



# OVERCOMING FATIGUE

In pursuit  
of sleep  
and energy

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*Overcoming Fatigue: In pursuit of sleep and energy*

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## FOREWORD BY DR. JAMES DOBSON

August 15, 1990, began much like any other day for me. I awoke early in the morning and headed to the gym for a game of basketball with a group of friends and colleagues—some of whom were as much as twenty or thirty years younger than I! Because I frequently hit the court with these “youngsters,” and because I had reached middle age with the lanky build that allowed me to still move easily, I assumed that I was in the prime of physical health.

A sharp pain in my chest on that late summer morning told me otherwise. I excused myself from the game and drove alone to the hospital (something I do *not* recommend to anyone who suspects he or she is experiencing a serious medical problem!). Hoping and praying that I was merely battling fatigue, I knew deep down that there was something else terribly wrong. It didn't take the doctors long to confirm that, sure enough, this “healthy” basketball enthusiast had transformed, in the blink of an eye, into a heart attack victim.

As I lay in the hospital in the days following that ordeal, I realized that, early-morning basketball games notwithstanding, my predicament was directly related to

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my lifestyle choices and, in particular, the fatty foods I was allowing in my diet. I asked the Lord to give me another chance, resolving to use every resource at my disposal to safeguard my heart and my health through a combination of healthy diet and exercise. Despite some setbacks (I suffered a stroke in 1998 but recovered from it almost immediately), I have endeavored to keep that commitment, and, today, I am feeling better than ever.

Like so many Americans, prior to my heart attack, I was extremely busy—but not necessarily *active* in a way that would ensure optimal physical health. Indeed, statistics show that, despite our frantic pace of living and continued advances in the medical field, Americans suffer from an alarming number of health problems, many of which could be prevented or at least decreased by changing bad habits.

Research confirms just how serious the situation has become. The latest figures from the American Heart Association show that 13 million Americans have coronary heart disease; 5.4 million have suffered a stroke; and 65 million have been diagnosed with high blood pressure. Unfortunately, a large number of these cases are related, at least in part, to lifestyle choices. The AHA also reports that 48.5 million American adults (nearly 23 percent) are smokers. From 1995 to 1999, an average of 442,398 Americans died annually of smoking-related illnesses (32.2 percent of these deaths were cardiovascular related). The American Cancer

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Society estimates that 180,000 of the cancer deaths in 2004 could be attributed to smoking. Further, one-third of cancer deaths in 2004 were related to nutrition, physical inactivity, being overweight or obese, and other lifestyle issues. In other words, many of them were *preventable*!

As I suggested earlier, perhaps the biggest factors in maintaining proper physical health are diet and exercise. Unfortunately, a recent study revealed that a full 25 percent of Americans reported participating in *no* physical activity during their leisure time. Perhaps that is why more than 65 percent of adults in the United States are overweight, including 30 percent who are clinically obese. Between 1971 and 2000, the average daily caloric intake for men grew by about 7 percent, which translates into seventeen pounds of additional body fat per year. Obesity dramatically affects life span as well. The life expectancy of a twenty-year-old white male who is clinically obese decreases by an estimated thirteen years, and for black males, an astonishing average of twenty years are lost due to obesity. One recent study revealed that the number of annual deaths attributable to obesity among adults in the United States is about 300,000. And perhaps most telling of all, airlines are telling us that they now have to carry additional fuel in order to transport more overweight customers.

This situation is sobering, but I am living proof that a dramatic change in eating habits, combined with a

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focused regimen of heart-strengthening exercise, can significantly improve one's overall health. I'll admit that the prospect of making such radical lifestyle changes can be daunting, but let me assure you that it is worth the investment. Choosing a healthy lifestyle *now*, while you still can, is infinitely preferable to being sidelined by a stroke, heart attack, cancer, or some other health crisis in the future.

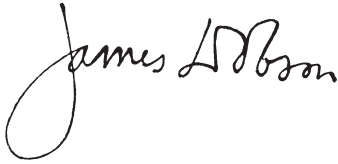
This pocket guide and its parent book, the *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness* are excellent resources designed to answer many of the questions that may arise as you endeavor to put yourself and your loved ones on the road to a healthier life. They can help you identify important medical tests; foster *emotional* and *spiritual* health in addition to physical fitness; discover answers to specific health-related questions for family members of all ages; and so much more. The information presented here is based on the most up-to-date medical research as well as the first-hand experiences of members of Focus on the Family's Physicians Resource Council. These experts will give you lots of practical advice on some critical disciplines.

Perhaps you consider yourself generally healthy and are simply looking for a plan to help you stay that way. Or maybe you or someone you love is suffering from a serious health problem related to poor lifestyle choices in the past. Either way, this book will provide you with the tools you need—as a complement to the advice of



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your personal physician, of course—to live smarter and healthier. Change is never easy, but it is possible, and I pray that God will bless you as you endeavor to be a good steward of the body He has given you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James C. Dobson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "C" before the "Dobson".

James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

## WHY AM I SO TIRED ALL THE TIME?

Do any of the following situations sound familiar to you?

