

NEXT
TRIBE
 AGE BOLDLY



KEEP LIFE ROLLING

SHOP NOW

available at 



AUGUST 22, 2021

BY ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN · HEALTH

You Think Insomnia is Bad? Consider the Flip Side

Robin Bernstein has the opposite problem of her friends who doom-scroll at 3 a.m. She can't stay awake during the day—once even falling asleep standing up.



Insomnia is no picnic, or so I've heard. I wouldn't know, considering I'm a middle-aged woman who sleeps



Insomnia is no picnic, or so I’ve heard. I wouldn’t know, considering I’m a middle-aged woman who sleeps through the night like an infant drunk on warm milk. But my bleary-eyed friends, doom-scrolling at 3 AM, shouldn’t be envious. Because my ability to nod off at night has a not-so-pleasant flip side.

Like a tuckered-out toddler, I conk out by day, too—often unexpectedly. Think Rip Van Winkle, but instead of one 20-year nap, I do a bunch of short ones, usually at inopportune times. I blame the laws of physics. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, so if millions of people can’t sleep, apparently it’s my job to do it for them, whether I want to or not.

We’ve all dozed off watching a movie or reading. But like a case of the hiccups, my daytime shut eye can be unplanned and annoying. One minute I’m reading something on my MacBook, the next I’m waking up, hands still on the keyboard, from a nap I can’t remember taking. It can last mere seconds. The technical term is “microsleep” and *it tends to strike the sleep deprived*. It happens when parts of the brain essentially go offline for a few seconds while you’re awake, forcing you to drop into a light stage 1 or stage 2 sleep. I joke that maybe I have narcolepsy. Then again, I’m a card-carrying night owl who never fully adapted to an early bird world. Maybe I’d nap less if I went to bed earlier.

“
If millions of people can’t sleep, apparently it’s my job to do it for them, whether I want to or not.”

Fortunately, though, I’m usually aware that naptime is nigh. I can feel the fatigue rolling in like fog. If I’m with other people in a situation that I can’t easily exit, my drooping eyelids and growing lack of focus are accompanied by a mounting sense of dread and embarrassment.

Read More: Can’t Sleep ... Like, Ever? Read How One Insomniac Tried Every Solution

How Sleepy Am I?

Out of curiosity, I took the *Epworth Sleepiness Scale*, a quiz that ranks how likely you’ll fall asleep doing things like reading, watching TV, traveling and, yes, even talking to someone. A score of 0 to 10 is



Out of curiosity, I took the *Epworth Sleepiness Scale*, a quiz that ranks how likely you'll fall asleep doing things like reading, watching TV, traveling and, yes, even talking to someone. A score of 0 to 10 is considered normal, while 18 or higher means you'll probably drift off before you finish reading this sentence. I got 17.

Over the years this has meant an occasionally embarrassing and generally losing bid to stay awake. Traveling by bus or train is a one-way ticket to dreamland. I try to read but barely get through two paragraphs—three if they're short—before dozing off, head back, jaw slack. Now with mask requirements on public transit, at least nobody has a birds-eye view of my tonsils.

Although many moons ago I did attract the sympathy of an acquaintance who became a beau. “I just wanted to reach over,” he confessed, once we were dating, “and gently close your mouth.”

One time I managed to fall asleep standing up, like a horse. I was on a packed E train. Eventually gravity took over and my head tipped forward until it smacked into the subway pole I was holding. I jolted upright and heard my fellow pole-grippers chuckling. Mortified, I kept my eyes shut, pretending not even slamming my skull into hard metal could awaken me.

It happens on vacation, too. Two English friends once took me on a lovely tour of Yorkshire via motor coach. But sight-seeing, by definition, requires that one's eyes remain open. I tried to stay awake. Oh, how I tried! I chewed gum. I popped mints. I raised and lowered my eyebrows like an overly dramatic silent film star. Nothing worked. Luckily, they gave me the window seat, so I pressed my face against the cool glass and drifted off, hoping they'd think I was gazing intently at the passing scenery.

The Sleep Gene

The urge to snooze runs in my family, passed down through some overactive patrilineal sleep gene. My mom loved to tell us about the first time she met my dad's family, at a picnic. “After lunch, they all lay down on their blankets and took a nap,” she said. “So, I just sat there till they woke up.”

“

One time I managed to fall asleep standing up, like a horse.



My father didn't have to deal with social media, however, which has created new minefields. I've accidentally unfriended people by dozing off with my thumb on my iPhone screen. I've also awakened, horrified, to pop-up boxes asking to confirm that my friend's cute puppy photo is "offensive content."



I fessed up to my literally unconscious faux pas.

Accidental friending is worse. Years ago, before a first phone call with a guy I'd met online, I scrolled his Facebook page. Bad move. Because a few minutes later, I awoke to find that he had accepted my friend request.

"Nooo!" I wailed, realizing I'd friended him while catnapping-with-hand-on-mouse. Frantic, I Googled "how to turn back time."

At least he had a sense of humor about it. "That was you?" he said, amused, after I fessed up to my (literally) unconscious *faux pas*. "I thought it was someone from high school I didn't recognize."

The Queen of Naps

Maybe I'll move to Spain; I'm down for daily siestas. In any event, I'm in good company: *Winston Churchill, Salvador Dali and Albert Einstein* are among the many luminaries who have extolled the virtues of nap-time. The latter two even recommended taking a micro-nap, which is sort of a pre-planned microsleep. My dad, who enjoyed his legendary naps throughout his life, would appreciate that I'll intentionally grab forty winks in my oversized blue armchair in the late afternoon, setting my phone timer for 20 minutes.

I suppose that despite the red-faced awkwardness of it all, it's not so terrible to be the Queen of Naps. I always wake up refreshed. If that's the price for staying up too late at night, I guess it's one I've been willing to pay. But if I ever start drifting off face-first into my soup, I'm pretty sure I'd start going to bed a lot earlier. Fortunately, the soup-snooze isn't part of my nap repertoire.

At least not yet.



The Queen of Naps

Maybe I'll move to Spain; I'm down for daily siestas. In any event, I'm in good company: *Winston Churchill, Salvador Dali and Albert Einstein* are among the many luminaries who have extolled the virtues of nap-time. The latter two even recommended taking a micro-nap, which is sort of a pre-planned microsleep. My dad, who enjoyed his legendary naps throughout his life, would appreciate that I'll intentionally grab forty winks in my oversized blue armchair in the late afternoon, setting my phone timer for 20 minutes.

I suppose that despite the red-faced awkwardness of it all, it's not so terrible to be the Queen of Naps. I always wake up refreshed. If that's the price for staying up too late at night, I guess it's one I've been willing to pay. But if I ever start drifting off face-first into my soup, I'm pretty sure I'd start going to bed a lot earlier. Fortunately, the soup-snooze isn't part of my nap repertoire.

At least not yet.

Read More: Confessions of a Snorer: How I Stopped Sawing Logs Every Night

Robin Eileen Bernstein is an award-winning writer whose essays, humor pieces and feature stories appear in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Salon, The Daily News, Newsday, Ozy, Weekly Humorist, Narratively, Next Avenue, The Manifest-Station, Purple Clover, and elsewhere. She spent much of her career speechwriting and ghostwriting for universities and corporations. You also might find her behind an easel drawing nudes, her decades-long hobby. Her nostalgic memoir-in-progress will take readers back to 1970s Rockaway, New York when she was an ordinary teenage girl with an unlikely dream: to be a drummer in a rock-n-roll band. She lives in New York City. More at robineileenbernstein.com.