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Alarm bell

Wake up! You may not be sleeping enough...

Most of us don't value sleep. We consider it a luxury rather than a necessity and, as a result, we aren't willing to adjust our schedule to get adequate rest. We give you one week to change your life!

Do you know what it feels like to sleep well at night and be wide awake, creative and dynamic all day long? If you're like most people, you probably don't. Try these simple steps to improve your quality of sleep.

1 Determine your Personal Sleep Quotient [PSQ]

The optimum amount of sleep your body needs to function at its best. Failing to reach your personal sleep requirement diminishes concentration, productivity and work quality. If we operated machinery the way we're driving our bodies, we'd be guilty of reckless endangerment. After 17 – 19 hours without sleep, your brain activity is similar to someone with a blood alcohol content [BAC] of 0.05 [0.08 being the legal limit for intoxication in most countries].

Here's how to determine your PSQ:

- Pick a bedtime when you're likely to fall asleep quickly—that's at least eight hours before you need to get up. Keep to this bedtime for the next week and note when you wake up each morning. You might rise early for a few days if you're used to sleeping less, that habit will soon give way to longer rest.
- If you need an alarm to wake up, if it's difficult to get out of bed, or if you're tired during the day, eight hours isn't enough for you. Move your bedtime up by 15 – 30 minutes the next week. Continue doing this each week until you awaken without an alarm and feel alert all day.
- When you determine what you think is your ideal bedtime, cut 15 minutes off it to see if you're sleepy the

next day. If so, then you've nailed your PSQ. Add those 15 minutes back, and you're set.

Most adults require 7.5 – 9 hours of sleep to be fully awake and energised all-day long. As a rule of thumb, you'll probably have to add one more hour to your current sleep schedule.

2 Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day

Every day means seven days a week, 365 days a year—regularity is vital for setting and stabilising your body's biological clock. It only takes a few weeks to fully sync the hours you spend in bed with the sleepy phase of your clock. When this happens, you won't need an alarm clock to wake you up and the hours you spend awake will correspond to when you feel most alert and refreshed.

By sticking to a schedule, you'll be significantly more alert than if you slept for the same total amount of time at varying hours during the week. And eventually, such regularity will reduce the total sleep time required for maximum daytime alertness. Yes, a regular sleep routine will enable you to do just as well on a little less sleep.

British sleep researchers and scientists at the *Harvard Medical School* found that by altering your sleep schedule by even a few hours, mood deteriorates. Shift-workers in particular experience more anxiety and depression partly because they're out of sync with their biological clocks.

3 Sleep in one continuous block

Sometimes it's impossible; any new parent or an older guy with prostate woes will tell you so. But so-called 'fragmented sleep'—even for hours—is not physically or mentally restorative and causes daytime drowsiness. It also dramatically compromises learning, memory, productivity and creativity. In fact, six hours of continuous sleep is more restorative than eight hours of fragmented sleep.

Senior citizens anticipating a night of fragmented sleep often go to bed early hoping to manage eight hours of total sleep within a 10-hour period. But as we've seen, that's a waste of time. So, don't let yourself doze on and off for hours. Limiting your time in bed to your PSQ, and

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not a minute [or 20] more, will eventually bring greater benefits.

Many people use snooze bars thinking that they'll get an extra hour of sleep after the first alarm goes off. Wrong! If you set the alarm to ring every 15 minutes for an hour, at best, you might get 18 – 20 minutes worth of fragmented sleep. It's much better to go to bed one hour earlier and wake up naturally.

4 Make up for your lost sleep as soon as possible

Every hour that you're awake you're building sleep debt. Every two hours of wakefulness requires a repayment of one hour of sleep. It's a 2:1 ratio. That's why the general

rule is that after 16 hours of being awake, you'll need 8 hours of sleep. When you violate this rule, sleep debt accumulates quickly. Before long, you'll crash [hopefully not on the road], get sick or perform poorly.

Here's how to make up for lost sleep:

- Don't try to replace it all at once. If you skipped a night, don't try to sleep for 14 – 16 hours the next night. That's just about impossible because your long-established biological clock is pre-programmed to put you to sleep and wake you up at a set time every day. Instead, apportion your sleep debt out over the next few days until you feel better.
- Catch up on lost sleep by going to bed earlier than usual, not by sleeping late. If you sleep late, you'll find it harder call asleep the following night at the usual hour.
- Don't try to make up for large sleep losses during the week by sleeping in on the weekend. This is like trying to get fit or lose weight by doing all your exercising or dieting on Saturdays and Sundays. Your brain doesn't have a separate biological clock for weekends. Changing your sleep/wake times disturbs your body's natural rhythm. If you sleep till noon on Sunday, for instance, you won't be very tired, come your regular bedtime. Maybe you'll doze off sometime after midnight, but just a few short hours later, your alarm will jerk you back to consciousness and you'll have to crawl to work with the Monday morning blahs. You'll have induced jet lag without leaving your zip code.
- Try napping to pay back your sleep debt. However, be careful not to nap too long or too late in the day, or you'll further disturb your sleep cycle. Whenever your sleep is

significantly disturbed, return to your regular schedule as soon as possible. For years of accumulated sleep debt, it may take as long as 4 – 6 weeks until you discipline your sleep. But the resulting alertness, mental and physical performance, and enjoyment of life will be more than worth the discipline it took to get there.

In sum, determine and meet your PSQ, establish a regular bedtime schedule, get one long block of continuous sleep, and be sure to make up for lost sleep. As you can see, the cure for sleep loss is painless and pleasurable. All it takes is just a little discipline.

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 excerpted from the forthcoming book, "Sleep for Success"
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