

FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF LIFE

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SLEEP IS A BEAUTIFUL THING. THERE ARE FEW BETTER PLACES TO BE THAN IN THE COMPANY OF A THICK DOONA AND A LARGE 'SNOOZE' BUTTON ON A COLD WINTER MORNING.

But it takes up a lot of time. The average person will spend 28 years of their life sleeping. So why do we keep going back to bed?

CATCHING Z'S

Sleep is one of those frontiers of science – one of the things we kind of understand, but don't really. It's the research equivalent of being on the tip of your tongue. We know where we're going, but we don't know exactly how to get there.

It's the kind of speculation that leads to gross misunderstanding. That's why an episode of *House* can send insomniacs America-wide into a panic, suggesting that ten days of sleeplessness can suddenly kill you. In the days after the episode's airing there were more than a few worried phone calls to general practitioners.

Sleep is a big part of human life. 8 hours of our 24 we down tools and settle in for some rest. A full third of your day gone, just like that.

TIME EXTENSION

So people devise different ways of avoiding sleep. Of course there's you and your 3 litres of coffee the night before deadline, but there's also a group of people who are dedicated to squeezing the need to sleep out of their lives; people who are no friend to the doona and give no quarter to the pillow.

It's called polyphasic sleeping, and the basic idea behind it is this: sleeping more times per day means shorter sleeps, leading to increased productivity. In theory, it works, because sleep happens in phases.

Polyphasic sleep theory suggests that all of those phases except REM - in which the brain is most active - are effectively useless. If you can force your body into going straight to the useful part then you can spend significantly less time sleeping. Thus the 'Uberman' polyphasic sleeping schedule was created. It takes the form of six 20 minute naps separated by waking periods of 2 hours 40 minutes, and if everything works out that's only two hours of sleep per day. You've suddenly got another six hours in your day to do stuff with.

Remember those 28 years of your life spent sleeping? Well here's the kicker: if you can cut down to even just three hours of sleep a day at age 20, and keep it up throughout your life, you've got an extra 11 years on your average Western lifespan. 11 whole years that you would otherwise just sleep away. You could watch all of the *Lord of the Rings* extended cuts just over 8,500 times with those years (if you never ate, drank, used the bathroom or decided to function as a human being in that time). 11 years really is a lot of time.

"It's not the amount of extra waking hours, but the mental clarity I get after a sleep," my cousin Mark says, avidly scrawling down notes about the Russian neo-classical movement, even as we speak. He's a musical theatre student, and between learning three instruments, acting,

singing and for god-knows-what-reason pursuing professional basketball, he doesn't have much time to spare.

He's pretty much the poster boy for the benefits of polyphasic sleeping. An insatiable ambition to learn, but not enough hours in the day to do it. The large online communities forming around polyphasic sleep are similarly ambitious, being a collection of people from younger industries that are happy to let someone swap their lunch break for a couple of 20 minute naps. Especially if it leads to increased productivity. It seems like a win for everyone.

"THERE'S ABOUT AN HOUR THERE WHERE I CAN JUST REFLECT WITH ABSOLUTELY NO OTHER THOUGHT, NO DISTRACTION. THE AMOUNT I'VE LEARNT IN THOSE HOURS IS WORTH IT ALONE." Despite what he says, it appears as if he speaks through tired eyes. "It's much better than it was before," he retorts to my gesture of concern. "When I started I had to keep moving to stay awake, and at least it helps me eat better."

He's referring to an odd restriction of the polyphasic community. Apparently if you want to stay awake 22 hours of the day, you have to be incredibly conscious of your diet. Lots of slow-burn energy. No sugar, no caffeine-and depending on who you're asking-no artificial preservatives. One single misstep and you'll be inexplicably exhausted. Similarly, missing your scheduled sleep time will land you deep in the end of sleep hallucinatory deprivation. Not exactly a place you'd ever want to be.