- Your hand “dive-bombs” the snooze button on your alarm several times every morning.
- You have trouble concentrating and find yourself nodding off during school or work.
- You often lie awake at night worrying about troubling issues or your schedule for the next day.
- You always seem to feel tired, no matter how long you sleep.

If so, you are not alone.

As many as one in four patients visiting a primary-care physician is likely to consider fatigue a significant problem, even when something else is the stated complaint.<sup>1</sup> Millions more who feel chronically tired still carry out their daily routines, whether out of habit, necessity, or self-discipline, even if they feel tired while doing it. For some,

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fatigue is so severe that they have difficulty fulfilling even their most basic responsibilities.

Medically speaking, fatigue is not a diagnosis but rather a symptom, one that may have numerous causes. When we say we're tired, we may in fact be referring to a number of different experiences: a transient feeling arising from a day of physical labor or a sleepless night, a symptom produced by a serious illness, drowsiness at some point in the day (or all day), or a generalized sense of feeling poorly that has lasted for months or years.

Feelings of fatigue originate from several sources: medical issues such as sleep disorders, personal choices such as overcommitment, and life circumstances such as raising small children. In some cases a simple adjustment can produce better sleep—turning on a fan to mute disrupting sounds, for example. In others, a medical examination or a close look at our lifestyle choices is in order.

In this book we'll explore many causes for fatigue, and we'll discuss ways to combat tiredness and renew energy. Before we do that, however, it's important to understand a bit about what happens during sleep. We'll take a brief look at how much sleep we need, what our bodies are doing when we sleep, and how we can get the most out of a night's slumber.

## HOW MUCH SLEEP DO I NEED?

The answer: Probably more than you are getting.

Sleep research has consistently shown that most adults actually *do* need the proverbial eight hours of sleep a night in order to perform at their best and avoid general tiredness, daytime drowsiness, and even fatigue-related illnesses. There are, of course, some who actually have a physiological need for as many as nine or ten hours and some who are fine on a routine of six or seven. The exact amount may be altered by genetics, sleep habits, and certain problems that can interfere with the quality of sleep.

The need for sleep varies as we age. Newborns often sleep twenty hours per day, while children may need anywhere from eight to thirteen hours (depending on age). Teenagers, who are notorious for gravitating toward a “late to bed and late to rise” schedule, also generally need nine hours. As we age, it’s harder to fall asleep and stay asleep. Our sleep also tends to become less restful and more easily disrupted, and we spend less time in deeper phases of sleep.

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How much sleep *you* need is best judged by how well you feel and perform during your waking hours. If you are sleep deprived, you may identify with one or more of these situations:

- You have come to hate whatever program is playing when your clock radio goes off.
- The first word out of your mouth upon arising is “Coffee . . .”
- You often feel sleepy and fatigued during the day.
- You have difficulty staying awake when you have to sit still, such as during a class or meeting or while driving.
- You struggle with irritability, poor concentration, or remembering facts.
- You find yourself relishing the chance to catch up on sleep on weekends or your day off.
- You fall asleep almost immediately when your head hits the pillow.

## SLEEP DEBT AND SLEEP LATENCY

When a person fails to get the sleep that he or she needs for more than two or three days, whether due to an overextended lifestyle or a sleep disorder, that person begins to build what doctors call a sleep debt. Unfortunately, even with a steady flow of caffeine and a lot of activity, it's not really possible to adjust to sleeping fewer hours than are needed. As our sleep debt builds over several days, fatigue increases and mental and physical performance begin to suffer. The need for sleep will continue to grow until we sleep in on a weekend or a day off, become ill, or start napping dur-

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ing normal waking hours. In order to feel (and be) properly rested, the sleep debt will at some point need to be repaid. Sleep debt has been blamed for many major industrial and aviation accidents, and it is now implicated in overall poor health as well. The only way to repay a sleep debt is to get an hour or two more sleep than we typically need for several nights in a row—an assignment that can be surprisingly difficult. Once the debt has been dealt with, the brain reverts to seeking whatever amount of sleep it normally needs.

Fatigue and sleep debt also affect sleep latency, the actual amount of time it takes to fall asleep. If you're not fatigued or short on sleep, it can take twenty minutes or more to fall asleep. At the end of a long, demanding day, or with a buildup of sleep debt, sleep latency can shorten to a few minutes or less. If you experience a very short sleep latency night after night, this is usually an indication that the amount or quality of your sleep is inadequate. A short sleep latency should be noted as a warning sign, especially by anyone (such as a long-distance driver) whose life and safety depend upon staying awake.

