Sleepy from oversleeping

(1) Dear Alice,

I am in my second year at college and I have found myself falling into an unhealthy sleeping pattern. I sleep mostly at night (I don't nap too much) and don't go to bed too late (usually between 12 a.m. to 2 a.m.). But, unless I have some huge incentive to get up in the morning (class, etc.), I can sleep extremely late (1 p.m. to 2 p.m.). This makes me end up feeling even sleepier throughout the rest of the day. How can I keep myself from oversleeping?

— Sleepy

(2) Alice,

Since final exams, I have been sleeping way more than I did during the semester. Normally, I can get by on six to eight hours a night, with maybe one morning to sleep late, if I've been leaning to the six-hour end for too many nights. And I would sometimes even wake up in the a.m. before any alarm clock and just get up since I would be wide awake. (Which was a good thing... )

But lately, I've been sleeping for eight to twelve hours a night, and still feel groggy when I do get up. I'm not doing anything noticeably different now than during the spring semester and don't think I'm depressed about anything. I would like to get up at 7 a.m. or 8 a.m. like I'm used to doing, but I just can't drag myself out of bed.

— Any suggestions?

Answer

Dear Sleepy and Any suggestions?,

Rest assured that oversleeping isn't necessarily abnormal, though it may keep both of you from achieving your best in school and in life. According to the National Sleep Foundation[^2], most young adults (between the ages of 18 and 25) need between seven to nine hours of sleep per night. However, keep in mind that these aren't absolute values and fluctuations on either end are common and normal. But too much sleep could be problematic or be a sign of other health issues. Oversleeping may actually be an indication of excessive tiredness or fatigue, which could
have an underlying physical, psychological, or lifestyle cause — a symptom of a symptom, if you will. In addition to feeling groggy or even sleepier after oversleeping, as you both mentioned, you may also experience naps that don’t help decrease sleepiness, loss of appetite, thinking and memory difficulty, restlessness, and anxiety. Similar to not getting enough sleep, getting too much can be a risk factor for higher mortality, heart disease, and stroke. But, don’t lose sleep over this just yet — there are strategies you can use to stem your sleepy situation!

First, what could be causing you to sleep excessively? Oversleeping may be a sign of excessive tiredness or fatigue. Some conditions that may contribute to feeling this way include hypothyroidism, anemia, heavy menstrual periods, weight loss or gain, pregnancy, celiac disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, viral infections, restless leg syndrome, and sleep apnea. Another possibility could be hypersomnia, which is marked by excessive daytime sleepiness or long periods of sleep at night. These individuals are more likely to fall asleep during meals, in mid-conversation, during work, or at school. If you suspect that you may have one of these conditions and think it could be related to your sleep pattern, consider bringing this up to your health care provider. They can examine what's behind your sleepiness and give an appropriate diagnosis and suggest treatment.

Along with the physical conditions that may be potential culprits, there are also psychological causes for oversleeping. As you mentioned, Any suggestions?, depression can be related to oversleeping. Other underlying psychological causes include stress and anxiety, which are common experiences when having to meet deadlines, take final exams, or deal with unplanned life events or emergencies (among other day-to-day stressors). In fact, research has found that college students who experience greater degrees of fatigue and stress tend to report worse sleep quality. It might be helpful to chat with a mental health provider to determine a cause and brainstorm possible solutions if you think that your sleepiness could be related to a psychological cause.

So, what can you do to help with oversleeping? If the amount of time you're sleeping actually causes you to walk around rubbing your eyes and feel more tired, it may be a good idea to cut back on your z’s. It’s possible that cutting back on sleep and rising earlier in the morning will help you be more productive and better manage your work, school, or social life. To help improve your sleep quality and regulate your sleep patterns, consider these simple sleep tips:

- **Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day.** If you need to, change the time you go to bed to make sure you get enough sleep. If you find yourself tossing and turning for a while, consider getting up and doing something relaxing until you feel tired enough to go back to bed.
- **Sleep in a cool, dark, and quiet room.** To create a sleep environment that suits you, consider using room-darkening shades, earplugs, a white noise machine, or a fan.
- **Avoid certain foods and substances near bedtime.** Steering clear of alcohol too close to bed is wise, since it can interrupt REM (rapid eye movement) sleep — which could throw off your sleep cycle. If you consume caffeine (typically found in coffee, soda, chocolate, and tea), try to do so earlier in the day so it is out of your system by bedtime. Sugar can also cause peaks and rises in energy levels throughout the day — consider cutting back on refined sugars and avoiding heavy meals near bedtime.
- **Limit long daytime naps.** If you do need a nap, limit it to about 10 to 30 minutes during the
mid-afternoon.

- **Pencil in regular physical activity.** Regular physical activity can promote better sleep, helping you to fall asleep faster and to enjoy deeper sleep. Getting active right before bed keeps some people awake, but helps others sleep. Do a little experimenting to see what time of day works best for you to get your sweat on.

- **Reserve your bed as a sanctuary for sleeping, cuddling, and sex.** Keep activities like watching TV, reading, or surfing the internet (including on your smart phone) out of your bed. These activities could prevent you from winding down.

*List adapted from the Mayo Clinic* [4].

There's no "magic bullet" to fix sleep issues, so it may take a little trial and error to find the best solution for you. Regardless of the strategies you choose, finding the right balance of sleep quantity and quality can change a few times during the average lifespan. Try to keep an open mind to new sleep habits — they may help you find a sleep routine that works for you.

Alice!

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