Can't wake up; am I just lazy? a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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Question: I am 21 and a college student. Since entering college I've had BIG issues waking up in the morning. I hit the snooze repeatedly. Eventually I turn off my alarm thinking I'm was ready to get up. The next thing I know, I've missed two classes. Sometimes I turn off my alarm, but have no memory of it. I tried putting my alarm across the room -- I get up, walk across the room, hit snooze and go back to bed, often times simply turning the alarm off and not even knowing it. Last week when I woke up, I literally couldn`t imagine getting out of bed, like my body was rebelling or something. This happens more often lately, even though I get 6-7 hours of sleep each night. All my peers can get whatever amount of sleep they want and can still get up in the morning. Because of this, I run late for too many classes and work.

Could this be a mild sleep disorder, or am I just profoundly lazy? Thanks

Answer: Let me assure you that laziness does not explain what you have. The problem, as you describe it very well, is called "sleep inertia" or "sleep drunkenness". It represents a period of impaired performance following awakening from sleep. This impairment may be severe, and may last minutes to hours.

During this period the person may forget most of what went on. Having conversations and appearing awake to others can occur during these episodes. The person also may perform a few mechanical activities, like turning an alarm off, fixing a snack, or answering the phone without...
remembering any of it, even after being fully awake. This is similar to sleep walking except that during sleep inertia episodes, the person appears mostly awake by brain wave assessment, while during sleep walking, the person is actually asleep.

**Causes of sleep inertia**

The main causes of sleep inertia include insufficient sleep and disturbed sleep. Some people are more sensitive to limitations of sleep quantity and to poor sleep quality than others; and these individuals are more likely to have sleep inertia. Insufficient sleep is a very common problem in our current 24/7 society. While sleep duration needs are different between individuals (range from 5 to 9 hours), most people function well on 7 hours of sleep per night.

**Keep track of your sleep**

You can discover your sleep need by keeping a 7 day sleep log similar to the one attached below, which I borrowed from the National Sleep Foundation website. For the log to work, you have to fill it out when you have no scheduled commitments and when you don't need to wake up at a particular time during the day (say on a long holiday or vacation). If you find you are getting less sleep on work/school days than what you need, then the answer is easy: Get more sleep!

**Quantity vs. quality**

Even when quantity of sleep is appropriate, the quality may be sub-optimal, and this may precipitate sleep inertia. Sleep can be disturbed by a number of things. Sleep apnea, restless legs, and poor sleep hygiene are the most common causes for disturbed sleep. Narcolepsy and idiopathic hypersomnia are less common. If suspected, the evaluation and management of these sleep disorders is best discussed with your primary care provider, but may need the help of a specialist in sleep disorders.

I understand your concern about the impact of sleep inertia on your potential job opportunities. Therefore, if you'd like additional information regarding sleep and sleep disorders, you can obtain it on the website of the [American Academy of Sleep Medicine](http://www.cleveland.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2010/03/cant_wake_up_am_i_just_lazy_a.html). This website also contains a list of [Sleep Centers](http://www.cleveland.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2010/03/cant_wake_up_am_i_just_lazy_a.html) across the country so you can locate one near you if need it. Good luck, and sleep well.

**Related Resources:**

**Sleep Diary**