

The Art of Being a Morning Person (Even if You're Actually Not One)

Night owls may never truly love the early hours. But there are simple ways to make them feel a little less painful.



By Catherine Pearson

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My older child has always been an early riser. He rarely snoozes past 6 a.m.; 6:30 is a miracle. He bounces out of bed as my husband and I clench our coffees, greeting his enthusiasm for the day with a lot of halfhearted grunting.

As a night owl, I often marvel at how I created this morning lark, especially because sleep experts say our respective sleep patterns are at least partly hard-wired — though not immutable.

“Everybody’s ‘clock’ is set a little differently,” said Leisha Cuddihy, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester’s Comprehensive Sleep Center. “You may never wake up totally ready to go and wanting to do stuff,” she added, noting that she herself is not much of a morning person.

Still, if people like us want to feel more alive upon waking — a reasonable goal, given work and school start times — it’s not hopeless, Dr. Cuddihy said. I asked her and other experts in sleep medicine and habit change to share strategies that can help mornings feel more tolerable, and even productive.

Lock in your wake time.

When people try to shift their sleep schedules, many focus on going to bed earlier, but that isn’t the most effective strategy, said Dr. Rafael Pelayo, a clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences in sleep medicine at Stanford Medicine and the author of the book “How to Sleep.” Instead, he believes the trick is to set a consistent wake time, and stick to it every day.

“It’s biologically easier to force yourself to wake up than it is to force yourself to fall asleep,” Dr. Pelayo said. “You can tell me what time you went to bed last night, but you can’t tell me what time you fell asleep.”

It tends to take about a week for your body to adjust for every hour you move your wake time up, Dr. Pelayo added, but it may take six or more weeks to fully acclimate.

Acknowledge your nature.

Even if you are a naturally early riser, you may not wake up ready to start the day — or even in a particularly good mood. The clinical term for the grogginess and grouchiness many of us experience after waking up is “sleep inertia.” It tends to last 30 to 60 minutes, though the length and intensity depend on the person and circumstances.

“A lot of people, no matter what time they wake up, just need a minute,” Dr. Cuddihy said. “I don’t like talking to people within 30 minutes of waking up.”

Simply acknowledging that reality can help bring a feeling of peace and acceptance to the morning, she said. Find ways to protect that quiet time: Maybe sit in bed and take a few deep breaths. Couple it with a strategy known to increase wakefulness, such as soaking up some sunlight (or bright artificial light) or moving your body, Dr. Cuddihy said.

Reward yourself — immediately.

People tend to change habits when doing so feels relatively easy and rewarding, said Wendy Wood, a professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California and the author of “Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick.”

So if your goal is to wake up earlier — or to mitigate early morning grouchiness — it is essential to build in immediate rewards, Dr. Wood said. Consider what would feel good in the moments after you wake up. Maybe it’s a delicious breakfast, she said, or cranking up some music that you love.

Be patient with yourself. “Habits are very persistent, and you shouldn’t expect them to change immediately,” Dr. Wood said. “If you set in place ways to reduce friction, and ways to increase rewards, you’re more likely to be able to change.”

Turn mundane routines into meaningful rituals.

“When you shift something from a routine into a ritual, it makes it more special,” said Cassie Mogilner Holmes, a marketing professor at the Anderson School of Management at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the author of “Happier Hour: How to Beat Distraction, Expand Your Time and Focus on What Matters Most.”

Focus on something you already do every day, like having your morning cup of coffee. Instead of moving through the process without giving it much thought, label it your “coffee ritual,” Dr. Holmes said. Try to notice, with wonder, what it feels like to go through each step, like using a special mug or enjoying a particularly delicious brew.

“All of a sudden, it puts you in a different frame of mind,” Dr. Holmes said. “One of the reasons mornings can feel so stressful is because time is sort of taken from us, and we lose that sense of agency.”

I have no illusions that I can somehow outsmart my genes (and I’m wary of our cultural fixation with highly choreographed morning routines). But if finding the extraordinary in a cup of coffee is enough to help me wake up singing with my morning lark, I’m willing to give it a try.

Catherine Pearson is a reporter for the Well section of The Times, covering families and relationships. More about Catherine Pearson