

End your insomnia: The new shift in sleep

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Before artificial light was common, people snoozed for part of the night, got up for a while, then returned to bed. Our writer shows that this medieval pattern yields modern benefits » by Beth Levine

I'm what people call a restless sleeper. I conk out fast but get up eleventy-jillion times in the wee hours to pee, stare at the ceiling or fret about life. Then I flip and flop around for what seems like forever, beseeching Morpheus to redescend and bless me with unconsciousness. The only thing I usually accomplish is pulling

the sheets off the bed and trapping myself in the twisted mass.

So even though I go to bed at a reasonable hour (11:30 PM, after Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*) and stay there until about 8 AM (I work at home, so no commute), I never feel rested. I usually sneak in a catnap around 3 PM, but because I am so tired, CONTINUED ON PAGE 96

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my planned 20-minute siesta can extend to an hour (or two), effectively killing the afternoon and leaving me disoriented and kind of nauseated.

That's why I'm eager to try what is known as biphasic sleeping, which was a common practice for many people before the advent of artificial light in the Industrial Revolution. They went to bed 9 PM-ish, woke up maybe five hours later and, instead of fighting the wakefulness, accepted it as the norm, using the next hour or so to read by candlelight, get frisky with their partner, putter around, visit with neighbors who had the same sleep schedule or just lie quietly in a kind of meditation. Then they went back to sleep for another few hours.

Virginia Tech history professor A. Roger Ekirch, PhD, stumbled across this pattern while conducting research for his book *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*. He found preindustrial documents and literature (such as *The Canterbury Tales*) that referred to "first sleep" and "second sleep" as common occurrences. During the 1990s, research conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health suggested a biological basis for this sleeping in shifts. Thomas A. Wehr, MD, a psychiatrist who now has a private practice in Bethesda, Maryland, led a monthlong experiment in which subjects were deprived of artificial light for

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14 hours a day. Without lightbulbs, the subjects fell asleep at about 8 PM, woke up after midnight for a few hours and then went back to sleep. Wehr concluded that biphasic sleeping may be what our bodies would do naturally if there were no artificial light to keep us awake.

"Nowadays we think of segmented sleeping as a disorder, but maybe we

have it completely backwards," says Wehr. "Maybe when we wake up in the middle of the night, it's actually a natural pattern of human sleep that is reasserting itself in a modern world."

In other words, maybe the only problem with my sleep habits is my thinking they're a problem. Sounds good to me. So I decide to try my own test. For two weeks, I will embrace the biphasic pattern and see if I feel more refreshed and productive during my waking hours.

It's an experiment that ends up changing my life.

Preparations

For a game plan, I talk to Mark Sisson, author of *The Primal Blueprint* and publisher of the health blog Mark's Daily Apple, who has studied "shift sleeping." He suggests this approach:

1 | Figure out when I need to be up in the morning. Then count back and hit the sack nine hours before that, which will give me two four-hour sleep blocks and one hour of in-between awake time. "Each sleep block has to be long enough for you to get your full REM sleep, since that's when most of our recovery and growth take place," says Sisson. I decide to go to bed by 10 PM and get up by 7 AM.

2 | After sunset—or at least two hours before bedtime—reduce my exposure to artificial light, including (gulp) computers and TV. If I really can't give those up, I should wear blue light-blocking glasses or stick to yellow light, provided, for example, by candles. "Yellow light, natural to sunlight and fire, does not interfere with the onset of dim-light melatonin, a hormone that promotes sleep," Sisson explains. He also clues me in

on F.lux (stereopsis.com/flux), a free software program that makes the color of your computer's display adapt to the light in the room (at night, you get a blue that's warm rather than cool).

3 | Make sure my wakeful period, whatever I decide to do with it, is gentle rather than taxing or anxiety producing.

For example, I shouldn't watch political news shows that make my head want to explode.

4 | Feel free to nap as usual. "Contrary to popular belief, napping does not interfere with the quality of your sleep at night. It just adds to the recovery and the repair that sleep is supposed to accomplish," Sisson says.

Wednesday

8 PM | At the beginning, I get a boost from nature in the form of Superstorm Sandy, which roared through Connecticut right before my start date. A giant fir came down and took out the whole neighborhood's power, so we have been thrown back to preindustrial times with no electricity, Internet or phones (landline or cell). My husband Bill and I huddle around the light of a few candles, feeling quite *Little House on the Prairie*-ish. The romance palls quickly, however. In about 10 minutes, I completely understand why our forebears turned in so early. Between the darkness, silence, cold and utter boredom, I can barely keep my eyes open. I give up and crawl into bed.

2 AM | Aaaaand I'm up. Now this is where I would usually flop around for an hour, but instead I stop trying to sleep and get up. I wouldn't mind gossiping with my neighbors, but since it isn't AD 1300, none of them are wide awake. Then a brilliant idea strikes me: There are so many dangerous downed power lines in the area that the electric company has posted executives to sit in their cars for 12 hours at a time to keep an eye on them until they're fixed. Earlier, I chatted with the poor lady from internal auditing who has been stuck in her Ford Focus outside our house, looking bored enough to weep. Huzzah! Internal Audit Lady will be thrilled to see a fellow human and connect!

