

HOW TO ACHIEVE YOUR DREAMS: **INSPIRING STORIES**

# Readers' Digest

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OTHER CULTURES  
SLUMBER IN VERY  
DIFFERENT WAYS  
FROM US. IS THERE  
SOMETHING WE CAN  
LEARN FROM THEM?

BY JOY PERSAUD

# HOW THE WORLD SLEEPS

**If you're drowsy on a weekday afternoon,** chances are you must just force yourself to stay awake. But if slumber beckoned while you were in Spain, the tradition has been to slip away for a siesta.

When we sleep is as much cultural as biological—and practices differ drastically round the globe. For instance, if you were sleepy during a meeting in parts of northern Kenya, no one would bat an eyelid if you let yours close. Dr. Carol Worthman,



professor of anthropology and director of the Laboratory for Comparative Human Biology at Emory University, Atlanta, recounts watching chiefs of the Gabra tribe discussing heated matters. "Somebody will just pull a cloth over his head and fall asleep," she says. "Here it would be, 'You're fired!' But there, the boundaries between when you can and can't sleep are less absolute."

In many societies this flexibility begins in childhood, because children are with their parents all the time. For example, many Balinese spiritual rituals happen at night and continue into daybreak; children and adults sleep as often as necessary, with babies learning to drop off amid noise and music, retaining the ability into adulthood.

Whether we sleep together or apart is one of the biggest cultural differences between the West and elsewhere. Some societies in New Guinea and Indonesia, for instance, sleep together for spiritual protection. "They believe you go off into the spirit world when you sleep but are pulled back by those with you," explains Worthman. "Sleep alone and you may not wake up."

**A**nthropologist Gilda Morelli of Boston College has compared the sleeping arrangements of parents in the western US with Mayan Indians in Guatemala. Mayan babies slept with their mothers all day and night, falling asleep on backs or laps, whereas US parents ritualized sleep through clothes, lullabies, bathing and bedtime stories—often encountering resistance to going to bed. Mayan

comes home. People tell me there's a high level of alcohol consumption there—it's a typical thing for men to do after work—so they don't get home until 10.30 or 11pm and their kids don't get to bed until then."

Morelli's findings echo this. "In the communities I work in, children are part and parcel of the adult world. Only in Western societies is there the feeling that babies should sleep apart from their parents and need to be in bed at seven because 'now I need time with my husband or wife.'"

In fact, families didn't start to sleep apart in the UK and US until the Industrial Revolution and it was only by 1920 that it was actually desirable for babies to sleep alone. There are various possible explanations for the change. Multiple-room homes have only been common for ordinary people in the last 200 years. There are also theories connecting it to pronouncements from the church, either through prurience or due to confessions from mothers who had deliberately suffocated their children in response to poverty, then claimed they'd done it accidentally in their sleep. Others connect it simply with the value put on independence in British and US society.

But co-sleeping may be healthier. Recent studies suggest that the proximity of parent and child helps babies to regulate their breathing and temperature, perhaps offering some protection against sudden infant death syndrome. (The current UK advice is for babies aged up to six months to sleep on their backs in a cot in their parents' room.)

Climate also influences our sleeping culture. Anthropologist Jolan Whiting discovered that in the developing world men and women routinely sleep together where the temperature regularly drops below 10°C. But it's not just temperature: light plays a part too.

**Our biological clock allows a period for sleeping:** the onset of darkness triggers the production of the hormone melatonin, which induces drowsiness. As dawn comes, rising light levels reduce melatonin production and increase the release of cortisol, which boosts blood pressure and blood sugar, so we become wakeful. This works fine in equatorial regions where night begins

We Brits like a lie-in—74 per cent of us sleep in on a day off, but only 56 per cent of people in other countries do. British people are half as likely to use sleeping pills as other nationalities, while 53 per cent of us sleep naked, compared with 30 per cent of our global counterparts.

SLEEP COUNCIL SURVEY 2011

and ends sharply and nights are the same length all year round. But nearer the Poles it's a different story.

Dr Chris Idzikowski, director of the Edinburgh Sleep Centre, has spent time in the freezing reaches of Lapland, which experience big seasonal differences in light levels. "As one heads into a winter pattern of light, with longer nights, there is a tendency for sleep to break up into two parts. It can

be described as an insomnia, but it's really an adaptation to spending longer in bed." Some modern Finns use light boxes to help regulate their light exposure and stabilise sleep patterns.

