Dear Alice,

Is there any way that I can reduce the amount of sleep I need voluntarily? Right now, I need a lot of sleep (ten hours or more) and I would like to reduce this so that I can sleep healthily for eight hours a night. Is this possible, given the way that my body works? I have heard that it is, that I can "train" my body to require less sleep. It certainly isn't healthy to sleep fewer than eight hours if my body needs ten, of course. And I'm sure that some people are forced to sleep for six or fewer hours a night for years! Do their bodies just adapt?

Answer

Dear Reader,

If you're sleeping ten or more hours a night there may be a good reason — your body could just need that much sleep. While you may have heard that you need seven to eight hours of sleep each night, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [2] there is no perfect number of sleep needed because the amount of z's needed varies across individuals. Also, you're right that getting less sleep than your body needs may not be healthy, so decreasing the amount of sleep you get may not be the answer to your question. Rather than focusing on training your body to need less sleep, you may consider figuring out if you're getting the sleep you need.

So, how much sleep does a person need? Well, recommendations are based on age. According to the National Sleep Foundation [3] adults may need anywhere from six to ten hours of sleep each night. So, the amount of sleep you are getting may just be what your body needs. If you're questioning the amount of sleep you need, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you rested and productive on seven hours of sleep? Or does it take you additional hours of quality sleep to feel healthy and happy?
- Do you depend on caffeine to power through your day?
- Do you feel sleepy during the day when you get less than ten hours of sleep a night?
- Are you oversleeping?
Adapted from the National Sleep Foundation [4].

You might consider experimenting with how much sleep you get and then ask these questions again. Another option could be keeping a sleep diary [5] to track your sleep and what impacts it each night. This may help you understand how much shut eye your body requires and what factors influence your ability to get a good night's rest.

Although sleeping less each night may give you more time during the day (and many people could probably all use a little more of that), there are some downsides to not getting the shut eye your body craves. If you don't sleep as much as your body needs, you can accumulate a sleep debt that can lead to sleepiness and can affect your mood, performance, memory, and motor skills. Trying to "train" your body to get less sleep than it needs just won't work. Although you may get used to living with a different sleep schedule, your mood, judgment, and reaction time may all suffer. You could also compromise your immune system since getting enough quality sleep assists your body in fighting off infections.

If you feel that the number of hours you're sleeping at night leave you with fewer hours in the day to get things done, consider some time management techniques. This way you can get everything done and still get the sleep you need. If you're experiencing daytime sleepiness or trouble concentrating, or if you're concerned about the amount of sleep your body needs, you might consider seeing a health care provider. It may help to keep in mind that your body will let you know if you're getting enough sleep and when it's ready to wake up. You just need to listen.

Sweet dreams,

Alice!

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