All night, done right: Getting the most out of an all-nighter

Hi Alice,

Some roommates of mine and I have been thinking about sleeping lately.

Usually we’re all told to get eight to nine hours of sleep, and a lot of the time we do! The problem is, once in a while, when there’s an essay to write or exam to study for, I or my friends may end up having no choice but to be up until 6 in the morning. No one’s really explained what the best thing is to do if you have to be up.

What would you suggest? Should we eat? Take a quick nap before class, sleep during the afternoon or wait until evening? Any suggestions you have would be great.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although it may be tempting to burn the midnight-to-6-AM oil the night before a big exam, it’s better to finish your work ahead of time and catch some Z’s. Studies show that the brain processes and consolidates information during sleep, boosting next-day performance. However, when sleeping's not an option, here are some tips on winning your race against time and the Sandman:

- **Snappy napping:** Short naps, lasting about twenty minutes or so, might help you feel more alert the next day. Some people may feel groggier and drowsier after napping, but those feelings usually go away within fifteen minutes or so after waking up.
- **Lighten up:** Staying in well-lit rooms while studying will help to keep you alert and awake.
- **Don’t touch that dial:** As your body temperature drops right around bedtime, you may feel a bit colder than before. Instead of turning up the heat, which can lull you to sleep, put on another layer to keep warm.
- **Procrastinate on procrastination:** It may be more efficient and effective to study the more important subjects or do the harder, most essential tasks earlier in the night, before drowsiness kicks in.
- **Break dancing (or jogging, or walking, or skipping):** Take short breaks while studying. Staying physically active during these breaks may also be beneficial in staving off sleep.
- **Eat up:** Eating healthy foods during the day and avoiding foods that may upset your
stomach may help your body fight the beast that is sleep. During the night, grabbing small snacks can provide much-needed energy and allow for breaks. Some good choices may include (dried) fruits, nuts, or yogurt. Steer clear of big, heavy, or fatty meals, which can leave you comatose in no time.

- **Caffeine crutch:** If caffeine is your thing, remember that a little bit (every so often) can go a long way. It's best to sip a *small* amount of coffee, tea, or caffeine-containing drink over a longer period of time rather than chugging it all at once.
- **Find a trusty sidekick:** Having someone to stay up with, who can make sure you stay awake and monitor you for signs of excessive drowsiness, can help to keep you going during the night and the next day.

After your day of judgment, try to get back on your regular, healthier sleeping schedule as soon as possible. If your body's mad at you for not taking care of business when you had the chance and telling you it needs sleep, then you might want to consider hitting the sack early.

Zzzzzzzzzz,

Alice!

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