Tips for Waking up Successfully in the Morning

The key to successful awakening is a multi-modal approach grounded in neuroscience and common sense.

Practice good sleep hygiene.

- Get up at the same time every day, week day and week end. Your biological clock is set by the time you rise and is programmed to seek sleep 16 hours after rising. Pick the time that works for all your days and stick to it. Go to bed in a way to ensure 8 hours in bed. The time you fall asleep is less critical but still a routine helps to set the stage to allow sleep to happen.

- Bed should only be used for sleep (and sex) not to read, watch T.V. or be on the computer.

- Go to bed after a wind down ritual to put distance between you and the day’s worries. A warm glass of milk (tryptophan in milk induces sleep as do happy associations with mother’s milk) or a relaxing bath/shower may help.

- Go to bed in a cool quiet completely dark room. Don’t read in bed, watch T.V., or listen to music. Sleep is all about returning to that primal cave at night time. Even a little light will throw off the cascade of hormonal changes that lead to sleep so block out all those lights from electronics or outside your window. Eye shades and earplugs may be necessary in shared accommodations.

- A white noise generator may also help create the illusion of silence. Some like the gentle wave sound setting.

- If you are not asleep in about 15 minutes, get up, get out of bed, move away from the bed and do something boring but useful. Try not to put too many lights on. When you feel sleepy, say in 15 – 20 minutes, try to lie down again and repeat as necessary. Do not sleep in the next day. Instead use that drive to sleep to improve your chances to fall asleep in a more timely way the next night. You are trying to condition yourself to fall asleep within 15 minutes of going to bed, not to lie in bed staring at the ceiling.

- Do not nap; it throws your rhythms off. Later, once a well-established pattern is formed, brief naps (20 minutes) may be possible to add.
If that’s not enough to get up refreshed in the morning, you need to add more. If you sleep in and find it hard to get up you need to use all the tools.

- Multi-sensory prompts work better than a single alarm. Get a timer and have the light come on shortly before you plan to wake. This way you wake up like our ancestors were programmed to do in response to the rising sun. It is that light flooding into your eyes that sets the circadian clock. There are commercial alarms (Dawn Lights) that create an artificial dawn but a simple timer and a table lamp can do the job, albeit less gently.

- Don’t have just one alarm clock, have several spread about the room set to go off one after the other so even if you turn off one and crawl back to bed, you have to get up and turn off the next. There is evidence that if you have to walk 10 paces after being awoken like this you are unlikely to go back to bed. There is even an app for this called “10 paces”.

- Get a bed vibrator that goes off at the same time as your alarm clock buzzer. These are devices used by the hearing impaired. By adding light and vibration to the irritating sound of your alarm you are far more likely to awaken even from the deepest sleep. These are available at modest cost at medical supply stores and some pharmacies.

- Have cold orange juice at your bedside. Drink it when you hear the alarm. It is like rocket fuel and jump starts your day.

- Decrease your cognitive load. The more decisions you face at the start of the day, the more likely you are to crawl back into bed. Lay out your clothes for the day the night before. Use the “one bowl method” for your morning routine. The one bowl method has you keep everything you need that morning in a bowl. You dump the bowl and as each task is done you put it back in the bowl. In the bowl are your toiletries, tooth brush, tooth paste, razor, soap, comb, brush, and make-up. Also have your door keys, phone, wallet, glasses, contact lenses, and your day’s to-do list that was made the night before. These latter items you hold onto for the day.

- Schedule the start of your day with something pleasant like coffee and reading the paper at Starbucks/Tim Hortons or better still, have a good run or other work out scheduled to share with a friend so there is the extra pull of a commitment to another person. Exercise is a great wake up and also ensures better sleep that night.

- Have a friend or family member call you or physically be present to wake you up and get the day underway.

- Consider turning your mattress on its side right after you get up to give you more reason to stay off your bed.