

The Big YAWN!

Story Frances Whiting



I AM trussed up like a Christmas turkey. There are leads running up and down my limbs, electrodes attached to my temples, a black receiver box strapped to my chest with coloured tubes running to various body parts, and a plastic clip attached to my nostrils with a long thin tube looped over both my ears, while on my right-hand index finger a machine emits a tiny red light.

As I look down at the strange tangle of cords and flickering lights that cover my body, it crosses my mind that I'd never pass an airport security screening. The electrodes tickle my skin, my nose clip keeps falling out, and the receiver box feels heavy and alien on my chest. I gingerly lie back on the bed, and remember the words of sleep scientist Tina Schurmann at Brisbane's Wesley Hospital Thoracic and Sleep Group who had placed the various tubes and clips on me earlier. "Well," she'd said, smiling in her white lab coat, "I hope you get a good night's sleep."

Not highly likely, I think, trying to concentrate – plastic clip notwithstanding – on breathing in through the nose, out through the mouth, in through the nose, out through the mouth ...

Nine hours later, I wake up.

WE'RE EXHAUSTED. SHATTERED. COMPLETELY and utterly knackered. At least, that's how it seems. Ask people how they are these days, and it's likely the truthful answer will mention their own particular level of fatigue, from the mild ("just a bit tired"), to the extreme ("I fell asleep on the train last night and woke up at the end of the line").

Constant tiredness is a contemporary refrain with its own catchphrase: the Exhaustion Epidemic. We are – doctors, scientists, social commentators and the statistics tell us – working longer, sleeping less, not resting enough, and taking on too much. A survey by Australia's Sleep Health Foundation found 35 per cent of respondents woke up feeling tired several days a week, 24 per cent suffered fatigue and exhaustion several days a week, and 19 per cent said that, as a result, they were moody and irritable several days a week.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that although on paper we are actually working slightly fewer hours than we were a decade ago, with a national average of 32 hours a week, a growing band of workers clock up far more time. Results from the ABS 2011 census suggest one in six employed people works 49 hours a week, and that's not counting the "hidden" shifts many of us put in at home – the hours and hours of unpaid screen time spent logging on to computers, checking emails,

sending texts, reading messages. Many of us are not, as a current advertising campaign for instant coffee chirps, working nine to five any more, but five to nine – and then some, many would add.

When we do fall into bed, hollow-eyed, thoughts racing, mobile phones at the ready on the bedside table, many of us don't get the recommended eight hours. Instead, the amount of sleep we average as a nation is decreasing every year, with roughly half of us now getting by on five to six hours. It's not enough, and one of the major reasons we are all so tired is because we are literally all so tired. It's also the reason why the six beds at Wesley's Thoracic and Sleep units are taken most nights, with patients wired for sound, breathing and movement.

The unit looks a bit like a five-star hotel; the bedrooms, all with ensembles, are furnished in muted tones and soft, inviting textures – a rug over a chair here, a plumped-up pillow there.

The air-conditioning is set at a cool, pleasant temperature, and it is blessedly quiet. Staff walk with soft steps and talk in low murmurs. In fact, if not for the infra-red cameras positioned discreetly throughout each room, it looks like the sort of place I'd like to check in to for a week or two.

But just down the hall from the bedrooms is the technical room, with its bank of computers showing continuous readouts from slumberers nearby – their brain waves, cardiac data, respiratory rates, limb movements, and oxygen levels. All the information is relayed via the black receiver box, and my own data shows that for someone who went to bed convinced I would never get to sleep, I actually dropped off surprisingly quickly.

"You fell asleep in four minutes," the unit's Cheryl Scott smiles, consulting my chart. "The average is 20."

"I was tired," I tell her, adding: "I'm always tired", a phrase I get the feeling she has heard a few times before.

Scott, 34, a sleep scientist of some 12 years' experience, says I have a "sleep efficiency" of 87.3 per cent, which is within normal parameters. She explains I went into my first Rapid Eye



Sleep scientist Cheryl Scott hooks up a patient for monitoring at the Wesley sleep clinic. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

Movement, or REM, sleep cycle at the 39-minute mark; I experienced average percentages for both slow-wave and deep sleep; but my brain “woke up” 12.9 times an hour, giving me a higher than normal arousal index.

All of which may not mean much to me, but to scientists such as Scott, it’s like reading a book, where my body provides the plotline as it reposes.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE CALLED SLEEP “nature’s soft nurse”, and the Bard was, as he proved to be about so many subjects, spot-on. While we are only just beginning to understand the role sleep plays in our lives – co-director of the Wesley’s sleep unit, Dr John Feenstra, calls it “the last frontier” – we do know it is vital for certain cognitive functions, such as the laying down of memory. We know wounds heal faster during slumber; that it plays a major role in the repair of blood vessels; it releases specific hormones that affect appetite and how our bodies react to insulin; and it is during sleep that most of our growth hormones are released. We also know what happens to us if we don’t get enough sleep, with Feenstra noting that if a person is deprived of REM sleep – woken up the moment he or she enters REM – it can actually cause short-term psychosis. And, science aside, there’s not a parent on the planet who couldn’t describe the horrors of sleep deprivation.

