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CULTURE

Sleep Debt is Piling Up—Can Women Really Pay it Back?

Sometimes it's okay not to do one more thing from the to-do list. Sometimes, it's okay not to feel guilty for resting well

BY TEJASHEE KASHYAP

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Most of us borrow hours from sleep like an unlimited currency. We are left with a dull ache behind the eyes after a string of late nights completing deadlines, a short temper, a brain fog and more. But, we push through. We show up and multitask. While society applauds productivity and perseverance, it often overlooks the physical and emotional toll that sleeplessness takes on our bodies. This is sleep debt. Unlike financial debt, we don't realise those lost hours aren't (really) refundable.

According to the World Health Organisation, we should get between 7-9 hours of sleep each night. However, nearly 60% of women globally report feeling sleep-deprived regularly. And these health stakes are higher for women. "Inadequate or disrupted sleep affects the delicate balance of hormones such as estrogen, progesterone, cortisol, and melatonin. This imbalance can exacerbate menstrual irregularities, heighten emotional reactivity, and even accelerate symptoms of perimenopause or menopause. Emotionally, a lack of restorative sleep increases vulnerability to anxiety, mood swings, and burnout," explains Dr Massimiliano Mayrhofer, Revital Method- Manager at Italy's Palace Merano.

Like any unpaid loan, sleep debt accumulates with interest, quietly draining your energy reserves until your body demands repayment in ways you can't ignore. "In women, sleep loss quickly disrupts hormonal stability—irregular cycles, increased PMS, anxiety, or mood swings are common early indicators. Often these signs are mistaken for stress or overwork. Physically, we may see frequent muscle tension, headaches, sugar cravings, low immunity, or a sudden sensitivity to light and noise. Emotionally, there's a drop in patience, creativity, and resilience," tells Dr Katharina Sandtner, Medical Director at Austria's Lanserhof Lans, a medical spa resort. "See sleep not as rest—but as regulation. It's what keeps the (female) system in sync."

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But why is it that women, in particular, are more sleep-deprived? A big reason is that most women are the primary caregivers with society applauding them when they put others first before themselves. "There's an unspoken cultural pride around women being busy and self-sacrificing. These narratives exist because women consistently receive validation for being overextended and putting everyone else first. Over time, it takes a serious toll—on their emotional health and even their sleep," explains therapist Deepti Chandy.

Add to that the pressure to be high-performing and perfect, and slowing down can feel like a failure. "Many women grew up equating perfection with worth. As adults, anything less triggers a sense of failure and loss of control. This creates a kind of fear psychosis around slowing down or letting go. Physically, it leads to stress-related conditions—often autoimmune," she adds. Nearly 80% of autoimmune diseases affect women—and that's no coincidence. Conditions like lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, often triggered by chronic emotional stress, show up in women's bodies.

No wonder why many women also excel in revenge bedtime procrastination. "Women often need time to truly unwind—but that space rarely exists during the day. Late at night becomes the only moment free from kids, calls, and responsibilities—the one time they can just be. They scroll, read, or linger—not because they're not tired, but because it's the only sliver of time that's truly theirs. A study by Saurashtra University found that 65% of participants experienced this pattern, underscoring how little personal space women feel they have in their daily lives," Deepti reasons.

But can we catch up on sleep? Well, turns out we can't just make a huge deposit after weeks of withdrawals by sleeping in over the weekend. However, experts say restoration is the key. "The most important step? Digital detox. Practices like waking with the forest, breath therapy, guided meditation, and aromatherapy support the nervous system and help create a deep sense of internal safety—essential for sleep," Dr Sandtner answers.

Even in Ayurvedic wellness, sleep, or *nidra*, is considered one of the three pillars of health. "You can tackle sleeplessness with classical Ayurvedic wisdom with curated therapies like Shirodhara (medicated oils are gently poured on the forehead), Thala Pothichil (a herbal paste is applied on the scalp to release trapped heat and induce calm). Avoid stimulants like caffeine and align sleep with the body's natural circadian rhythm—ideally retiring by 10 PM. Consuming a light, nourishing dinner before 7 PM and avoiding excess fluid intake post-6 PM prevents nocturnal awakenings," advises Dr Sreelal Sankar, Head of Ayurveda at Ananda in the Himalayas.

Let's be honest: most of us can't just quit our jobs, ditch our families, or move to a zen retreat in Bali. Hence, reclaiming rest starts with boundaries. It's in the small rituals: a solo coffee, an ignored call, a no said without apology. True empowerment begins when women feel safe enough to rest—without guilt.

Sleep

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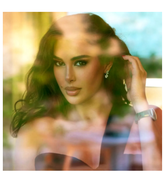
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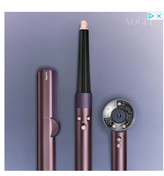
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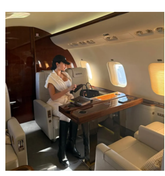
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