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Your Life Should Revolve Around Sleeping

Start your bedtime right when you wake up



Laura Vanderkam Nov 11, 2020 · 4 min read ★

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“I’ll sleep when I’m dead” might be one of the more damaging sayings in our contemporary productivity lexicon. Indeed, we know that sleep deprivation reduces productivity. In fact, you could even argue that because being well-rested makes you more productive and efficient, sleep doesn’t take time, it *makes* time.

And yet, we’re a tired nation. One Gallup poll found that people estimated their average sleep at 6.8 hours per night, with 43% saying they should get more sleep. But according to the American Time Use Survey, which has collected the daily data of thousands of people, the average person sleeps 8.84 hours per day. Even working parents with kids under age six average 8.32 hours per day.

There’s much to be said about why time estimates don’t match time use surveys. For one thing, we are living in exhausting times. Even before the pandemic, people were struggling with fatigue, often thanks to over-scheduled lives, poor diet, lack of exercise, and other culprits. These days, an overactive news cycle, our dramatically restructured lives, and the ongoing stress of living through uncertain times can all contribute to a bone-deep sense of exhaustion. We tell ourselves to breathe and drink water and sleep, and then we do those things — so why isn’t that enough, even when we get a full night’s sleep?

Here’s what we do know, and can actually control: People can feel tired despite averaging eight-plus hours of sleep daily because of how that sleep is structured. That means that by restructuring a schedule, it should be possible to feel more rested without actually needing to find new hours anywhere. Smart sleep scheduling can even create more high quality free time.

Here’s a guide to doing just that.

Track your time

First you have to know when and how you sleep. Time logs show that people don’t just sleep in their beds from lights out to the alarm blaring. They crash on the couch while watching TV, or hit snooze (neither of which produces good sleep). They might sleep 6.8

hours some night during the workweek, which then becomes “typical” in a mental model, but average 8.84 hours per day when weekends, holidays, naps, and unintentional sleep get factored in. Knowing your general weekly sleep total means you can then divide this by seven and aim to get somewhere near this number in higher-quality sleep each day. Going to bed at a set time and waking up at a set time will feel more restful than cycling through weekday exhaustion and weekend crashing.

Go to bed earlier

Most responsible adults can’t really sleep in on weekdays. Consequently, going to bed earlier is the only way to sleep more during the workweek. But even if you could wake up whenever you wanted, there are upsides to an earlier bedtime. Few people spend the hours before bed on weekdays on high priority activities (there’s a reason evening is “prime time” in television ratings). By contrast, most people have more energy in the morning. Going to bed earlier allows you to wake up earlier, which means you can exchange low-energy evening free time for higher-energy morning free time. Instead of just watching screens, you get all sorts of other possibilities.

How a Night Owl Can Become an Early Bird

You’re not entirely at the mercy of your body’s natural rhythms

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Use your mornings well

For one thing, waking up early can be the key to being able to fit exercise into your busy life. Most regular exercisers say they prefer mornings; it’s done first thing, and the time won’t be taken away by work or family emergencies. Regular exercise tends to lead to better sleep, and if you get up at a set time to exercise on weekdays, you’ll be tired at night — and more likely to go to bed on time. It’s a virtuous cycle.

Remember “me time” doesn’t have to be late

One reason people stay up too late on weekdays — and then crash on weekends — is that after the kids are in bed, the work is done, and the chores are finished, they feel their time is finally theirs. Who wants to cut that short? But other me-time options don’t

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show or read a book. If you have kids, trade off weekend coverage with your partner (or require burning the candle at both ends. Take a real lunch break and watch a favorite a friend or neighbor) so each of you gets time to chill.

Make bedtime a treat

Invest in luxurious pajamas and sheets. Create an indulgent ritual, maybe with some

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