A good night's sleep — an impossible dream?

Tonight, do yourself a favor. Shut off the TV, log off the Internet and unplug the phone. Relax, take a bath, maybe sip some herbal tea. Then move into the bedroom. Set your alarm clock for a time no less than eight hours in the future, fluff up your pillows and lay your head down for a peaceful night of restorative shut-eye. That's what American doctors advise.

American sleep experts are sounding an alarm over America's sleep deficit. They say Americans are a somnambulant nation, stumbling groggily through their waking hours for lack of sufficient sleep. They are working longer days — and, increasingly, nights — and they are playing longer, too, as TV and the Internet expand the range of round-the-clock entertainment options. By some estimates, Americans are sleeping as much as an hour and a half less per night than they did at the turn of the century — and the problem is likely to get worse.

The health repercussions of sleep deprivation are not well understood, but sleep researchers point to ills ranging from heart problems to depression. In a famous experiment conducted at the University of Chicago in 1988, rats kept from sleeping died after two and a half weeks. People are not likely to drop dead in the same way, but sleep deprivation may cost them their lives indirectly, when an exhausted doctor prescribes the wrong dosage or a sleepy driver weaves into someone's lane.

What irritates sleep experts most is the fact that much sleep deprivation is voluntary. "People have regarded sleep as a commodity that they could shortchange," says one of them. "It's been considered a mark of very hard work and upward mobility to get very little sleep. It's a macho attitude." Slumber scientists hope that attitude will change. They say people have learned to modify their behavior in terms of lowering their cholesterol and increasing exercise. Doctors also think people need to be educated that
allowing enough time for sleep and taking strategic naps are the most reliable ways to promote alertness behind the wheel and on the job.

Well, naps would be nice, but at the moment, employers tend to frown on them. And what about the increasing numbers of people who work at night? Not only must they work while their bodies' light-activated circadian rhythms tell them to sleep, they also find it tough to get to sleep after work. Biologists say night workers have a hard time not paying attention to the 9-to-5 day because of noises or family obligations or that's the only time they can go to the dentist. There are not too many dentists open at midnight.

As one might imagine, companies are springing up to take advantage of sleeplessness. One of the companies makes specially designed shift-work lighting systems intended to keep workers alert around the clock. Shiftwork's theory is that bright light, delivered in a controlled fashion, can help adjust people's biological clocks. The company president says they are using light like a medicine. So far, such special lighting has been the province of NASA astronauts and nuclear power plant workers. He thinks that in the future, such systems may pop up in places like hospitals and 24-hour credit-card processing centers. Other researchers are experimenting with everything from welder's goggles (which night workers wear during the day) to human growth hormones. And, of course, there is always what doctors refer to as "therapeutic caffeine use", but everyone is already familiar with that.

So, is a good night's sleep an impossible dream for Americans? Maybe so.

Americans are referred to as a "somnambulant nation" because they...

1. ...need special help to fall asleep.
2. ...are sleepwalkers.
3. ...regularly wake up at night.
4. ...don't get enough sleep to function effectively.