Can't stay awake in bed [1]

Dear Alice,

I suppose I'm lucky. I fall asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow. The problem is that I can't stay awake in bed even when I really need to, e.g. to talk about important things with my girlfriend. No matter what I do to try to stay focused and awake, I invariably nod off. Aside from simply not going to bed until sleep is okay, are there techniques for postponing sleep? short of speed or gallons of coffee?

Sleepy

Answer

Dear Sleepy,

You can consider yourself lucky; feeling sleepy in bed is a good thing (ask anyone with insomnia [2]). In fact, sleep specialists recommend keeping bedroom activities limited to sleeping and sex. That would imply that, aside from sweet nothings, important conversations with your partner (or any activity that requires focus) should take place at another location. And sure, you could do a bunch of things to postpone sleep (taking speed and drinking gallons of coffee included, but strongly not recommended), but when you're tired, it's best to (you guessed it) go to sleep.

It's pretty normal to get sleepy in bed since our brains and bodies have been conditioned to use it mostly for one thing, and one thing only ...sleep. Those who do have trouble falling asleep and/or staying asleep are often advised not to eat, read, study, watch television, etc. in bed so that they learn to associate that space with slumber.

How about designating another spot in your home for focusing? You could use the dinner table or a desk to do work, for example. As for having an important conversation with your girlfriend, anywhere (outside of the bedroom) that is quiet with few distractions will do. If you have a hard time getting your girlfriend on board, perhaps talking to her about the sleepiness you experience once you get in bed will help. The two of you could work to figure out an alternate space and time to discuss important topics. Just remember this: When you need a recipe to stay focused and awake, regardless of the task, the first step is to make sure you are well rested. If you're still not feeling energized, check out Energy boosters [3] for more suggestions.

Broadway producer George Abbott, who lived to 103, gave really great advice when he was
asked his secret to long life. He said, "Have a good time, and go to sleep when you’re tired."

Sweet dreams,

Alice!

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