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Ask a Scientist: Why don't I feel better when I get more sleep?

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Courtesy of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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As finals approach, students all over the country are struggling to get sleep. Most of us have been there — two projects, two finals and two papers that we've put off for the entire semester and now need to finish in two weeks. Obviously, there's not enough time in a 16-hour day to get it all done, so we cut into our recommended 8 hours of sleep. If we're lucky, we'll get four hours of sleep ... if not, we pull all-nighters. We wear the bags under our eyes as badges of honor – “Look at my dedication! My ability to procrastinate and still get everything done is amazing!”

After several near-sleepless nights, we'll fall into our beds and sleep 10 or 12 hours, expecting to wake up feeling completely restored. But it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes you wake up from a sleep-binge and feel just as terrible as you did before. But why doesn't getting more sleep make you feel better?

The confusion about sleep's ability to "cure" us of tiredness comes from confusion about the function of sleep. Most of us think, "Okay, my brain needs a certain amount of time 'off' to function properly, so as long as I give it the correct amount of time off, it doesn't matter how that downtime is divided up." If we need 16 hours of sleep in two days, it should be fine to get four hours of sleep one night and 12 hours the next, right?

Wrong. To function properly, your brain needs adequate amounts of sleep every night, and every night that it doesn't get that amount of sleep, it's building up small amounts of damage. Damage can't simply be "undone" by getting extra sleep later on.

Think of it this way. Your car needs an oil change every 3,000 miles. Would you expect two oil changes after 6,000 miles to have the same effect as one oil change every 3,000? Of course not. The extra 3,000 miles after when you should have had your oil changed results in some damage to your car. Maybe it's not a lot of damage at first, but every time you neglect an oil change, the damage builds up, eventually breaking your car down.

We know this about cars; we can accept this as a fact. For some reason, though, we can't understand that our brains require the same regular maintenance and that our brain's maintenance comes during sleep. To undo the damage of sleep loss, you need many nights of consistently sufficient sleep. How many nights? Well, that depends on how long you've gone with a sleep-deprived brain. This is why one night of "good" sleep doesn't always cure you of tiredness. Try getting good sleep for a week. We can almost guarantee you'll feel a lot better.

We know what you're thinking. It's easy to say, "Get good sleep for a week!" but it's a lot harder to actually do that. No one has the ability to command oneself to fall asleep! With all the distractions, stress and expectations which come with modern technology, it seems that getting asleep is harder now than it has ever been. But with dedication and sheer force of will, you can get consistently good sleep. Here's our advice on how:

1. Don't procrastinate. Procrastination feels good in the moment, but when your brain is trying to fall asleep, all of the things you were supposed to do today will help keep it awake. Just doing one thing — even if it only takes 10 minutes — will make you feel a lot better.
2. Go to bed at around the same time every night. Yeah, your friends want you to stay up until 3 a.m. and call you a grandma when you say you're tired, but hey, you don't feel dead inside the next day, so who's got the last laugh?
3. Don't use snooze. Snooze buttons are the worst thing for your sleep. Set your alarm for when you actually have to get up (which is probably an hour later than when your alarm is set right now) and then when your alarm goes off, get up. Your brain is going to appreciate that extra hour of good sleep, and getting up immediately is going to help build a strong internal clock. Pretty soon you won't even need an alarm! (Seriously though, you won't. It's amazing.)
4. If you find yourself lying awake at night, don't just stay in your bed. First, give yourself a time limit – count to 300. If you're still awake by the time you get to 300, get out of bed and do something. Reading tends to help the most – it will distract your brain and make your eyes tired. Writing can help, too. If you've got racing thoughts, try writing them down. Then your brain won't feel like it's responsible for remembering them all, and with any luck, it will go to sleep.

As we head towards the end of the semester, just remember that a good night's sleep is way more important than a few more hours of studying. Your brain can have all the information in the world, but if it's too sleep-deprived to recall any of it, it won't do you any good.

Happy sleeping!

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