Hi Alice,

I find that I'm most alert late at night, and at school I'll stay up till three or four in the morning. Since I've had morning classes in the past, I've tried to form a habit of going to bed earlier ? around midnight or one ? but realistically, I don't think this is ever going to happen. I was thinking of trying, when I go back to school this fall, to go to bed around three or four and sleep for four hours, and then also take a four-hour nap during the day. Is this a good solution, or will I be more tired than if I sleep eight hours straight at night? Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sleep needs are unique, so it's entirely possible that your proposed plan will help you make it through your day. It's normal for some students to feel most alert late at night, however, you do not mention in your question how you feel throughout the day. Are you fatigued? Do you navigate through your activities feeling tired and drowsy? Because everyone is different when it comes to sleep, one of the best ways to determine if you are getting enough sleep is to notice your level of drowsiness throughout the day.

According to sleep experts, most people need between six and ten hours of sleep each day for optimum performance and health. Lots of important stuff happens inside our bodies when we sleep ? for example, hormones are produced, blood pressure is regulated, and kidney functions are altered. Additionally, information you've studied and learned during the day is processed and stored while you're getting some shut-eye. Having enough uninterrupted, regularly scheduled sleep is the best way to end up feeling rested and energized when the alarm clock rings. How much uninterrupted sleep varies from person to person ? some people feel fine on just a few hours a night, while others need more.

Let's assume you are fatigued during your day. With classes, homework, friends, jobs, families, extra-curricular activities, and other commitments, regular and continuous sleep can be hard to come by. You're right that naps can help you stay alert through a crazy schedule. Here are some tips to get the most from your naptime:

- Try to sleep either 20 to 30 minutes or longer than 90 minutes. Twenty to thirty minutes is enough time for your body to rest before it drops into deep sleep, and 90 minutes is enough time for your body to complete a full sleep cycle.
- Nap somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed.
Avoid alcohol, nicotine, or caffeine before napping.

Studies have shown that sleeping or napping for two to four hours is not particularly effective at improving alertness. If it's not possible for you to get enough sleep in one nightly snoozing session, perhaps you could hit the sack a little earlier and plan on a 90-minute nap during the day, or several 20-minute power naps whenever you have some down-time.

It might also be helpful to think about how you use your waking hours. Perhaps you can do what you need to do more efficiently or even cut back on your commitments to give yourself more time under the covers.

Sleeping well at night is an additional dimension of overall snoozing success. One study suggests that for college students, sleep quality may be more crucial than sleep quantity. Check out the Sleep category in the Go Ask Alice! archives for ideas on how to sleep more soundly.

One last thought to consider is what your sleep needs might be after you complete school. Are you planning a career path that would allow for two four hour sleep cycles? Ultimately, the sleep plan that allows you to feel rested and alert throughout all of the activities you need (and want) to do is the best plan for you. Rest well!

Alice!
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