

TEENS AND THE VAMPIRE SYNDROME

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Having recently returned from a vacation back east, which included a visit to New York City, I found that it took me several days to recover from the jet lag due to the three-hour time difference. One of the first clients I saw upon returning to work in my practice involved an adolescent male whose mother remarked that with school about to start she wondered how her son was going to get to bed at a reasonable time and awaken early in the morning in time for school—given the summer schedule he has been living. My jet lag and this mother’s comment caused me to think.

Many teens today spend their summer like vampires—they stay up most of the night and sleep most of the day. (What they are doing during the evening may also be questionable—like playing video games—but that topic was addressed by me in a previous article.) By essentially turning their days and nights around teens are changing their body clocks. Physiologically, then, it is as if they have moved or vacationed half-way around the world—for ten to twelve weeks!

If it took me a few days to adjust from being on the east coast for ten days, how long might it take for an adolescent to recover after living “like a vampire” for about two months? Is it any wonder, then, why some teens seem dazed and confused the first few weeks of school each year? (Let us not forget that many teens go back into “vampire mode” on most weekends during the school year, as well.)

Although it would be nice, I’m not advocating that parents force their teen to keep a normal sleep schedule during the summer. It would be far too difficult to make most teens keep a regular schedule during the summer. (Of course, a summer job, if one could be found, would greatly help in maintaining a reasonable schedule.) Instead, I suggest that parents of teens talk about this vampire notion and encourage their teen to start going to bed earlier and awakening earlier a week or so before the start of school. By the way, teachers who also have been staying up later during the summer should start adjusting their sleep schedule as well a week or two before the school year begins.