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Sleep much? Early birds and night owls

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By PAULA GANZI LICATA. Special to Newsday



Photo credit: Heather Walsh | Hours before the sun rises, Estelle Ferry can be found working on her scrapbook in her East Northport home. (March 19, 2011)

Estelle Ferry wakes at 4:30 every morning (sans alarm) so she can have time to herself before her kids wake up. "It is the best time of the day," says Ferry, 45, of East Northport. "Everything is quiet, no one needs me for anything, and I can do as I please."

It's a time to bake, read, do paper crafts -- and a wonderful way to start her day, she says. "You go outside any time of the year [in the early hours], and it's just beautiful."

There are those, like Ferry, who wake before the rooster crows and others who'd rather sleep in. Can we change our inner clocks, or are we hard-wired from birth? Apparently, there's not much choice.


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

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director of the Huntington Medical Group Sleep Disorders Center. "The circadian tendency has a genetic component to it and it does run in a family. Typically first signs start at preadolescent years."

By the time we age into the Act 2 generation, we've learned to make peace with our natural clocks. So what are people doing in pre-dawn hours or way-late at night if they're not sleeping? Many check emails and Facebook -- social networking on the Internet isn't restricted by the time of day (or night).

"I kick into high gear around 11 a.m. and, except for a late-afternoon lull, my energy keeps increasing throughout the evening," says Robin Bernstein, 51, of Melville, who stays up late catching up on emails, work, reading the newspaper or a book. "Anything I get done after 10 p.m. counts toward the next day, giving me a good six-hour head start on the early birds!"

That's one way of looking at it, but overall, early risers feel they get more out of their day because they have more hours of light.

Of course, not everyone is comfortable with their circadian rhythm. "I Hate the Birds," was an idea for a club John Bell of Locust Valley had for late-nighters who dread early morning chirping, knowing that sunrise would soon follow.

"It meant we had pulled an all-nighter and the next day was wasted," says Bell of his younger days. In his heart, he's a night owl, but his natural clock is set for sunrise. "I go to sleep anytime from 10 until very late if I am out catching music. My problem is I wake at 5 a.m. no matter what time I go to bed," says Bell, now 47. "I was never a great sleeper . . . and then my kids came along . . . Now I'm going through a divorce . . . forget about sleep."

Jeff Morosoff, 51, of Great Neck, is the sleep equivalent of ambidextrous; he wakes before the alarm and goes to bed after midnight. "I've always been an early riser and have liked to stay up late," says Morosoff. Since being diagnosed with sleep apnea, a condition in which someone stops breathing periodically while sleeping, he's enjoying the best of both worlds.

"I never seemed to get enough sleep when in reality I wasn't getting any good sleep," Morosoff says. In 1998, he began using a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, and he now gets the six hours of sleep his body needs. "When the weather is good, I love walking outdoors as the birds are waking up and having the extra time to get ready for my day at a very relaxed pace," he says. In the evenings he catches up on emails and watches television, among other things.

Besides health issues, other factors can impact sleep schedules, such as the seasons and age. Children tend to wake early, while teenagers and young adults often struggle to get out of bed in the morning. Some women interviewed noted that, once they had babies, they became early birds -- like it or not.

What happens when an early riser marries a night owl? It's not easy adapting. "We are exact opposites and it's amazing our marriage has withstood this," noted Wendy Heppt, 53, of Port Washington, a morning person whose husband is not. "He wakes up and can't function before having coffee, and when he comes downstairs, I start talking. He says I talk about things he needs to use his brain for, and he's not ready . . . We don't like each other in the morning."

Carol Goldberg, a Long Island-based psychologist, says that's not uncommon and suggests couples maximize the differences. "Couples need shared time as well as their own time zones."

Goldberg says there are misconceptions about each group on either side of the sleep equation. "There's a social prejudice that the early bird is someone who is more productive and the night owl is lazy because he's in bed past 5 a.m.," says Goldberg, a night owl, "I would like to overcome that stereotype."

Elaine Duvall, 54, a true late-nighter, offers some unscientific observances about each group. "Night owls, in my opinion, are usually more creative and a little more on the darker or edgier side of life," she says. "Early birds are usually very efficient, go-getters . . . and seem a little more rigid." Duvall gets to bed between midnight and 3:30 a.m. "I go to see live music. Or read," she says. She's also been known to exercise during unorthodox hours when she can't sleep. "I would get up and go bike riding," says Duvall. "I live in Sea Cliff, and it's very pretty. Sometimes I would go on the swings at one of the parks."

Moonlight becomes her. "I was like this as a child," says Duvall. "I used to crawl out onto the small roof of the porch with my pillow and lay down and be in my glory looking at the stars and just feeling like I was awake when everyone else was asleep. It felt like a magical time for me."

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