The dangerous trend of sleep hacking

Kimberley Petty gets on average three to five hours of broken sleep a night. She gets up through the night to feed her 11-month-old son and then wakes at 6am to go to work full-time. "I never complain, always have my make-up done and soldier on as any good working mother does," the 21-year-old from Brisbane says. "The foggy brain and droopy eyes catch up with you every now and again, but you keep going. It's just part of life today. I wanted the career, it's my choice to be sleep deprived."

For Petty and those like her, cutting back on sleep is the only way to cram more into the day. They are part of a growing trend of sleep hacking, where the endless demands of work and family life push sleep to the bottom of the pile of priorities.

Sleep coaches and self-help books are offering advice to determined sleep hackers on how to train body and mind to cope with getting less than five hours' sleep a night. They suggest tips for quality sleep, believing that it is the quality rather than the quantity of sleep that is the most important.

Richard Bowles from Victoria says he gets about five hours' sleep a night because of his hectic schedule. The 35-year-old adventure runner, author and coach runs a

minimum of 20 kilometres a day on trails at 4.30am and works until 10pm. "Sleep is for suckers," he says. "I believe there is no such thing as burnout. If I'm asleep, I'm missing out. Sometimes I get a little upset that I get tired at night, as I'm so focused on getting stuff done."

For sleep hackers, the busier you are and the less sleep you get, the more productive and successful you seem. But when did we start thinking that sleep was something we can do without?

"There is often a strong belief that we need to be busy, and that busy is good. Whereas rest and recharging our batteries with sleep and rest are not as highly valued," David Cunnington, sleep physician and director of the Melbourne Sleep Disorders Centre, says. "Think of when we see a friend and ask 'How are you?' The most common response, borne like a badge of honour is 'flat out' or 'really busy'. Almost never is the response 'relaxed' or 'quiet at work'."

In May researchers from universities in the US and Britain found that on average people are getting two hours less sleep a night than 60 years ago. They warned that society was becoming "supremely arrogant" in ignoring the importance of sleep.

"Most people need at least seven hours' sleep per night to function well," Dr Cunnington says. "Feeling tired is not always the best measure of whether we are getting enough sleep, as it can manifest in other ways such as physical or mental health problems."

Experts know that getting less than the recommended amount of sleep can lead to serious health issues. A 2010 study by Britain's University of Warwick found that getting less than six hours' sleep a night was linked to a dramatically increased risk of death.

Short sleeping, of less than five hours a night, is associated with increased risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes and weight gain, Dr Cunnington says.

"There is evidence that people sleeping for five hours or less per night over eight nights have significantly increased food intake, eating over 500 more calories per day,

compared to those spending eight hours in bed. Over a month this amount of excess calories would lead to 2 kilograms weight gain," he says.

There is a psychological toll too. "Short sleeping increases the risk of developing depression as well as anxiety. Importantly, there is emerging data in the management and business literature showing that strategic decision-making is impaired and there is reduced self-control which manifests in a number of ways, including unethical behaviour, poor risk assessment and increased abusive behaviour from managers towards their employees."

Fiona Anson, 54, from Sydney says she sacrificed sleep to get her business up and running but it wasn't long before she noticed the effect it was having on her health.

"Earlier this year, with the frenetic pace I was working, I started to notice some what could be serious health problems, including high blood pressure and heart palpitations. I got myself into such a bad pattern that I was working until midnight most nights, then up until 2am trying to sleep, then back up at 7am or earlier to get to work."

Ms Anson also noticed she had trouble getting up in the morning, lethargy and a general malaise. She felt like her health was seriously starting to suffer and decided to get things back on track.

"The result has been remarkable," she says. "My health challenges were a real wake-up call to me and I'm very thankful that I don't seem to have done any permanent damage. I never thought that a lack of sleep could be that detrimental. However, I now am very aware that it can be."