I put on a parka over my jammies, grab a flashlight and go out into the cold. Yet sitting out there in the pitch dark is not my friendly lady but some huge guy who looks just as alarmed to see me as I am to see him. Abort mission! Abort mission! I do a U-turn to the

house and run into Bill, who has gotten up to see where I went. We climb back into bed and yak for a while. It's nice. Sort of reminds me of the odd moments we used to steal when we had an infant and practiced no-phasic sleeping. Surprise, I drift gently back to sleep.

Thursday

2:30 AM | Still no power. When I wake, I grab my e-reader, with its soft glow light, and lie in bed, all cozy and warm, while I knock off a couple of chapters. And then I use up my charge and the reader dies. There's no way to revive it. Ugh! I am not made for pioneer living.

Saturday

5:30 PM | The lights return, and we are back among the living. Sort of. While we have electricity, we still don't have a landline, Internet or TV, which all come through cable. Using a cell phone, Bill and I take turns sitting on hold with the cable company for more than two hours, then give up. Since it's a 24-hour hotline, I decide I will use my between-sleep period to try again.

3 AM | Alas, even in the middle of the night, while my call is *very, very* important to the cable company, the folks there still don't want to actually talk to me. I lie in the dark on hold for half an hour. Then I realize the obvious: Fighting bureaucracy is not exactly the kind of low-stress pursuit the experts have recommended.

Monday

8 PM | And the Lord said, Let there be cable! Now the fun really begins. I'm hoping to keep some of the rhythm of the past five days of living off the grid.

It turns out that it's one thing to wind down early when there is absolutely nothing to do but quite another when there are so many modern-day enticements. TV! E-mail! Facebook! Netflix! Phone! *Storage Wars!* I can get my Jon Stewart fix earlier in the evening—*psst, reruns at 7:30 PM, pass it on*—but can I break my computer habit as well? I shut the thing down. And then boot it back up because I remembered one more

event to put in my calendar. Then shut it down. Then back on. Feel itchy and slightly panicked. Oh, Lordy, my name is Beth and I am a computer addict. I force myself to go to bed and turn on my now fully charged e-reader.

10 PM | Asleep!

4 AM | I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date. I promised Bill I'd wake him for some after-midnight delight, but I slept longer than usual. Despite the early-morning hour, he rises to the occasion. Frankly, I've never seen him so supportive of my work.

Wednesday

9 PM | I'm feeling a change—moving past the computer jones and beginning to enjoy the early-evening wind-down.

3:30 AM | You know what's kind of a relief? When I start to wake up, I no longer fight it. Wehr helped me reframe the issue: "Most people naturally wake at some point, but then they worry they aren't getting enough sleep. The anxiety makes the sleeplessness worse. Instead, if we embrace the two-shift idea, we may actually sleep better because we lessen the anxiety." So when I'm up in the middle of the night, I accept that as normal. I know that if I do a little something, I'll be back to sleep shortly.

Thursday

10 PM | Still itchy when I shut down the computer, but I am having no trouble falling asleep early.

2:30 AM | I'm in a groove now. For the past few nights, I've been awakened by inspirations dancing through my brain, and I scribble them all down. Then, because I have unburdened my busy mind, I go back to sleep fairly easily.

Saturday

6 AM | Well, good morning. Instead of struggling out of bed at 8 AM, I'm up. Oddly, cheerily so. How bizarre. When I go downstairs, my husband, who is always on the move at this hour, eyes me with some terror. When I sing out

my good morning, he looks to see what pod has taken over my body.

Monday

3 PM | My naps have become shorter, and I am waking up from them less addled. Today I lie down and get all comfy, and . . . nothing happens. I realize I am lying down out of habit, not need. But how can I feel less sleepy by sleeping less? W. Christopher Winter, MD, medical director of the Martha Jefferson Sleep Medicine Center in Charlottesville, Virginia, explains it to me: "You are consolidating your sporadic sleep into two solid segments instead of many little ones. Fewer hours of that sleep may feel better than more hours of disrupted sleep. You may be spending less time asleep, but the quality of your sleep is much better." Woo-hoo! Yeah, baby!

Wednesday

End of experiment. Will I stick to the biphasic schedule? Yes. I won't be religious about it, but I really like going to bed early. Plus, there have been some subtle benefits for my marriage. Bill has gotten into the rhythm with me, which gives us more time to connect. I do have to avoid the siren call of the computer and TV as the evening progresses. And I will certainly not wake myself up if I am sleeping through the night.

But now I understand that when I do wake, it's better not to fight my body's natural sleep patterns. When the anxious flip-flopping starts, I will stop and do some rhythmic breathing while Thinking Lovely Thoughts. ("What's that you say? You want to give our son a full scholarship to college for all four years? Well, aren't you sweet!")

What's in this for me, you ask? Well, if you have young kids and/or a full-time job, maybe nothing. There is no way you are turning down the lights at 8 PM. And if you already sleep like a log all through the night, why bother? But if you're a fitful sleeper like me and have some flexibility in your life, biphasic slumber is definitely worth a shot. Who knows, maybe that nice lady from internal audit will come back someday. *