

New study suggests ADHD- like behavior helps spur entrepreneurial activity

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Many people have experienced a few nights of bad sleep that resulted in shifting attention spans, impulsive tendencies and hyperactivity the next day—all behaviors resembling ADHD. A new study found that this

dynamic may also be linked to increased entrepreneurial behavior.

"We're not advocating depriving yourself of sleep to get ahead," said Jeff Gish, a professor of business at the University of Central Florida and co-author of the paper. "We're saying that there appears to be an interesting link between sleep and entrepreneurship. ADHD-like tendencies can be a benefit, rather than a hindrance in spurring ventures. But there is a potential downside. Even though [sleep problems](#) might lure an individual to an entrepreneurial career, if the sleep problems persist they can subsequently leave the individual without the cognitive and emotional competency to be an effective entrepreneur in-practice."

This paper suggests that sleep problems might nudge aspiring entrepreneurs to enter self-employment, but does not test the efficacy of subsequent venturing efforts.

Anecdotal information would appear to support the idea. According to multiple media reports, Bill Gates, Walt Disney, Richard Branson, Cisco Systems CEO John T. Chambers, actor Jim Carrey and Hollywood personality Howie Mandel all have ADHD. They are recognized impresarios who have significantly impacted their industries.

The results of the study published today in the journal *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* complement previous research that links sleep deprivation with lower productivity, lethargy and the hindrance of the longer-term success by suggesting that unhealthy sleep may have a limited upside.

Although the findings may engender contrasts to recent work advocating for adequate sleep, the results may also "contribute to the destigmatization of individuals whose social or personal circumstances place healthy sleep out of reach, [contributing to] greater social acceptance of diversity in sleep patterns."

The authors reached their findings by conducting four distinct studies that connected the dots from sleep quality to temporary ADHD-like tendencies and then to entrepreneurial intentions.

Sleep Deprivation and ADHD-like Tendencies

The first study, an experiment with 350 participants, had them fill out pre-experiment surveys. The participants were asked about their sleep and ADHD tendencies in the past six months. Questions aimed to gauge ADHD-like tendencies included things like:

- How often do you have trouble wrapping up the fine details of a project, once the challenging parts have been done?
- How often do you have difficulty getting things in order when you have to do a task that requires organization?

To gauge entrepreneurial intention, they were asked about their intention to start or acquire a business in the next 5-10 years.

Then the group was split into two and they filled out additional surveys under two conditions. One group had an uninterrupted night of sleep and woke up the next day to fill out the survey, which asked questions about their sleep quality, ADHD-like tendencies and intent to start a new business.

The second group filled out a total of 10 surveys beginning at 10 pm one night and every hour on the hour until 7 am the following day. This was to elicit [sleep deprivation](#).

The results provided experimental evidence for a causal relationship

between sleep problems and ADHD-like tendencies. "Our results suggest that disrupted sleep may help nudge people toward acting on their entrepreneurial ideas rather than continuing to ponder them," said Brian Gunia, a coauthor and associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

Sleep, ADHD-like Tendencies, and Entrepreneurial Intentions: Studies 2-3

About 300 people filled out surveys that measured entrepreneurial intentions, followed by measures of ADHD-like tendencies, and sleep problems. Finally, they completed some demographic questions. The results were similar.

Poor sleep quality was associated with heightened ADHD-like tendencies, which was associated with heightened entrepreneurial intentions; poor sleep quality was also directly associated with heightened entrepreneurial intentions.

Extension to Practicing Entrepreneurs: Study 4

The previous studies looked at general populations, but the researchers wanted to see whether their predictions extended to practicing entrepreneurs. So, they surveyed a multi-national panel of 176 practicing entrepreneurs recruited from a mailing list maintained by a business planning software company on the U.S. West Coast. The participants in this group on average were 43 years-old, had started about two businesses and had been self-employed for at least seven years. Slightly more than half were men. They had the participants fill out similar surveys on sleep, ADHD behavior and their intent to start another business.

The results: Impermanent sleep problems elicit ADHD-like tendencies and can spur on entrepreneurial intent even among practicing entrepreneurs.

"We were surprised that sleep problems so consistently influenced the entrepreneurial intentions of people who know the challenges of starting a [business](#)," says Brian C. Gunia, an associate professor at John Hopkins University's Carey Business School and co-author of the paper.

The paper concludes by saying that we need to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of sleep problems. On the one hand, they may nudge people toward entrepreneurship. On the other, they may undermine entrepreneurial performance if they continue unabated.

More information: Brian C. Gunia et al, The Weary Founder: Sleep Problems, ADHD-Like Tendencies, and Entrepreneurial Intentions, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1042258720940502](#)

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