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To Nap, or Not to Nap

Liya Panayotova, Psychologist, liyap.com 4.5K reads

To nap, or not to nap, that is the question for plenty of people. There are some who just love to squeeze in a little nap time in the middle of the day, and others who avoid it at all costs because it renders them zombie-like for hours.

Turns out that we humans are one of the few species which are monophasic sleepers. That is – we operate in two general stages – wakefulness and sleep – as opposed to sleeping multiple times during the day, for short periods of time, like most animals, do. However, we still experience an energy low at about 2 - 4 pm.

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Afternoon Drowsiness

Surely, we don't have to go into detail about how this feels because you've probably experienced it more than once. Afternoon weariness has been studied by science. According to Michael J. Breus, Ph.D., at about that time our bodies experience a dip in core body temperature, which signals the brain to release melatonin. This same process occurs at night, right before we go to sleep. Therefore, on a smaller scale, our brain receives signals that indicate we should become sleepy.

The Benefits of Napping

Naps appear to be harmless because, in most cases, they are. They possess an impressive list of benefits.

Taking a nap allows your body to rest and unwind, so that you can regain your state of relaxation, to carry on with the rest of your daily activities. As sleep also helps your brain's cognitive functions (such as memory and concentration), naps are encouraged in children and the elderly. People who are employed at shift jobs, and work irregular hours, can take advantage from naps too because they've been known to restore alertness.

Regular and planned naps have also been proven effective as part of the treatment for disorders like narcolepsy and hypersomnia. By scheduling naps, people who suffer from these conditions, feel less pressure to fight sleep. Besides, by planning your naps, you also set the right conditions for a consistent bedtime in the evenings.

Are Naps a Cure-All?

With other sleep disorders, such as insomnia and fragmented sleep, it may be slightly more complicated. In agreement with good sleep hygiene, napping is strongly discouraged, even if you become drowsy during the day. It is believed that for these types of disorders, napping may contribute to the already distorted sleep pattern.

If you have trouble sleeping through the night and wake up frequently or too early, and you take a nap, or a few naps, during the day, you'd just be adding more short amounts of sleep to your routine, and your body won't get the restorative effects that our monophasic sleep provides.

Power Napping

This refers to a brief sleep session, in the middle of the day, which lasts anywhere from 10 to 35 minutes, with the optimal length being about 25 minutes.

According to numerous studies, including ones that involved participants at high-intensity jobs, such as astronauts and air traffic controllers, after a power nap, people become more alert and significantly less fatigued.

However, for a power nap to be effective, there are certain conditions it must meet:

- **Don't let it last longer than 30 minutes.** Otherwise, you may go into the deep stages of sleep, and feel groggy upon waking up. Make sure you have set an alarm to go off exactly 30-35 minutes after you've gone to bed. Even if you don't manage to fall asleep right away the first few tries, you are still going to be relaxing and, with time, your body will become acquainted with the power nap.
- **Only do it if you meet certain criteria.** This point is a bit tricky and may require the assistance of your physician. If you suffer from insomnia or other similar conditions, napping during the day, even if it is power napping, may only make it more difficult to

sleep at night. Furthermore, people who struggle with depression may feel the need to take one or more naps during the day, although they might not be sleeping during that time. Therefore, a power nap is only useful, either if you have a sleep-related disorder, such as hypersomnia, or if you don't have a sleep disorder but have been sleep deprived, due to external conditions.

- **Don't nap too late.** Napping late in the afternoon can disrupt your regular sleep pattern and stand in the way of a good night's sleep. That is why it is best to sleep after lunch, or in the early afternoon, if you are going to do it at all.

Types of Naps

To help you figure out the science of naps, and more importantly – what works best for you, it may be useful to have an idea of the most common types of naps.

- **Scheduled nap:** As the name suggests, you schedule a time during the day, when you are going to take a nap, without know whether or not you will be tired at that time. Scheduled naps could be beneficial to those with full schedules, who don't feel like they have time for anything. Planning a 15-minute nap, to substitute your afternoon coffee, doesn't take that much out of your day, does it?
- **Spontaneous nap:** If you start to feel extremely fatigued and distracted during the day, it may be best to take a spontaneous nap. This is especially important for people who are operating heavy machinery included driving a car.
- **Habitual nap:** Our bodies enjoy routine and become used to it. If you take a nap at the same time every day, then you will gradually start noticing how you become drowsy around that time. This can be a great strategy for people who need to structure their sleep pattern better.

Napping can be a wonderful resource for helping you change your unhealthy sleep pattern, or for boosting your mid-day alertness. However, as is the case with all sleep-related matters, carefully choose your strategy, in accordance with your specific needs.

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