Can't wake up in the winter

Alice,

I have always been a poor "getter-upper" in the mornings, but lately I haven't even awakened when the alarm goes off. I just sleep right through it and wake up at around noon. I have been missing classes regularly and it's very distressing! I haven't been going to bed any later (I go to sleep at around 2:30 or 3 AM and have since the beginning of school and I used to wake up at around ten for my class). I haven't been eating or exercising differently. Could this be a result of the shift in weather or in the clocks? Does it take time for the body to adjust to the new season?

— Sleepyhead

Answer

Dear Sleepyhead,

There’s nothing quite like snuggling underneath the warm covers on a cold winter day, so it may not be a surprise that many people struggle to get out of them at all! Everyone has a sleep-wake cycle that corresponds to their optimum degree of physical, mental, and emotional well-being. However, a few factors can upset this cycle, including seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that's related to changes in seasons and typically strikes hardest in the winter months, as well as circadian misalignment, often described as sleep and wake times that don't match up with day and nighttime. Read on to explore some of the possible causes of the change in your sleep schedule, as well as some tips to help you solve your sleeping strains.

One possible explanation for having trouble getting up in the morning is a disruption to the body’s circadian rhythm. Circadian rhythms are physical, mental, and behavioral changes that follow a daily cycle, and explain why humans tend to sleep at night and stay awake during the day. These rhythms respond primarily to light and darkness in an organism's environment. As you might suspect, reduced levels of sunlight in the fall and winter may alter the body's circadian rhythm and internal clock. It's possible for a person to experience circadian misalignment (in combination with or separate from SAD), which has several possible effects, such as sleep and wake that don't line up with the times that society expects people to be awake, misalignment of the sleep-wake cycle with feeding rhythms, and misaligned rhythms of the cells and systems in the body. Misalignment of the sleep-wake cycle may lead to sleep disturbance, insomnia, difficulty waking
in the morning, and daytime sleepiness.

Another explanation may be SAD. This is a form of depression that typically strikes hardest in the fall and winter months, during which people may feel both depleted of energy and moody. There are a few possible explanations for why a person may experience SAD. This includes a disruption in the body’s level of melatonin, as well as a drop in serotonin — a brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that affects mood — in response to reduced exposure to sunlight, which can lead to depressive symptoms. Those with SAD often need increased amounts of sleep and have difficulty waking up. Other symptoms include a loss of energy, increased moodiness, appetite changes (craving foods high in carbohydrates), oversleeping, and weight gain. The happy news about SAD? It’s often remedied by increased exposure to stronger-than-usual indoor lighting, vitamin D supplements, and relocation to warmer latitudes (which isn’t an option for everyone, of course).

With that said, putting some time and effort into managing your sleeping habits — even if you experience SAD or circadian misalignment — may assist you in getting on a sleep schedule that works better (or even well) for you. Consider the following tips:

- **Establish a regular sleep time and stick to a sleep schedule.** Be consistent by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day to help reinforce the body’s sleep-wake cycle.
- **Pay attention to what you eat and drink.** This may involve avoiding heavy or large meals within a couple hours of bedtime. Nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol all have effects that can have an impact on your quality sleep.
- **Create a restful and supportive sleep environment.** Ideal rooms for sleeping are dark, quiet, free of distractions, and not too warm.
- **Limit daytime naps.** These can interfere with night-time sleep.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine,** ideally for at least 20 to 30 minutes, three or four times a week. Regular physical activity can promote better sleep if it’s done at least two to three hours before sleep. Physical activity too close to sleep may make it harder to fall asleep.
- **Manage worries.** Start with basics, such as getting organized, setting priorities, and delegating tasks.

Changes in sleep patterns can be emotionally distressing and have a major impact on your daily functioning, leading you to miss classes, be less physically active, and eat differently than you might on a typical sleep schedule. While SAD and circadian misalignment may explain what’s going on, it’s always worth consulting with a mental health professional or health care provider if you’re concerned about your functioning or well-being.

Here’s to many restful nights and productive days ahead.

Alice!

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