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 late night oil before a big exam in order to cram in as much information as possible, you might not be getting the benefits of all that work. Studies show that the brain processes and consolidates information (including what you’re studying) during sleep, boosting next-day performance. Because of that, whenever possible, it can be more beneficial to focus on nighttime sleep instead of staying up to study. However, there may be rare occasions when sleeping isn’t an option; here are some tips for maximizing your sleep and recovery time:

- **Let there be light**: Staying in well-lit rooms while studying can help to keep you alert and awake. On the flip side, when you’re trying to turn in for the night, try to keep your sleeping area dark.
- **Keep it cool**: 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 critical subjects or do the harder, most essential tasks earlier in the night, before drowsiness kicks in.
- **Make some moves**: Take short breaks while studying. Staying physically active during
these breaks may also be beneficial in staving off sleep.

- **Fuel up for productivity:** Eating nutrient-dense foods during the day and avoiding foods that may upset your stomach can help you stay up past your bedtime. 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. If you’re trying to stay awake, it’s best to steer clear of big, heavy, or fatty meals, which can leave you feeling sleepy.

- **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. Drinking a glass of cold water can also serve as a good pick-me-up without having the longer lasting impacts of caffeine.

- **Have a buddy system:** Having someone to stay up with you, 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.

- **Power naps:** Short naps, lasting about twenty minutes or so, might also help you feel more alert. Some people may feel groggier and drowsier after napping, but those feelings usually go away within 15 minutes or so after waking up.

After your big exam or after your paper is complete, it’s best to focus on getting back to your regular sleeping schedule as soon as possible. The best way to do that is go to bed early the next night and wake up when you typically do the day after. Continue to do that until you’re able to make it through the day, to your usual bedtime, without feeling overly sleepy. You might also find it helpful to supplement your sleep with regular physical activity and nutritious foods. You may also find it helpful to implement time management strategies into your routine so that you won't need to pull an all-nighter in the future. You may want to think about how you can approach your schoolwork and other obligations in a way that will still allow for you to get sleep. If you struggle with procrastination, you may find Procrastination [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives to be helpful.

Good luck and take care,

Alice!

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