

[IMAGE]

Close Your Eyes, Open Your Mind

Since early childhood, we've been told that all kinds of bad things will happen if we don't get enough sleep. Scientists have long suspected that sleep (or lack thereof) influence learning and memory, but without substantial research to support the specific mechanisms behind such a connection.

In a study designed to test the hypothesis that brain pathways develop and strengthen during certain stages of sleep, researchers recorded the ability of cat brains to adapt/remodel when forced to see out of only one eye. Researchers noted twice the amount of brain changes in cats that slept for six hours after being deprived of light to one eye, compared with those kept awake in a dark room for the same time period. Additionally, cats allowed to sleep (both eyes closed) for the six hours experienced more brain changes than those kept awake and exposed to light.

What's this all mean? According to the authors of this study, their findings emphasize the importance of adequate sleep. They suggest that sleep, particularly in early life, may play a crucial role in brain development.

Reference: Frank M, Issa N, Stryker M. Sleep enhances plasticity in developing visual cortex. *Neuron* 2001: Vol. 30, No. 4, pp275-87.

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