

FISHING AND SLEEP DEPRIVATION



You've all heard the expression when it comes to surf fishing "Fish hard, sleep when you're dead." Well, given the current morbidity and mortality statistics on sleep deprivation that may come a bit sooner for some of us.

As I approach 60 years of age I am coming to the realization that I am no longer indestructible. My shoulders ache, my knees ache, and I don't see as well at night. I don't rock hop like the way I did in my 20s and 30s and for that matter my 40s. Today I get up on rocks with kind of a slug-like squirm and I get off as if I'm worried about fracturing my skull. Sleeping in my Jeep feels more like sleeping in a clown car than my bed at home. As Mick Jagger wrote in his song Mother's little helper, "What a drag it is getting old."

Working in the organ transplant business for the last 30 years I am always on organ donor call 24 hours a day, 10 to 20 days a month. My overall sleep patterns when I'm on call for organ transplants is completely disrupted with frequent sounds of beepers and cell phones going off in the middle of the night. My wife is so used to me getting paged that she no longer hears the beeper going off anymore.

It was mid October of 2010 when I drove from work one night to catch the last of the outgoing tide at Montauk. It was about 1 a.m. when I waded quietly out to a nice flat rock in a wetsuit, got up on my perch and started casting. There was not a soul around, I was in heaven! Within a few minutes I was nailing some small bass and bluefish. About 30 minutes into my feeling of euphoria I suddenly felt a weird skipping of my heart beat in my chest. I tried to shake it off as simply being tired from working all day. Yet as I continued to cast into the abyss the sporadic skipped beats became increasingly unnerving.

Having a background as an R.N. working in emergency medicine, transplantation as well as cardio-thoracic medicine, I knew that I could get into some serious trouble. While standing on my rock I put my rod under my left armpit and with my right hand I started taking my pulse in my neck. I started counting the number of skipped beats in one minute intervals. It was at that time I realized I was having PVCs (premature ventricular contractions of the heart) and I had to do something about it. I really didn't want to leave a decent fish bite so I said to myself in a convincing manner, "I wasn't having chest pain; that's good. I wasn't having shortness of breath; that's good. I wasn't feeling dizzy; and that too was good." But I knew better, so I got out of the water and quickly dressed back in to my work clothes. My mind was racing with thoughts of having a stroke or heart attack or ending up being one of my own organ donors. With my anxiety now at an all time high level I drove myself to the hospital emergency room.

Fortunately for me I knew the E.R. staff very well and they took me right away. After putting me on the cardiac monitor,

doing an EKG, starting an I.V. checking my blood pressure, vital signs and drawing labs I was told that I wasn't going to die that night. I explained to them about my current medical history and they listened to my stories of late night fishing, lack of sleep and overdosing on coffee and 7-11 junk food.

I was told that I was probably suffering from long term sleep deprivation and perhaps caffeine toxicity. I kind of knew that all along, but I did my best to think otherwise. This was my wakeup call! My friend who is an emergency room physician said with a grin, "Steve, you're not 20 years old anymore, in fact you're not 50 years old anymore." It took nearly three months for the arrhythmias to subside with some much needed lifestyle changes and much needed sleep. Today I still take 24-hour on-call responsibilities for my job, but I now balance my fishing and sleeping more carefully.

Studies have shown that time and time again that sleep deprivation over the long haul can increase the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart attack, diabetes, cardiac arrhythmias, obesity, weakened immune system, hallucinations, poor wound healing, mood swings, depression, automobile fatalities, and sudden death at any age. Your overall cognitive function is impaired leading to poor decision making and perhaps greater risk taking. Studies have also shown an increase in workplace accidents for those that are sleep deprived. With sleep deprivation the body's immune system continues to produce higher levels of Cortisol, a stress hormone that can lead to chronic inflammation within the body leading to coronary artery disease. Sleep loss is also associated with increased appetite and weight gain. Elevations of Cortisol levels in chronic sleep loss are more likely to promote the development of insulin resistance, a risk factor for obesity and type 2 Diabetes Mellitus.

While many of us, myself included, continue to peruse the late night pleasure of hunting the nocturnal striped bass we should keep in mind that this adrenaline rush or (Cortisol rush) we all love can hurt us in the end. Make sure you do your best to get at least six to eight hours of continuous uninterrupted sleep per night, avoid excessive caffeine and energy drinks. Keep yourself hydrated by drinking water, and if you smoke, you need to quit. Smoking has been associated with higher blood Cortisol levels thanks to the presence of nicotine. Avoid excessive drinking of alcohol. Alcohol not only disturbs sleep patterns but can lead to accidents and injuries. Alcohol can also exacerbate sleep apnea and other illnesses you may already have.

One thing I know for sure is that I won't be doing any fishing when I'm dead so get some sleep! Stay alive and stay healthy, life is too short and I have a lot of fishing that I still want to do. 🐟