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Nap Time

Though the Practice Is Fading in Some Places, Experts Find Benefits In Midday Slumber. And a Few Firms Are Even Open to Shut-Eye.

By Dennis Drabelle
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I never used to be a napper. In fact, daytime slumber was virtually beyond a congenitally wired type like me. My buddies would catch 40 winks on the long bus ride home from our high school, but for me that was out of the question. With age, however, my metabolism has changed. After the double whammy of a late-morning run and lunch, I'm pretty much a goner. I lie down and nod off in much the same way that Marlene Dietrich fell in love in that old song of hers: because I can't help it.

While it lasted, though, my nap resistance put me in sync with the American way of sleep: Do it all at once and strictly at night. Traditionally, we've begrudged ourselves naps. They may be forced on toddlers, recommended for pregnant women and tolerated among senior citizens with nothing better to do, but they've been frowned upon for worker bees in their prime. Recently, however, sleep scientists have discovered advantages to napping, which they view not just as solace but also as something akin to brain food. No longer written off as a cop-out for the weak and the bored, the nap is coming into its own as an element of a healthy life.

When you take a look at American history, we might seem to be a nap-friendly people. After all, some of our most productive figures napped shamelessly during the day, among them [Benjamin Franklin](#) and [Thomas Edison](#). But they probably did so because, like Dietrich, they couldn't help it. Consider the daily schedule Franklin drew up for "The Art of Virtue," a treatise he worked on for 50 years but never finished: Over a 24-hour period, sleep gets allotted a mere five hours. Or take the contemptuous words of Edison: "Sleep is an acquired habit. Cells don't sleep. Fish swim in the water all night. Even a horse doesn't sleep. A man doesn't need any sleep."

If Franklin and Edison followed their own rules for success, their naps were compensatory: They conked out during the day to make up for the sleep they'd skimmed on the night before. For these Type A personalities, napping may have been a badge of honor, proof that they disdained sleep as a nuisance to be beggared and cheated. (By the way, Edison may have known a lot about filaments and wires, but he was dead wrong about fish and horses.)

Napping was more valued on the other side of the Atlantic, where the habit's foremost champion was probably [Winston Churchill](#). In "The Gathering Storm," the first volume of his World War II memoirs, the British statesman wrote, "Nature had not intended mankind to work from 8 in the morning until midnight without the refreshment of blessed oblivion which, even if it only lasts 20 minutes, is sufficient to renew all the vital forces."

In southern Europe, naps were woven into the fabric of life. Offices and stores would shut down for two or three hours so that employees could go home, lunch with their family and doze through the hottest part of the

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day. But Spain, where the siesta is deeply ingrained, has been adjusting to changed circumstances. Especially in big cities, most Spanish workers don't head home at midday anymore (they live too far from the office for this to be practical) or use the time out for sleeping, and the siesta has become a pointless interruption that prolongs the workday until as late as 7:30 p.m. In 2005, the Spanish government canceled the siesta for its employees, although it offered them flex time for easing into the new regimen.

Elsewhere, the nap is winning friends and invigorating people. Some new studies make dramatic claims for it. Taken in the workplace, naps can increase productivity and reduce "general crabbiness," according to a just-concluded 25-year survey of the practice in industrial countries. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Haifa in Israel showed daytime nappers doing better at retaining a newly mastered skill -- bringing a thumb and forefinger together in a certain sequence -- than a control group whose members slept only at night.

Experiments conducted by Matthew A. Tucker of [Harvard Medical School](#) suggest that a 45-minute nap can enhance the ability to perform tasks relying upon memory. And Dimitrios Trichopoulos, also at [Harvard](#), has found that among a sample of 23,000 adult Greeks, habitual nappers were 30 percent less likely to die of heart disease.

There is even anecdotal evidence that napping can enhance creativity, including a charming confession made by Salvador Dali. To prime the pump for his surrealist paintings (the melting watch, the human leg with a built-in chest of drawers, etc.), the Catalan-born artist used to take -- and abort -- a nap after lunch. He would sit down with his arms extending beyond the chair's arms. In one hand he would grasp a key between thumb and forefinger. After he fell asleep, his fingers would relax, the key would fall to the floor, the clatter would wake him up, and he would harvest the wild associations common to the first few minutes of sleep.

