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## FEATURE

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### Metroland Special Section *Mind Body Spirit*

#### To Sleep or Not to Sleep . . .

Is the question really that difficult? For some of us, yes

By Amy Halloran

Family legend purports that I did not sleep through the night until my mother and father left me with my aunt. I was 6 months old. An interest in staying awake has persisted, and I am alternately pleased with and plagued by my sleep habits—or lack thereof.

My first serious bout of insomnia lasted most of fifth grade. The social studies teacher kept warning us of a diorama project, and once I turned out the light, the threat loomed over me like a barking shadow. I slaved over my farm scene for weeks and was sorely disappointed when hodgepodes of Elmer's glue, cereal boxes, and plastic cows got the same A as my lovingly-rendered cottonball sheep did in their carefully-tempera-painted pasture.

When I was a teenager I began to play with my sleep patterns. Inspired by the fact that we spend a third of our lives asleep, I stayed up late reading Camus and listening to Led Zeppelin. I got up early. By the time I was in my 20s, I was exhausted. I had made major overdrafts on my sleep bank and was constantly nervous that I might not get enough rest. Every bedtime became a battle.

A generalized anxiety about sleep continues to haunt me, especially since I am now marching through my 40s. My female body keeps me well aware of the hormonal fluctuations that influence my pursuits at the pillow. I have, however, learned a few tricks to woo the sandman. I exercise daily and regulate my sugar, caffeine and alcohol intake like a gambler strategizing at the roulette wheel. I use yoga CDs and DVDs with practices geared toward relaxation. If I awaken too early, I get up and start working on the Great American Short Story.

Mystics have used sleep deprivation as a tool to divine the Divine, and I try to consider extreme sleepiness as a kind of wisdom when it strikes. However, I am better described as irritable than spiritual when tired. There's no surprise there, as sleep deprivation has been used as a tool of torture.

“Chronic sleep loss does impair moral reasoning,” says Dr. Joshua Rotenberg, medical director for Academy Diagnostics LLC Sleep Center, and fellow for the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, by phone from San Antonio, where he is a neurologist and sleep-disorder specialist. “I take care of a lot of kids with autism, and their parents are chronically sleep-deprived, because kids with autism have insomnia; it's just hardwired. It's really amazing to see the difference in the whole family when the kids are sleeping better.”

I experienced a rash of sleeplessness during my children's young lives, and my attitudes toward sleep have shifted. My changing thoughts somewhat mirror varied cultural approaches to rest. I was happy to find a reason to discount sleep, partially because I am a little hyperactive and ready to glom onto extreme ideas. However, living in a land that encourages productivity while discouraging rest impacted my thinking, too. As a country, Japan exceeds the American obsession with activity, but there is also a general appreciation of sleep.

Napping is seen as beneficial rather than lazy in many Asian cultures. It was, perhaps, the common Japanese nap palaces that inspired Yelo, the first of its kind in Manhattan, to open late last year. The facility allows people to take power naps inside specially outfitted sleep cabins, and offers massage services to supplement the restorative effects of 20-to-40-minute naps. Now, I dream of sampling sleep while nestled into a contoured bin in the humming heart of Midtown.



Changing thoughts on sleep are entering the national dialogue. The effects of chronic sleep deprivation are tied to cardiovascular problems, and notorious accidents, such as the oil spill at Valdez, may be linked to sleep shortages. The National Institute of Health reports that nearly 30 million Americans suffer from chronic insomnia, and the National Sleep Foundation's polls over the last decade note that half of the adult population suffers some symptom of insomnia on a weekly basis. We are building a sleep debt that compares to the numbers of our pre-bailout fiscal deficit.

The National Sleep Foundation aims to increase our understanding of the importance of sleep. In March it will host Sleep Awareness Week, and the foundation has a plethora of resources on its website ([sleepfoundation.org](http://sleepfoundation.org)). You can find reading for a lifetime of wakeful nights, Q and As, self-help quizzes and FAQs galore, and research local medical resources like doctors who specialize in sleep disorders and sleep clinics.

But what if your sleep life runneth over, especially in the winter? Are you a bear attempting an interrupted hibernation?

"There is a tendency to sleep more during the winter, especially at latitudes where there is less daylight," Dr. Rotenberg explains. "Melatonin is a natural hormone our brains make to signal it's time to go to sleep. Dim light sets off the release of melatonin."

Gather those extra Z's while daylight is still short. Perhaps you can invest in an invisible national sleep bank, and someday you'll be able to make payments to people who are sleep-poor. Maybe someday sleep will equal dollars, and the deficit will disappear. . . . Now that's the stuff of dreams.