Rising early? Is it really beneficial? [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a college student who doesn't have to wake up early every day for school (which is convenient because I love sleeping late). Yet people always say that you should wake up early in the morning, and I have always wondered if there's really any truth to it. Before seriously committing myself to waking up early on a regular basis, I'd like to know why I should. Are there really any health benefits to waking up early? I went online and found contradicting claims on the subject. Also, are there any studies that prove that working in the morning increases productivity/creativity/even chances of success?

Thanks in advance,

bed-bound

Answer

Dear bed-bound,

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," but with only ten percent of people falling into that "early to rise" category, it seems there's more to being healthy, wealthy, and wise than just waking up early. Whereas some early birds may boast about their "morningness" and all the benefits that come with it, there's little scientific evidence to show that the time at which you get out of bed really makes a difference when it comes to overall health (or wealth or wiseness for that matter). That's good news for the majority of people who don't qualify as early birds! If you don't have to get up early and feel better waking up a little later, you might consider sticking with that routine.

Even though there are no proven health benefits to waking up early, doing so may be helpful in other ways. Let's take healthy decision-making, for example. You may be more likely to eat breakfast or schedule in time for exercise if you get up earlier. Others may find that waking up early in the morning helps them to be more productive, or gives them time for activities such as reading a book, watching the sunrise, or taking up a hobby. Though our bodies' sleep timing is partly determined by genetics, if you're looking to amp up your AM productivity, here are a few tips you may want to try:

- Take your time adjusting by waking up progressively earlier (15 to 30 minutes every few days). Though circadian rhythms (biological, physiological, and behavioral processes which help our body determine when to sleep and when to wake) may be difficult to
change, you could try light therapy (our bodies naturally respond to light by becoming more alert), melatonin, and/or vitamin B12. Though it won't be a quick fix, sticking to this regimen may help make those early mornings a little less painful for the night owls out there. A health care provider may be able to give you additional tips on how to shift your sleep tendencies.

- Make sure that you're not sacrificing hours of sleep for those extra morning hours. Getting a full night's rest is crucial for physical and mental functioning. If you're going to dial back your alarm, make sure to hop into bed earlier, too. If you want to fall asleep by midnight, for instance, start getting your mind and body in bedtime mode at eleven.
- Refuse to snooze. Try putting your alarm clock far enough away from your bed so that you have to physically get up to turn it off. Giving up the "just another ten minutes" mentality and beginning your morning as soon as that buzzer goes off will help you be more likely to maintain your early rising regimen.
- Stick to your sleep routine and reward yourself for doing so. If you don't have any obligations until later in the day, find ways to motivate yourself to get up and fill those early morning hours. Consider taking some time to have a nice breakfast or get in some exercise to start your day off with a little more energy and rationalize getting out of bed earlier than work or classes require.

When deciding whether or not to dial back the time on your alarm, ask yourself a few questions. Do you wake up feeling unrested or are you a slave to the snooze button? If your body is telling you to sleep, in most cases the best plan is to listen. If you notice that you are sleeping longer than you're used to or if your sleep habits are the result of feelings of sadness or despair, you may want to consider speaking to a mental health care provider as well. In the end, rising earlier is not proven to make you healthier, wealthier, or wiser, but if it shifts your schedule to allow more time for healthy or productive activities, it's worth a shot. Good luck!

Alice!

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