

# The Simplest Way to Drastically Improve Your Life: More Sleep

Sleep deprivation is the invisible ceiling to how good life can be.



Credit...Ko Sasaki for The New York Times



By Tim Herrera

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Imagine this: Someone walks up to you and pitches you on a brand-new, magical pill.

This pill can measurably improve your memory, overall cognitive performance, ability to learn new information, receptivity to facial cues, mood, ability to handle problems, metabolism, risk for heart disease and immune system.

Would you buy it?

Yeah, yeah, you saw this coming: That pill exists, but not in pill form. You can have all of those benefits cost-free, and all it takes is going to bed a little bit earlier. That's it.

And yet! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have called sleep deprivation a public health crisis, saying that one-third of adults don't get enough sleep. Some 80 percent of people report sleep problems at least once per week, and according to a 2016 study, sleep deprivation "causes more than \$400 billion in economic losses annually in the United States and results in 1.23 million lost days of work each year."

If that's not enough, here is a non-comprehensive list of the ways your sleep deprivation is personally harming you:

- Your overall cognitive performance — particularly your visual attention and ability to form memories — deteriorates. (More colloquially, this is that "brain fog" we all experience after a late night.)
- Your ability to learn new information is impaired, both by sleep deprivation *before* you learn new information and *afterward*.
- You're less likely to correctly read facial expressions, even interpreting some expressions — even neutral ones — as threatening.
- You're likely to be more cranky and react worse when presented with obstacles.
- Beyond your severely impaired mental abilities, your body is affected, too: A lack of adequate sleep can contribute to weight gain, puts you at a higher risk of diabetes and heart disease, and makes you far less resistant to the common cold.

That is insane! All of this from just not getting enough sleep!

So what are we to do? We've got you covered with The Times's guide to getting a better night's sleep.

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First, **learn how much sleep you need**. Generally, if you're waking up tired, you're not getting enough.

However, the gold standard of eight hours per night might not be right for you. A study from 2015 brought into question whether we need that magical number, so following your body is the best way to figure out the right rhythm. The only real guideline is to get as much sleep as you need to feel refreshed and energized the next day, and then do that every single night. Keeping a sleep diary — like this one — can help you figure this out.

Next, **figure out your body's natural rhythm**. Maybe after years of trying, you need to acknowledge that you're *just not a morning person*. And that's perfectly fine! Take this quiz to find out what kind of sleeper you are, and don't fight your body's natural sleep tendencies.

Last, **keep a consistent sleep schedule**. This can be the most important part of your overall sleep hygiene. We're all equipped with a circadian clock, which is that internal 24-hour timer that naturally tells us when to sleep, and the best way to getting rest and feeling rested is to keep this consistent. Fall asleep and wake up at the same time every day (including weekends), and try to build as much regularity into your schedule as possible, including meal times, exercise routines, screen time (and when to shut off the screens) and morning sunlight time. And don't forget to keep your bedroom cool.

What helps you get the right amount of Z's and stay well-rested? Tweet me your tips at @timherrera.