Napping can Dramatically Increase Learning, Memory, Awareness, and More

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In some places, towns essentially shut down in the afternoon while everyone goes home for a siesta. Unfortunately, in the U.S.—more bound to our corporate lifestyles than our health—a mid-day nap is seen as a luxury and, in some cases, a sign of pure laziness. **But before you feel guilty about that weekend snooze or falling asleep during a movie, rest assured that napping is actually good for you and a completely natural phenomena in the circadian (sleep-wake cycle) rhythm.**

As our day wears on, even when we get enough sleep at night, our focus and alertness degrade. While this can be a minor inconvenience in modern times, it may have meant life or death for our ancestors. Whether you are finishing up a project for work or hunting for your livelihood, a nap can rekindle your alertness and have your neurons back up and firing on high in as little as 15 to 20 minutes.
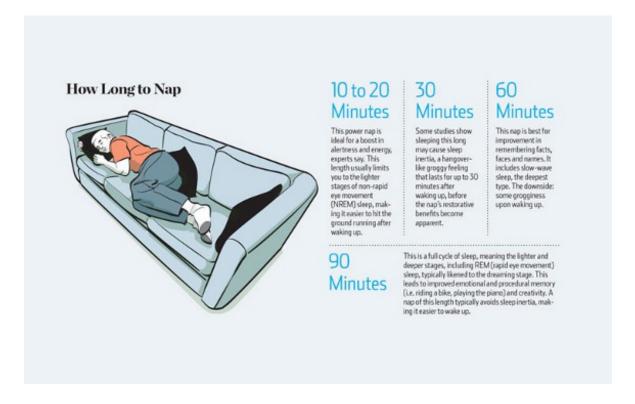
Big name (and high-dollar) companies recognize this. Google and Apple are just a few that allow employees to have nap time. Studies have affirmed that short naps can improve awareness and productivity. Plus, who wouldn't love a boss that lets you get a little shut-eye before the afternoon push?

A study from the University of Colorado Boulder found that children who missed their afternoon nap showed less joy and interest, more anxiety, and poorer problem solving skills than other children. The same can be seen in adults that benefit from napping.

Researchers with Berkeley found an hour nap to dramatically increase learning ability and memory. Naps sort of provide a reboot, where the short term memory is cleared out and our brain becomes refreshed with new defragged space.

Read: Sleep Removes Toxic Waste from the Brain

So how long should you nap?

How Long to Nap

10 to 20 Minutes
This power nap is ideal for a boost in alertness and energy, experts say. This length usually limits you to the lighter stages of non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep, making it easier to hit the ground running after waking up.

30 Minutes
Some studies show sleeping this long may cause sleep inertia, a hangover-like groggy feeling that lasts for up to 30 minutes after waking up, before the nap's restorative benefits become apparent.

60 Minutes
This nap is best for improvement in remembering facts, faces and names. It includes slow-wave sleep, the deepest type. The downside: some grogginess upon waking up.

90 Minutes
This is a full cycle of sleep, meaning the lighter and deeper stages, including REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, typically likened to the dreaming stage. This leads to improved emotional and procedural memory (i.e. riding a bike, playing the piano) and creativity. A nap of this length typically avoids sleep inertia, making it easier to wake up.

Experts say a 10 to 20 minute "power nap" is best for refreshing your mind and increasing energy and alertness. The sleep isn't as deep as longer naps, which allows you to get right back at your day upon waking.

A 30 minute nap can lead to 30 minutes of grogginess, as you are often waking just as your body enters the deeper stages of sleep. You'll experience some of that same fogginess if you sleep for an hour, but 60 minute naps are good for memory boosting.

The longest naps—around 90 minutes—are good for those people who just don't get enough sleep at night. It's a complete sleep cycle and can improve emotional memory and creativity.

Naps are good for you—physically and mentally. But don't sacrifice night time zzz's for an afternoon snooze; take your nap in addition to a good night's sleep.