Why can't I stay awake in class? [1]

Hey Alice,

Lately, I've come to realize that I have a very powerful tendency to fall asleep in class. It seems that I can't stay awake in any lecture style class where I have to listen to the professor and take down notes? where there is minimal engagement on my part. I've pretty much fallen asleep in all of my lecture classes, during one part or another for the whole semester. I think I'm getting regular sleep? six hours at a minimum. I don't like to drink coffee or anything.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Even if your professor has the charisma of a potted plant, your regularly scheduled class-time naps probably mean that you're not getting enough Zzzzs in general. And it makes sense that you'd notice yourself dozing specifically in big lectures. People don't usually feel sleepy when they're active? talking it up in smaller, discussion-based seminars, for example. It's in relaxed situations, such as a warm auditorium with comfy chairs, where the underlying fatigue makes an appearance. Boredom also can bring out evidence of a sleep deficit. While a mind-numbing two-hours of your least-favorite lecturer might bore you to tears, it won't knock you out unless your body is already aching for rest.

You mentioned that you snooze for at least six hours each night. While six solid hours can be enough for some people, most folks, especially people in their late teens and early 20s, may need as many as nine or ten to be completely rested and alert. The amount of sleep you need is genetically determined. Unfortunately, there's no way to decrease the number of hours you need to sleep [2] in order to perform optimally. It might be helpful to find out how many hours your body prefers or needs. As an experiment, try carving out an extra hour or so for sleep each night. Be mindful about how the extra hours of Zzz’s impact your daytime alertness. It may be helpful to keep a sleep diary for a few weeks. Keep in mind that it often takes a week or so of consistent, quality sleep to get back on track.

Another possibility is that the sleep you are getting is troubled, or not as satisfying as it could be. Here are some tips that might help improve your quality of rest:

- Go to bed and wake up around the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Don't use caffeine, alcohol, or nicotine close to your bedtime.
- Exercise regularly, but finish up at least three hours before you plan to hit the sack.
- Avoid eating right before you go to sleep.
Avoid exposing yourself to bright lights right before going to bed.
Make your bed the staging ground for only two activities: sleep and sex.
Meditate, masturbate, read, listen to music, take a bath, give/receive a massage, or do some other relaxing activity that will help take your mind off of the day’s stresses and excitements and allow you to ease into slumber land.

Getting enough sleep is often easier said than done ? classes, jobs, social commitments, activities, and homework can easily make a good night's slumber something only to dream of. Think about how you're using your time each day ? perhaps you can drop certain commitments or do some things more efficiently and give yourself a bit more time to rest at the end of the day. If you do find yourself operating on a sleep deficit, here are some tips to help stay alert through a daunting day:

- Eat a substantial breakfast.
- Avoid eating candy and other high-sugar foods.
- Vary your activities.
- Stay physically and/or mentally active.

Also, different people learn better in different ways. Maybe large lectures just aren't your style and more active, participation-oriented classes could perk you up in no time ? this could be something to consider the next time you register for courses. Or, if you are stuck with large lectures in larger halls, choose a seat in the front, close to the blackboard, projector, screen, and the lecturer, to help you pay better attention and be more engaged in the material being taught. Other strategies you can try to keep yourself from snoozing in class include occasionally asking questions, taking deep breaths, eating a snack, sitting up straight, and doodling.

If you feel as though you're getting plenty of rest and still regularly doze off during the day, a discussion with your health care provider might be a good idea. It's important to rule out any underlying health conditions. For even more information on sleep, visit the National Sleep Foundation web site.

Sweet dreams,
Alice!

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