Dear Alice,

Is there any way that I can reduce the amount of sleep I need voluntarily? Right now, I need a lot of sleep (ten hours or more) and I would like to reduce this so that I can sleep healthily for eight hours a night. Is this possible, given the way that my body works? I have heard that it is, that I can "train" my body to require less sleep. It certainly isn't healthy to sleep fewer than eight hours if my body needs ten, of course. And I'm sure that some people are forced to sleep for six or fewer hours a night for years! Do their bodies just adapt?

Answer

Dear Reader,

If you are sleeping ten or more hours a night there is most likely a good reason ? your body needs that much sleep. On average, people need between seven and eight hours a night, but this varies between individuals, with some people needing six hours or less, and others (like you) needing ten hours or more. You're right that getting less sleep than your body needs may not be healthy. Instead of focusing on training your body to need less sleep, you may want to figure out if there is something else that's causing you to snooze for ten or more hours.

Although sleeping less each night may give you more free time (and we could probably all use a little more of that), some negative consequences may also occur. If you don't sleep as much as your body needs, you can accumulate a sleep debt that can lead to sleepiness and can affect your mood, performance, memory, and motor skills. Trying to "train" your body to get less sleep than it needs just won't work. Although you may get used to living with a different sleep schedule, your mood, judgment, and reaction time may all suffer, and you might feel tired all of the time. You could also compromise your immune system since getting enough sleep assists your body in fighting off infections.

One idea you may want to consider is recharging during the day with a short 20 to 30 minute nap. Research from the National Institutes of Health suggests that a short nap may actually help you better focus on tasks. Some people can even fall into a rhythm of waking themselves up from naps and in the morning without an alarm clock (not something to start during finals week).

If you're catching a lot of zzzs at night and still feeling tired or drowsy during the day, you could be experiencing hypersomnia or another health issue. Hypersomnia is characterized by sleeping long periods at night and/or needing to nap multiple times per day. People with
hypersomnia may also have trouble concentrating. This can be caused by many different things including sleep disorders, excessive use of caffeine, medications, or drug or alcohol abuse. Sleeping a lot may also be linked to depression.

If you are having daytime sleepiness or trouble concentrating, or you are concerned about the amount of sleep your body needs, you may want to consider seeing a health care provider.

Keep in mind that your body will let you know if you're getting enough sleep and when it's ready to wake up. You just need to listen.

Sweet dreams,

Alice!

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