

Finals season for a college student is filled with stress, anxiety, and staying up all night to study for exams, but is staying up to cram actually helping?

The importance of sleep for students during finals season is critical for students' immune systems, memory retention, and overall well-being. Students who prioritize their sleep are helping themselves more than they realize.

Shelly Jebens, a clinical psychologist and professor in the behavioral science department at Flagler College, said there are a few reasons that sleep is important for students.

“The most important one is boosted immune functioning. When students don’t get enough sleep, their immune systems are compromised making them vulnerable to illness and disease,” Jebens said.

Jebens said that if students get sick, they can’t study which can result in not doing well on exams. She said that sleep is also important for brain development and memory.

“Another vital reason we need sleep is for brain growth and development,” Jebens said. “When memories from our working memory are transferred to long term memory, all of that happens while we sleep.”

For memories to transfer from working memory to long term memory, our brains need to cycle through the different stages of sleep, the most important being stage three and four.

Stage three of sleep is the deepest sleep and stage four is the beginning of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep where memory consolidation and dreaming occurs.

“When you reduce the amount of hours you sleep, you’re reducing the amount of REM sleep that you get, and you need deep sleep which is stage three, but you also need REM sleep too,” Jebens said.

Jebens said students need to sleep enough to allow the time for information to transfer from working memory to long term memory, otherwise they could miss out on what they’re learning.

“So, everything students are learning throughout the day, unless they get a good night sleep and cycle through the stages of sleep,” Jebens said, “they’re going to miss out and have to relearn all that information over and over again.”

Jebens said that if students got enough sleep, their immune systems wouldn’t be compromised, and their memories would be enhanced. She said it is better to get enough sleep than stay up all night trying to cram.

“Get lots of sleep, even if it means, ‘Oh, I’m not prepared’ you’ll do better going to bed,” Jebens said, “because whatever you are trying to learn, you’re going to lose it.”

Jebens said there are ways to better the quality of sleep, such as setting up the environment before bed and avoiding certain activities to help wind down.

“Some practical tips of things to avoid,” Jebens said. “Avoid big meals, caffeine and stimulants and avoid vigorous exercise before bed, because we want our brain to go into a wind down mode.”

Amanda Bleak, director of counseling services at Flagler College, said sleep is essential for students' mental clarity and readiness needed to complete finals, and there are some factors that contribute to lack of sleep.

“Negatives symptoms, such as anxiety or depression can affect sleep,” Bleak said. “As well as worry, roommates who aren’t mindful, or substance use (especially stimulants) can upset the ultradian sleep cycle.”

Bleak said that the lack of sleep can affect students' concentration and information retainment. She said there are ways to better the quality of sleep for students so they can better concentrate and retain information.

“Clinically speaking, it may benefit a student to prioritize a consistent daily sleep schedule, limit electronics and caffeine hours before bed, and learn and utilize stress management/relaxation techniques,” Bleak said.

Joshua Behl, a criminology professor at Flagler College, said that the literature on pedagogy, the study of education, has stated that giving turn in times before midnight is beneficial for students.

“One of the things that some of the literature on pedagogy has suggested is to have due dates instead of being at 11:59, to have them at 5 p.m. to kind of signal to students that there is an end to your academic day,” Behl said.

Behl said students have reported in literature that they like 5 p.m. turn in times better than midnight times and that when students turn in assignments, most are not waiting til that midnight time anyway.

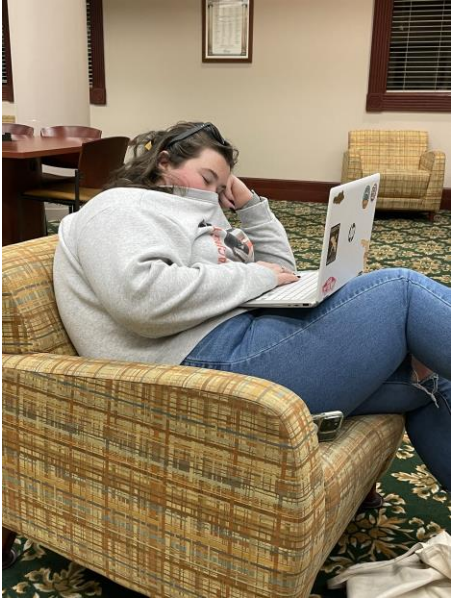
He has held strongly on it, even after hearing students complain about having games or work during the due date time but continues to see students prefer the 5 p.m. time.

“I’ve held the line pretty hard on those 5 p.m. turn in times,” Behl said, “to better allow students to prioritize their social life and their sleeping because their work is already due.”

Caitlin Johnson, a psychology major at Flagler College, said she has stayed up all night to get work done, but that she has noticed some effects of when she has a lack of sleep.

“I am more lethargic, and I can’t focus as much,” Johnson said. “I also have less motivation to get things done.”

Overall, students need to prioritize their sleep and how much time they allow to cycle through the stages. Adequate sleep is essential for their memory, concentration, and immune systems.



Caitlin Johnson catching some sleep in the library between classes. Students often take naps whenever they can around campus during finals season.