But while we all appreciate the importance of a good night’s sleep, we don’t often give ourselves much chance of enjoying one, filling our minds and our bedrooms

with too many distractions before bedtime. To put it bluntly, Dr Feenstra says, our bedrooms should be used for two purposes only: sleep and sex. But most of us, of course, are too tired for either.

“WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WOKE UP from a wonderful night’s sleep and leapt out of bed, excited to start the new day?” That was part of an email I sent around to a wide net of acquaintances as part of the research for this article. One woman, a part-time nurse and mother of three children under ten, replied “1987”. Humour aside, if that is true, then at least part of the reason is that the ‘80s was the last decade to be largely free of mobile phones, the internet, and certainly of social media. As each year passes, our interactions with technology increase. In 1998, for example, 16 per cent of Australian households had home computers. Today it’s 89 per cent (including tablets), and the average Australian now spends the equivalent of almost an entire day online each week.

These figures are some of the findings from the 2013 Nielsen Australian Connected Consumers Report, and there are plenty of other credible statistics available to confirm what we all already know. We are emailing, tweeting, Facebooking, messaging and texting a good portion of our lives away, but what we are only just beginning to understand is the toll it’s taking on our collective health. The very things that were meant to grant us more freedom have become our masters, tethering us to a Pavlovian existence where we are constantly responding like salivating canines to the beeps, blips, pings and ringtones in our lives.

There’s a scientific term for it – “intermittent reinforcement” – and it’s exhausting us because with each signal we receive a quick rush of anticipation, which releases the highly addictive hormone dopamine, which in turn gives us a little thrill, closely followed by a feeling of let-down. And like any sort of addict, we can’t wait until the next hit, with the average smartphone user checking for messages nine times an hour. No wonder we’re so tired all the time, says American physician Dr Frank Lipman, with our bodies experiencing a series of dopamine highs and lows several times a day, every day.

Lipman, author of *Revive: stop feeling spent and start living again*, counts actor Gwyneth Paltrow and fashion designer Donna Karan among his clients. He calls those of us who walk the Earth with increasingly weary steps the Spent Generation. Based in New York, Lipman says the Spent Generation is the most overcommitted, overscheduled, over-connected and, therefore, overtired in modern times.

"Most of us are working long hours, managing a family and social obligations, and trying to fit in exercise, errands, and all the other activities of modern life," Lipman says. "Add in our increased connectedness through digital devices and always-on internet connections, and our work day essentially never ends. Compounded with dual-career families and overscheduled kids, the demands on our energy and time are probably greater than ever before."

The Spent Generation, he says, is suffering from a debilitating fatigue, one where our digestive system suffers, nutrient levels are depleted, energy levels plummet and mental health is compromised. We are, in short, buggered.

"THERE'S A SORT OF SHAME IN IT, not keeping up." Alex is a 47-year-old Brisbane futures trader with one of the major global financial institutions. He's married with four children, a wife who works part-time, a live-in nanny, two dogs, and an eye-watering mortgage on the family home. Last year Alex had a breakdown of sorts. That is to say, he woke up one morning and discovered he couldn't get up. Speaking on condition of anonymity, Alex saw a "battalion" of doctors, and was eventually diagnosed with an auto-immune condition, gluten intolerance, and slightly elevated blood pressure. But he says he knows what was really wrong with him. "I was buggered," he says, "simple as that."

A year ago, Alex's day began at 5am with a workout with his trainer, five days a week, then back home to help with the kids, at his desk by 8am, at work all day, hopefully home in time to help put the children to bed, then back to work – from the couch. Futures trading is recognised as a particularly stressful profession, often involving wild gambles with huge amounts of money on what the market might do next.

"You have to know what's happening all the time, and for blokes like me that means never switching off. It was by no means unusual for me to be on my phone in the middle of the night, every night, or answering emails throughout the night. But we all did it. At my work, at least, there was a sort of macho competition about it, including with the women, [as to] who could work the hardest, keep the longest hours, win the biggest deals. And that behaviour was rewarded. You would come in bragging: 'I was on the phone to Amsterdam at three this morning' ... "

After his collapse, Alex took some time off and reassessed the way he was living. He's still trading, but has replaced his high-intensity workouts with gentler exercise, and his wife has enforced an iron-clad rule: no screen time after 10pm, including TV. "It's like I'm a kid," he laughs, "but it's working and the thing that's surprising to me

is it hasn't really affected my work that much. So now I'm wondering if we've all bought into something that's not even real – you know, this idea that if we're not flat-strap 24/7, we're not in the game."

