With my stress comes sleepiness ¹

Hi Alice,

Whenever I am in a very stressful situation such as an approaching big deadline, my body gets unusually tired and sleepy regardless of how much rest I get. I sleep well but it never seems to be enough. Why do I get so sleepy and what can I do to prevent this change when stressful situations approach?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As you are experiencing, snoozing and stress go hand in hand. Stressful situations and feeling stressed over an extended period of time can wreak havoc on your sleep cycle and daytime alertness. For example, what you may be experiencing is your brain subconsciously making you sleep longer in order to avoid daytime stressors. Or, possibly, the stress is disrupting your REM sleep so the hours of shut eye you get are less restful, causing you to wake up tired. You say you sleep well, but sometimes it’s hard to tell just how deeply you are sleeping. The fact that you still feel tired after a night’s rest is telling. Being kept awake at night by insomnia, and extreme daytime sleepiness are also common reactions to stress, which could explain your need to hit the sack when you find yourself in stressful situations. Although it’s hard (well, nearly, impossible!) to avoid stressful situations altogether, there are a number of strategies you can use to reduce how stressed out you feel and increase your energy in the face of looming deadlines. Some things you could try are:

- Practicing meditation ², especially before bedtime. Taking time to intentionally relax your body may help you sleep better and more soundly.
- Exercising regularly, not too close to bedtime.
- Make sure to get your Zzzs. Being sleep deprived is linked with increased stress levels, just as stress can prevent you from sleeping properly. It’s an annoying cycle!
- Targeting stress at the source could also help you get a good night’s sleep and stay alert during the day.
- Maintaining a healthy diet. Eating right can give you the energy to effectively tackle your assignments or stress during the day.
- Getting organized and managing your time ³ effectively might help you minimize your stress in the face of an overwhelming workload.
- And lastly, but maybe most importantly, give yourself more time and space when you anticipate feeling stressed about something. For example, in the week leading up to the due date for a paper, try scheduling in some physical activity or an extra hour of sleep.
each night. Give yourself permission to take restful and restorative breaks from work to socialize and relax.

If these techniques don’t seem to be working for you and you would like to talk to someone about the stress you’re experiencing, try reaching out to friends, family, or a mental health professional.

Good luck de-stressing and re-energizing!

Alice!

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Published date:
Aug 30, 2013
Last reviewed on:
Jul 28, 2015

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