

# wellness



Sleep  
Better,  
Dream  
More

ILLUSTRATIONS: MAGDIEL LOPEZ.





## We're in the middle of a dreamless epidemic.

And researchers are calling this national drought a public health hazard. Turns out, dreaming isn't just when you show up naked to middle school PE class. It's also a time when your brain and body consolidate memories, regulate negative emotions, and increase your overall well-being (that one where you're in Harry Styles' bedroom? #SelfCare). Which means that missing out on nighttime reveries can lead to physical and mental ails, according to a new study published in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.

Dreams—at least, the ones you remember in the a.m.—happen during rapid eye movement, or REM, sleep. This stage, when your limbs become temporarily paralyzed and your eyes dart around under your eyelids, follows the intense slumber during which your body heals tissue and cells. So if deep sleep ensures your literal survival, REM kinda makes life worth living by expanding your mind.

“REM has some biological functions, like replenishing neurotransmitters”—chemicals in the brain—“which are different from the type of repair that other sleep does but are still important,” says Deirdre Barrett, PhD, assistant professor of

psychology at Harvard Medical School and author of *The Committee of Sleep*. During REM, which should take up 20 percent to 25 percent of your total sleep time (so up to two hours, if you snooze eight), your brain is about as active as when you're awake.

“When you dream, you're solving emotional problems,” says Barrett. You're opening up your consciousness, adds Rubin Naiman, PhD, clinical assistant professor of medicine at the University of Arizona's Center for Integrative Medicine. “It's like yoga for the brain, stretching you to think more creatively.”

Skipping this process can leave you more prone to memory problems, anxiety, even dementia. Scary, since REM is the sleep stage that gets most disrupted by modern life. Alcohol, sleep meds, and antidepressants, for example, can mess up your sleep cycle and, even if they help you nod off initially, can keep you dream-deprived. Getting up too early to squeeze in a full day is also a direct hit on REM, which tends to be concentrated just before wake time. “When you sleep too little, your brain prioritizes crucial non-REM sleep,” says Naiman, “but then you lose the health benefits of dreaming.”

Your fastest solve: Rise naturally. Set an alarm for 15 minutes after your normal wake time, then go to bed slightly earlier until you're up before it sounds. “It could take a few days or weeks to regulate your circadian rhythm,” says Naiman. “But soon you'll be getting more beneficial REM-packed shut-eye.” ■

### Rev Up Your Reveries

#### Try Blue-Light Filtering Glasses

Melatonin, a sleep hormone, surges at sunset. But blue light from screens (your phone, your TV) can squash it. Enter Felix Gray's cute prescription and nonprescription specs (starting at \$95, [shopfelixgray.com](http://shopfelixgray.com)), which keep your 'tonin flowing.

#### Put Your Phone on Night Shift

This setting's warmer light can be better for your zzz's, says Rubin Naiman, PhD. Set yours—or use an app like Twilight—from sundown to sunup.

**Skip Sleep Rx's** Prescription meds change your sleep cycle, disrupting your REM. Only take them occasionally (like on flights), says Naiman. If you must get a 'scrip, ask your doc how to wean off them too.

#### Pop Melatonin

Try taking a time-release tablet of .5 mg 20 minutes to an hour before bedtime. (Check with your doc first, as melatonin may interfere with certain meds.)