If you have a restful vacation planned in the near future, try this experiment in order to help determine how much sleep you need on an ongoing basis: Once you are unpacked and settled in, go to bed each night when you feel tired and then sleep until you wake up spontaneously. Keep the room dark, set no alarms, and

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don't let other people awaken you. You may be paying back a sleep debt for several days, but after that you should start sleeping for about the length of time you actually need. If you don't have a vacation planned soon or will be following a busy itinerary on your next trip, you can try a similar experiment at home. Try to go to bed about fifteen minutes earlier each night (fifteen minutes the first night, thirty minutes the second night, and so on) until you discover the amount of sleep that leaves you feeling completely restored the next day.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON FATIGUE

Throughout this book, we describe symptoms and health hazards that arise from the frantic pace of our life. This point bears repeating as we conclude our look at fatigue. Jesus made a compelling offer: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). Many who are “weary and burdened” are in fact straining and exhausted under yokes of their own making.

Far too many of us are overcommitted, underrested, and overstressed, and this often results in our feeling *tired*—physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. We fill our life with activities, most of which are good when considered individually. However, as they accumulate, they can lead to overload and then fatigue. Much of what we buy and accumulate is supposed to make our life simpler, easier, and less stressful. But in



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fact many of these items (including those that are supposed to save time or labor) actually consume more time, attention, resources, and energy than we ever intended.

We are the victims of hurry sickness as well, responding to an ongoing push to see and do more in less time. Like the drive to accumulate more possessions, some of this relentless pursuit is fueled by media and marketing. To own more and do more, we need to *make* more as well, so we push the throttle at work and often look for other sources of income while we're at it. Often the reward in the distance isn't financial but rather status and recognition, but these can capture our time and energy as effectively as any quest for a bigger paycheck. We seem unwilling to wait for anything anymore: Buy the big house *now*, get the new car *now*, take the exotic vacation *now*, and don't worry about that inevitable *pay later* part of the equation.

All the while, the most important things in life—relationships with God, family, and friends, not to mention time for exercise, sleep, reading, prayer, and other critical restoratives—are most often pushed to the background or out of the picture entirely. Our kids (who may have developed a frantic schedule of their own) not only suffer directly but may also see a mom and dad who can't say no. They may later mimic this example as adults.

In his books *Margin* and *The Overload Syndrome*, Dr.

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Richard A. Swenson describes a process of “pruning the activity tree,” which can be a major challenge for many families. But the reality is that we have limited resources of time, money, and energy, and we need to spend each of them wisely, with God as our adviser. We must realize that *no* can be a sacred word and have the courage to say it. We also need at times to ask ourselves why we feel compelled to have, to do, or to be something, to push ourselves and our families to the point of exhaustion.

We each have reserves to “run on empty” for a while, but we don’t have an unlimited capacity to do so. To some degree this serves to remind us that we were designed to live within physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual boundaries. We are not God, and one of the reminders of this reality is that we have limits. This may seem obvious, but too often our decisions reflect an unconscious assumption that *I can do it all!* Sooner or later, however, the challenges of life will bring us to the end of our intelligence, our knowledge, or our physical and emotional strength. Recognizing this may cause some to feel despair, but in fact this acknowledgment of our limits is the beginning of wisdom. Indeed, doing so *before* we reach the end of ourselves reflects even greater wisdom.

History, literature, and pop culture are abundant with would-be supermen and wonder women, but those who are not fictional or mythological inevitably

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prove to have feet of clay or chinks in their armor. Real people have been created for a relationship with God that is grounded on a humbling but also comforting reality: We are dependent on Him for every breath we take and every decision we make, and we need *each other* as well. The apostle Paul illustrates this mutual dependence with the analogy of a physical body whose various parts serve the whole:

*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

(ROMANS 12:3-5)

*God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.*

*The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. . . . God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*

(1 CORINTHIANS 12:18-26)

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON FATIGUE

Our family, our friends, and our fellow believers in a community of faith fulfill different (and interdependent) roles in our life so that all can live more abundantly without feeling overburdened and worn out. Acknowledging our limits—the reality that we can't be and do everything—is not a liability or a sign of weakness. Instead, doing so provides opportunities to experience God's utter sufficiency and to serve one another in love—and in so doing, to avoid wearing ourselves out.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> K. Kroenke et al., “Chronic Fatigue in Primary Care: Prevalence, Patient Characteristics, and Outcome,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 260, no. 7 (August 19, 1988): 929–934. Abstract available at <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/260/7/929>.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin Brown, Barlow Soper, and Walter C. Buboltz Jr., “Prevalence of Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome in University Students,” *College Student Journal* (September 2001). See [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FCR/is\\_3\\_35/ai\\_80744660](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCR/is_3_35/ai_80744660).

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.” See <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/cfs/about/what.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> More information is available from the CFIDS Association of America (<http://www.cfids.org>), which both promotes research and disseminates educational material regarding this syndrome for patients, their families, and healthcare providers.

While most of the content of this organization’s Web site is both informative and reasonable, note that some of its material and links dealing with alternative therapies steer patients toward approaches that are scientifically unsound or that have metaphysical underpinnings that neither Focus on the Family nor its Physicians Resource Council can endorse. It is important that individuals and families dealing with chronic fatigue syndrome discuss any treatment suggestions with their physician(s) and consider carefully the potential benefits and risks.

<sup>5</sup>The following suggestions have been adapted from the *Focus on the Family Complete Book of Baby and Child Care* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1997), 461–463.

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