



Australia, IT'S TIME TO NAP

The Spanish are on to something with their daytime siestas. It turns out a quick daily snooze could be the key to a sharper, happier brain, discovers Penny Carroll



"It gives me a healthy glow every day!"

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Grappling with a busy day? Coffee might be your go-to energiser, but, pleasingly, experts say what you really need is a siesta.

Daytime naps are credited with boosting alertness, memory, mood and creativity – and you can tap some of these benefits with as little as 10 minutes' pillow time.

Social neuroscientist (and proud power-napper) Dr Fiona Kerr of the University of Adelaide says napping works because humans are wired for a daytime doze. "We're biphasic, so we're actually built for two sleeps a day," she explains. "We have two different cycles that are pulling against each other most of the time: one is the homeostatic curve and the other is the circadian rhythm curve. But between 1pm and 3pm, depending on the person, those cycles are in alignment, and that's when the body and brain is supposed to power down and rest."

We know it as the afternoon slump, but instead of fighting it with sugar and coffee, scientists have discovered significant advantages to surrendering to your sleepiness. Researchers from Hiroshima University in Japan found that a 20-minute mid-afternoon nap improved performance, alertness and confidence, while longer siestas (between 60 and 90 minutes) have been shown to boost memory, complex problem-solving and creativity. If you only have 10 minutes to spare, researchers from Flinders University in Adelaide say that's enough to restore mental sharpness.

Giving your brain a little downtime allows it to catch up on admin, Kerr says. "During the morning, you stack more and more information into your working memory, so by midday you have a full 'inbox'," she explains. "A 10- to 25-minute nap is a very useful thing to do every day because it's basically emptying that inbox. It lifts your mood, you're able to focus because you've made some room, and your motor performance improves."

SLEEPING ON THE JOB

As the research supporting napping stacks up, a growing number of forward-thinking companies are encouraging employees to embrace a daytime kip. Google, The Huffington Post and tech giant Next Jump are among the organisations asking staff



to sleep on the job, offering dedicated nap rooms, sleep pods and napping classes.

"Attitudes to napping are shifting," psychologist Mary Hoang, founder of The Indigo Project, a mindfulness, psychology and yoga studio in Sydney, says. "Companies are realising that their employees' wellbeing is a key component to their businesses' success."

Hoang is helping change the culture around napping in Australia – she holds

"Companies are realising employees' wellbeing is a key component to their businesses' success"

daily naptime classes for the public at her studio, during which participants are guided into a 20- to 30-minute sleep via a relaxation meditation.

But she says you don't need to leave the office to get your shut-eye. "I suggest bringing a yoga mat to work and finding a quiet space or a spare conference room to lie down in," she adds. "Keeping an eye mask and ear plugs handy is also a good

idea as light and noise are the biggest enemies of napping."

If you have your own office, even better, Kerr says: "I shut my door for 15 or 20 minutes and climb under my desk with a pillow. When you get in the habit of napping, you can fall asleep really quickly."

But if your company isn't nap-friendly, or you don't have an office, there are still options. If you drive to work, consider taking a power nap in your car after lunch. Or, you could stretch out in a nearby park, slipping on some sunnies to disguise your snooze. While a horizontal break will help your body fully relax and encourage sleep, Kerr says it's not essential as long as you're comfortable, so in a pinch you could simply curl up in an armchair or rest your head on your desk.

Wherever you nap, make sure you set an alarm – "waking in the 30- to 60-minute window can lead to grogginess, so you have to do either short or long," Kerr says – and aim to get it done before 4pm to avoid disrupting your normal sleep cycle.

Kerr advises running it past your boss before you bust out the eye mask. You could even recruit some colleagues to lobby for a dedicated sleep space in the office. "I think it's really good to talk to

CAN'T CATCH 40 WINKS?

Napping isn't for everyone, but that doesn't mean you have to miss out on a mental reboot. Try these snooze-free options to refresh your mind.



GET SOME RAYS

"Taking a walk outside in the sunshine is very relaxing and beneficial," Hoang says.



SHUT YOUR EYES

Even if you don't sleep, closing your lids for up to 10 minutes can act as a kind of "neural shower", Kerr says, as it cuts out the large cognitive load of visual stimulation.



TRY A BODY SCAN

This mindfulness exercise is deeply restful, according to Nikki Janks, co-founder of Centred Meditation: "Close the eyes and bring your attention to where you feel tired in your body. Observe the physical sensations of this tiredness. When the mind wanders, gently guide attention back to these sensations until they're eventually relieved on their own."



DO SOME YOGA

Not only will the poses calm your body and mind, you might just nod off during the final relaxing shavasana pose.

your manager about napping," she says. "That feeds into a conversation about what productivity looks like. Let them know you'll be timing the nap and it's part of the work you're doing. They'll see that you deliver better quality work and you're usually in a better mood!"

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