The recent experiments, along with a relaxation of the old 9-to-5 rigidity, have awakened employers to the benefits of on-the-job sleep. A growing number of companies either make nap rooms available to their employees or encourage them to put their heads down on their desks. High-tech firms with a youthful workforce tend to be cooler with on-the-job snoozing than old-line companies staffed mainly by veterans -- a contrast that shows up here at The Post. The paper's headquarters in downtown Washington lacks a room dedicated to naps, whereas the company's Internet operation in Arlington has a small one set aside for that purpose.

According to information collected by the [National Sleep Foundation](#), [Toyota](#) encourages naps at its Tokyo headquarters, where they are easy to take thanks to an energy-conservation policy: During lunch hour, the company turns off its lights. In New York, those who can't find the peace and quiet they need to nap at work (or at home, for that matter) can patronize Yelo, a Manhattan sleep salon at which clients bed down for 20 to 40 minutes at a time. Yelo's slogan: "The city that never sleeps needs a nap!"

All this should please Sara Mednick, perhaps napping's most ardent advocate among American scientists: She's so sold on the practice that she calls a napless existence "the madness of monophasic sleep."

Mednick brings to her discipline not only impressive credentials (she is a professor in the psychiatry department at the [University of California at San Diego](#)), but also a popular touch: The cover of her book "Take a Nap! Change Your Life" incorporates a wheel with a dial for fine-tuning your nap schedule. You can also go to Mednick's Web site at <http://www.takeanap.info>, fill out a brief questionnaire, e-mail in the answers, and in a jiffy your personal nap-need index will land in your mailbox. My score fell in the "mild sleepiness" range, wherein "a nap will not only create a second day but will clear away any daytime sleepiness that will prevent optimal performance." (Churchill knew all about the nap's role as a multiplier of time: "You get two days in one," he declared. "Well, at least one and a half.")

Mednick was in Washington last month to give a talk at the Role of Sleep in Memory and Learning Conference, a co-production of the National Sleep Foundation and the Atlanta School of Medicine. She used slides and cited studies, but above all she projected enthusiasm for her favorite practice. "A perfect nap in the middle of the day," she declared, "is like a mini-night."

But hold on there, Sir Winston and Dr. Sara! Napping may be advisable for most people -- and superior, as many scientists assert, to keeping oneself artificially alert by gulping down coffee, tea, colas, chocolate and other caffeine-laced substances (a case, if ever there was one, of fighting the symptoms without addressing the underlying need). But a tricky question remains: How long should the interlude be? With naps, as with so much else in life, can you have too much of a good thing?

As an insomniac, I take a keen interest in these questions: I've found that if I nap longer than half an hour, or nod off later than about 2 p.m., I'm likely to have trouble falling asleep that night. My concerns were met on the day following Mednick's ode to the nap, when another expert at the conference, Eric Nofzinger of Harvard, drew a distinction between blissful sleepers and tossers like me: "The more you keep insomnia patients awake during the day, the more consolidated sleep they'll get at night."

When I reached Mednick by e-mail, she didn't quarrel with Nofzinger's caveat or my own qualms. "I do believe that people with severe sleep problems should be kept on a strict sleep diet," she wrote back. "What I think would be more helpful than telling [them] not to nap is getting people on a prescribed sleep regimen that incorporates naps. But only short and restricted naps."

Fair enough. Severely troubled sleepers should consult a physician about fixing their slumber, perhaps with naps of suitable length folded in. Those with less dire problems, among whom I number myself, can use trial-and-error to determine what napping coordinates work best for them. As for the lucky rest of you, you're free -- and encouraged -- to nap for as long as 90 minutes per day. (Beyond that, almost everyone runs the risk of encroaching on nighttime sleep.) The point is to inform ourselves about a practice that has all too often been sniffed at, done on the sly and snatched haphazardly.

In a country where fewer than half of us say we regularly get a good night's sleep, naps are increasingly important restoratives, and we owe it to ourselves to take them right.

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