That part doesn't make sense to me. If you could so easily adjust your body clock, why does it so violently retort when you don't keep schedule? I need at least four hours of sleep before I consider it a 'bad night,' but with polyphasic sleep it's more like 15 minutes.

CRACKS IN THE VENEER

See, the problem is few of the proponents of polyphasic sleep are academically trained in neuroscience, or even human biology. Dr Piotr Wozniak is, and he thinks people need to get a hold of themselves for a minute.

"The claim that humans can adapt to any sleeping pattern is false," the doctor writes. "Many shift workers never adapt to shifts in sleep patterns."

He goes on to explain that fatigue will follow whenever you distort the standard human sleeping pattern (which he does admit is biphasic), and his warnings against extended non-standard sleep are dire.

"This propels an individual on a straight path to a volley of health problems, which include cardiac disorders, suppression of the immune system, diabetes, gastrointestinal disorders, obesity, depression..." and the list just keeps going. That's not even considering the enormous risk of driving while fatigued or the social problems that arise from being constantly moody.

But it's easy to scare people by telling them everything wrong with them comes from a lack of sleep. What actually convinces me of Dr Wozniak's warnings is experience.

My cousin, as dedicated to his crazy sleeping schedule as he is, will happily admit that when trying to adjust to the pattern his immune system decided to stop existing. He would get incredibly sick, making him even more tired, and only stayed conscious through the use of very loud music and even more obnoxious alarms.

And it's not like it was just that first time either. The process of adjusting took weeks, and skipping a nap would see him drained for days to come. It wasn't exactly life-threatening, but being debilitating sick and having to take midday naps didn't make social life easy.

Dr Wozniak also sees the diet and napping arguments as a socially reinforced false justification. He believes the community is so obsessed with the benefits of polyphasic sleeping, that they don't see the fatigue for what it is - fatigue from not sleeping. It's not hard to see his point when you read the comments he cites; "Man, I'm struggling so badly today... I really pissed my body off. Must have been the popcorn because I can't think of another reason for this."

The internet is great at recycling information, whether it's well researched or not. So while science indicates you might be better off sleeping normally, that's not the message anyone's hearing.

But I don't want to leave you on a sour note.

THE ONLY EXCEPTION

Dustin Curtis is a prolific writer, but has a very peculiar condition known as non-24-hour sleep-wake syndrome. Essentially his body clock is attuned to the 28 hour day. A day that, unfortunately for Dustin, doesn't exist on the planet Earth, resulting in an entire childhood's worth of tiredness.

For Dustin, sleep is an obstacle that has to be overcome, so he's decided he should break it down. Before, his physiology (which preferred to sleep at night) was fighting his brain (which would be active for 22 hours before deciding to start its six hours of sleep time), but the use of polyphasic sleep brought him some semblance of balance.

It's a difficult thing for most people - taking 20 minute naps in the middle of the day - but for a person whose body ignores the very position of the sun, it solves a whole load of problems. So don't get me wrong, polyphasic sleep is a useful discovery.

So here's the thing. If you're a student who wants nothing more than to cram more knowledge into your head, polyphasic sleeping

will give you more time in your day - there's no question about that. You'll learn a lot with all those extra hours, if you're willing to put in the reading. My cousin still does. He's always tired and eats like Jenny Craig herself is personally watching over him, but he's also one of the brightest people I know.

In Australia we go to great lengths to secure a certain quality of life. We offer public holidays at the drop of a hat, and think working weekends is kind of despicable. It's a country that will let you slow down if you want to, you don't have to always run at top gear. So after my research, I'm at a loss as to why you might want to.

POLYPHASIC SLEEPING WILL KEEP YOU AWAKE 22 HOURS A DAY. IT CAN BE DONE. YOU CAN GO FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF LIFE, AND OUTRUN EVERYONE ELSE. BUT YOU MIGHT JUST END UP AWAKE AT NIGHT, TIRED, ALONE AND WONDERING HOW A BUCKET OF POPCORN MADE YOU SLEEP FOR 14 HOURS STRAIGHT.