is distraction. So then after that, we work into how do we actually proactively relax someone?

So my point here is not cut all the services from Netflix and Disney+ and all this. I do watch Netflix myself, I just don't binge it too much. And if I notice that my brain is hyperactive, I'm just hyper aroused and I'm thinking about a million things, I should not be thinking because now it's midnight. Then I shift to relaxation and relaxation is whatever helps you. Is it reading? Is it music? Is it white noise? Think noise, brown noise, stretching, yoga, painting, drawing, Sudoku, I don't care what it is as long as it's not on the screen and you enjoy it and it does the trick, meaning that it just slows down your brain and puts you in the right place to initiate sleep.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Generally, what I've noticed is knowing all this stuff about sleep hygiene, and I'm a self-proclaimed bad sleeper is very conscious of so much of this. And I'm not saying I'm blaming my children, but I'm 100% blaming my children, and COVID and running a small business and all the other elements, I feel like I've retracted so much of it. So you've inspired this to start thinking through and consciously of the things I can think through removing it from what I do. And I know for me too, okay, I've gotten into this habit of watching let's say Netflix before bed and it's something I do when I travel. But my next excursion is literally in the middle of nowhere. So there is no wifi, there's no cell signal. And all of a sudden I'm left with my own brain, which is very intimidating when you don't have that right practice when you don't have that right you know what to do to initiate relaxation?

Jonathan Charest:

Well, we do blame children a lot, but when this comes to why I'm in the middle of nowhere, no WiFi, no TV, no nothing. I will challenge you to actually ask your kid, what do you want to do tonight?

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Yeah, but I don't have my kids with me, this business.

Jonathan Charest:

That's the exercise though. Every evening, a five to 10 year old kid will not need WiFi or a television to distract themselves or relax or play.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

They never do. I'm so strict with my kids and then with myself, I'm terrible.



Jonathan Charest:

So then when you look at the kid, they have that childhood creativity. We haven't lost that creativity, we just don't use it. So that's why I ask a lot of parent, ask your kids what they want to do in the evening and bring that creativity with you when you are traveling for work so you're not spending your entire evening in front of a screen. If I'm telling you a five year old every two hours between 7:00 and 9:00, you decide what we do, I will not hear the end of it. If I ask that same question to a 30, 40, 50 year old, I will have a dead, silent human being in front of me. "Well, I'll watch sport, I'll watch this." And what about off screen? That five year old just told me 25 things you want to do. What about you? This is when yes, we can blame the kids for the sleepless night, but we can also use them for that creativity.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I like this, put them to work, really.

Jonathan Charest:

Put them to work for us and we deserve it after all.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

And then just because of my background and being an exercise physiologist, I just want to highlight this because I know for me, my best sleeps are after I'm active. If I have a day where I'm inactive, I can guarantee a bad sleep. It is a fundamental performance thing I think through and it's obviously to do with the physical activity itself, and that is important. But honestly my immediate benefit isn't that I'm going to prevent heart disease or do any of these lovely things that physical activity does. I might improve focus, but it's really for sleep that night. And if I exert myself, I will sleep better. And I've asked a couple different sleep experts this exact same question, if you were to get up early and be physically active or should you stay in bed, get more sleep and try to get the activity in the rest of the day, which you might not do because the motivation more than anything, because you do have such high motivation in the morning.

Jonathan Charest:

Well, early is early and am I dealing with a night owl? That would be my first question. So who am I dealing with? That refers to the 5:00 AM club. So I have night owls, "Oh, I want to be part of that club, that 5:00 AM club." You can't. Sorry to tell you, you are great. No, it will be detrimental for you. This is not the holy grail of club. It's the club for larks, it's a club for early birds. To me, of course, physical activity should be part of a daily routine. And then we do strategize. So we bring a 24 block, every block's represent 24 hour. And then we start coloring with patient. Blue is for sleep. Green is for physical activity and it does fit all the time. It is a scheduling matter, when do we introduce the physical activity? When do we sleep? When do we work? Where is the mental wellbeing? It is a doable thing, you just need to schedule and prepare for it.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

I'm going to add and be creative.

Jonathan Charest:

Always.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Sit here and tell me they don't have time to be physically active, but I know they watch four hours of Netflix.

Jonathan Charest:

You have time.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

It's not time.

Jonathan Charest:

The have time is the motivation. Should they sacrifice, sleep for it? How much are we talking about again? Because I believe that if you increase sleep by a half hour instead of going for a physical activity of an hour, I don't think it's worth it.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Right.

Jonathan Charest:

It depends on the timing. When is it? In the evening, in the morning, whatever floats your boat, whatever makes you feel better. At the end of the day, we're not talking about eight hour of sleep, we're talking about an enhanced quality of life.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

This is what I'm taking from the episode. This is going to be the title of it. Whatever floats your boat, sleep lessons. Thank you so so much, I have gotten so much insight from you so thank you so much for coming to talk to us today.

Jonathan Charest:

Thank you very much and everyone, please get your sleep. It is important for your creativity.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Thank you for listening to the Work Less, Produce More podcast. You can find me on LinkedIn and Instagram to follow my mission of living a four day work week or well, other versions of it @LisaBelanger. Also, look for ConsciousWorks for more tips on proactive mental health and performance on Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. For more information on today's guest and further resources, visit our podcast page on our website at [consciousworks.com](http://consciousworks.com).