The lack of artificial light meant that, as recently as 200 years ago, most western Europeans would have had a similar experience. Historian Roger Ekirch has argued that in pre-industrial times, people had a "first sleep" of a few hours, followed by a period of wakefulness, a "watching period"—when they would pray or converse for an hour or two—then a "second" or "morning" sleep. In parts of the world now where there's no artificial light, people do tend to slip in and out of sleep during the darkness, with no set bedtimes.

**B**ut while electric light has meant that Westerners can work and play whatever hours they want, it's had no effect on that tradition of daytime sleeping, the siesta. Originally a response to the climate—sleeping during the hottest hours to concentrate labour in the cooler times at the beginning and end of the day—it's a tradition that some cultures fiercely hang on to. This can be problematic for those whose lifestyles don't normally include an afternoon break. Morelli recalls: "At a conference in Barcelona my husband found that his Spanish colleagues had siestas and ate dinner late at night, whereas the Americans worked all day and started meetings at 6am. He was exhausted."

There's evidence that siesta culture is actually good for your health. Dr

brief naps—no more than 20 minutes—during the day. Dr Sara Mednick, author of *Take A Nap! Change Your Life* (Workman) and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of California, says, "In America and Britain napping is considered lazy and just for children or old people. But the Japanese are extremely supportive of napping in their culture. In China, napping is a note of honour because it means you are working hard."

Mednick says that, while it's hard to make a business case for the traditional siesta, companies are beginning to accept that they may save money by encouraging "power naps"—workers are more alert and make fewer errors. "You can do it in your lunch break, so you're still working the same hours but you'll be more productive."

Marcus de Guingand, managing director of MetroNaps, a company that supplies "EnergyPods" in which workers can grab 40 winks, believes that fatigue is endemic in the developed world. "There are more things keeping

us awake—24-hour TV, internet access, mobile phones. People think that by sacrificing sleep they can achieve more, but a US study showed that those who regularly slept less than five hours a night had impaired performance on a par with being legally drunk. If someone turned up to work having had a couple of pints in the morning they'd be fired, yet if they work until 3am they can expect a pat on the back."

**Neil Harrison, operations manager of Maintenance Management Limited in Milton Keynes, purchased an EnergyPod where staff could nap in privacy, because he was fed up with afternoon meetings that were "rubbish". He's convinced that alertness has improved, with higher levels of creativity on show.**

"I lived in France for five years and saw the French habit of taking two hours for lunch as a lack of efficiency and desire to work. I now realise the absolute opposite is true. The whole napping thing—it's three-quarters about the change in culture."

## STANDING OUT FROM THE HERD

Little Bo Peep would be proud. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has admitted that it has lost 1,039 cows.

The beef hole appeared in Defra's Cattle Tracing System, which is supposed to register the movements of all livestock, from birth to death, to protect public health.

But the absent bovines, which would fill about ten average farms, were apparently loaded on to trucks and never seen again.

Defra officials are a little unclear as to what happened, blaming clerical errors. Perhaps a strange old man offered them some beans on the way to market and they're too embarrassed to say.

Members of hunter-gatherer and nomadic societies mostly **sleep on mats, wooden platforms or the ground**, notes Dr Worthman. Pillows and headrests are uncommon as these can act as a magnet for lice and mites. Studies link the **incidence of asthma** to the spread of blanket use in New Guinea.

Dimitrios Trichopoulos of the Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, led a study of around 24,000 healthy Greek adults to find out if the region's low rates of coronary heart disease might be connected not just to the famous Mediterranean diet, but to other lifestyle factors. They discovered that those who took a siesta of 30 minutes or more at least three times a week had a 37 per cent lower risk of dying from heart disease than those who didn't. "Presumably a siesta is stress-releasing," he observes, "and stress of course has been involved as a risk factor for heart disease."

Trichopoulos emphasises, however, that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that afternoon siestas will prevent heart problems—but recommends them as an enjoyable practice. "In a way, a siesta almost doubles your life because you start at 5pm or 6pm fresh and ready for another six or seven hours of active life."

A traditional siesta of two hours or more is rather difficult to have in the UK. The working day is organised differently and people tend to work much further from home. But some experts are arguing for the benefits of