Bernard Salt calls this idea "competitive diary cramming". The author, researcher and social commentator says "busyness" itself has become a "tradeable commodity". "We find ourselves in the midst of a relatively new phenomenon," Salt says.

"It's a real generational shift. In the 1950s, the competitiveness was more about who was the best homemaker. Now it's more about who has the 'craziest' life. This is due to all sorts of reasons, but certainly the global financial crisis is part of it because it created this workspace where everyone is fearful for their jobs. They want to be seen to be delivering the goods, they want to show they can work harder for less because the underlying concern is if you're not profitable, then you're for the chop in the next round of redundancies. So the message people are trying to get out there is, 'oh, look at me, I'm so busy, therefore I'm so valuable'."

There also has been, Salt says, a psychological shift, whereby Facebook, Twitter and the like have created a population of "curated personas". "It's look at me, look at my life, look at this fabulous meal I'm eating, look at this beach house I'm staying at, look at my children with their trophies, look at this ridiculously crazy, busy, chaotic life I'm having. It's sending the message 'I'm winning'," Salt concludes, "and I suspect it's not only making us exhausted, it's also making us depressed."

Busyness, along with its by-product, exhaustion, is the new black, perhaps in more ways than one.



Megan and David Doyle, with children Tom, 13, Erin, 15, and Max, 11, are making a conscious effort to de-clutter their busy lives. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD, or uttered the words, “When I was a kid we’d just play outside until dark”? Or how about, “We didn’t do any after-school activities as kids, we just played”; “You know what school we went to? The one that was closest to home.”

We might be the so-called Spent Generation in the middle of a so-called Exhaustion Epidemic, but we are also, it seems, caught in a heady wave of nostalgia, longing for the good old days when the kids caught the bus home and we didn’t spend our lives in our cars.

Salt believes there is a growing disillusionment with being tired all the time, a rethinking of the way we live our lives. “We’ve had the sea-changers, the tree-changers and I think it might be time for the me-changers, when people are actively thinking about how they can stress less, and de-clutter their lives.”

Megan Doyle is doing just that. The 47-year-old mother of three works as a business unit leader for Canstar, a consumer research and ratings business in inner-city Brisbane. Her husband, David, owns his own chiropractic business, and their three children – Erin, 15, Tom, 13 and Max, 11 – attend private schools in the city’s inner north-west. In many ways, the Doyles are typical of the Spent Generation, their lives a whirl of work, appointments, before- and after-school sporting commitments, homework and socialising, all set amid the siren call of their digital devices. But, like

a growing number of families, they're also choosing to be careful not to overdo the extracurricular activities, and to switch off, literally, at night.

"I quite like being busy, actually," Doyle says, "but I think we all need to watch it and ask ourselves occasionally, 'is this the life I want?' I know our parents had a simpler life, and the choices we have can seem overwhelming – I remember when there were only four channels to watch on television. But I think we have to be careful not to over-romanticise the past, either. For me, I like being a working mother, I like keeping busy, I like that our kids lead busy, interesting lives, but to also be aware if it's becoming difficult to manage."



Constant tiredness is a contemporary refrain with its own catchphrase: the Exhaustion Epidemic. Picture: Getty

Doyle concedes she doesn't always get it right – "Sometimes I'm my own worst enemy, staying up late at night because it's the only time I'm alone" – but says she has taken steps to slow down. "In my field of work, you could work all day and all night, because you're watching consumer trends and that never stops. But I made a decision that I would not answer emails after my working hours stopped – unless, of course, they were urgent – because if you do, you don't switch off mentally, either. The kids are not allowed to have digital devices in their rooms and I make sure I switch off my phone at night so I don't hear it beeping at me all night long. "I'm still tired," she smiles, "but I'm happy."

TIPS TO BEAT TIREDNESS

Switch off. Turn off all digital devices at least two hours before bedtime, and don't watch television at least two hours before going to bed. The artificial light from screens sends a message to the brain that it is still daytime, and suppresses the release of the sleep promotion hormone, melatonin.

Think caveman. The Neanderthals had it right, sleeping when it grew dark, waking at first light. Keep your bedroom as dark, cool and quiet as possible.

Eat well and early. Our metabolism works best early in the morning and progressively slows down throughout the day.

Exercise gently. Don't exhaust yourself in your fitness quest. It's not a gladiatorial contest, it's life.

Reduce your schedule. How's your timetable looking? Like an overstuffed armchair? Get rid of the non-essentials that aren't making you, or your kids, happy.

Rest. Relax. Rejuvenate. Look after yourself. And get some sleep.