

The Trouble with Me Time

It's your favorite part of the day—and, we're guessing, the unhealthiest. Make over your evening routine to get the relaxation you deserve without overdosing on sauv blanc, mint chip, Netflix, or your iPhone.



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FOR YEARS, the story of my me time—those precious hours between the end of dinner and the beginning of sleep—has read like a handbook titled *What Healthy People Don't Do at Night*.

Wine. Tube cookie dough. A laptop-tablet-TV trifecta of sleep-sabotaging blue light. And, yes, part of this has to do with having children: Preschoolers and teenagers alike have a way of sending parents into a post-bedtime roundoff, back hand-spring, double-pike tumbling pass into our vice of choice. But honestly, I engaged in these subpar evening health habits before kids, too. Because if you're a woman and you spend your day doing anything other than lounging at a pool, you need some time at night to unwind. Time to treat yourself. And, more often than not, time for all bad health to break loose.

"At the end of the day, we are full of emotions that need to be processed: anxiety from work, exhaustion from running around all day," says Christine Carter, PhD, a sociologist and happiness expert at the Greater Good Science Center, based at the University of California, Berkeley. "But we're so exhausted that we just want to zone out, so we turn to numbing behaviors like consuming social media, sugar, alcohol, and TV."

It's hard to keep this behavior in check, because by the time we're wrapping up the day, we're fresh out of willpower. "Our brain is done making good decisions. We did that all day at work, parenting, cooking, errand-running, exercising, and more," says Rebecca Scritchfield, RD, of Washington, D.C., the author of *Body Kindness*. "So we make irrational choices: eating ice cream straight

out of the container instead of savoring just one dish; two glasses of wine, not one."

Not that scraping the bottom of the Nutella jar is the end of the world. "There's nothing wrong with treating yourself to a big bowl of ice cream or a gourmet cupcake," says Scritchfield. "But all too often, we're mindlessly engaging in these behaviors night after night, not



STRATEGY 1
JUST GO TO BED

YES, WE KNOW it sounds crazy. But stay with us. When the National Sleep Foundation asked women how many days in the previous week they'd woken up feeling well rested, nearly one out of four said zero. "Without the six to nine hours they may need each night, people become prone to irritability, exacerbations of depression and anxiety, increased appetite, and sugar cravings," says Lisa Medalie, PsyD, a behavioral sleep medicine specialist at the University of Chicago. "Sleep deprivation even increases vulnerability to diabetes and hypertension."

To help prioritize sleep, try reframing early bedtime as a treat. Experts call it "cognitive restructuring," and it means switching from thinking "I don't have time for sleep; I have too much to do" to "Sleep is the best thing I can do for myself. If I go to bed now, I'll feel so much better tomorrow." Your reasoning doesn't even have to be that virtuous. Alexandra Williams, a 58-year-old photographer and night owl from Santa Barbara, California, says she has motivated herself to turn in early by promising to bake Dutch baby pancakes for her son in the morning or "telling myself that it would make my eyes look good for a date I was going on."

If slipping between the sheets during prime time seems unimaginable, schedule a bed-centric activity that satisfies your me-time goal. Been alone with the kids all day and need intellectual stimulation? Read a book in bed and obey your eyelids when they grow heavy. Got a partner you haven't seen since 6 a.m.? Have sex or cuddle in bed and talk.

truly enjoying them and sometimes waking up feeling guilty about them, which is the opposite of how me time should leave us feeling."

Your mom probably didn't have these me-time issues—maybe because there hasn't always been an expectation that women deserve time to themselves in the first place. In today's world, where self-care is the buzzword du jour, we know better. But while we're trying to carve out more time to decompress, modern life has become the opposite of a decompression chamber. There are emails around the clock, overscheduled kids begging for homework help, and panic-inducing politics all over your Facebook feed. (Where did all the cute babies go?!)

Look, we need time to relax; done right, it enhances our productivity, creativity, and concentration. Research from the University of Michigan shows that lacking enough me time can be more detrimental to a couple's relationship than problems with their sex life. Try these strategies to make those post-dinner, pre-bed hours a little less of a regretfest.

"We spend so much energy and time focused on productivity that we no longer recognize fun when we see it."

STRATEGY 2
PRESS PAUSE ON THAT TREAT

FOOD CAN BE an important part of self-care, as long as you enjoy it mindfully (e.g., savoring the taste and texture of that Girl Scout cookie, not devouring it while you zone out in front of the computer). But you don't want what you consume at night to leave you feeling physically or emotionally uncomfortable the next morning. If it does, institute a short waiting period of at least 15 minutes, suggests Melissa Hartwig, author of *Food Freedom Forever: Letting Go of Bad Habits, Guilt, and Anxiety Around Food*. "Tell yourself, 'I'm an adult; I can have these chips anytime I want. They'll be here tomorrow for me, too.' You'll be giving your brain time to evaluate whether you truly want the salt-and-vinegar chips or are just bored, stressed, or tired."

STRATEGY 3
FIND NEW WAYS TO SOOTHE

WHILE YOU'RE in your waiting period, try options for recharging without snacks: a can of sparkling water or tea, a mud mask and 30 minutes of a tacky TV show, a gentle yoga routine. The key is to spend me time doing something you really want to do, says Ramani Durvasula, PhD, a psychology professor at California State University, Los Angeles. "While it's important that it doesn't turn into a wine-induced Cheetos-fest every night, it is important that it feels like an escape," she says. "If you can't stand how tea tastes, it won't work."

STRATEGY 4
FLIP YOUR WORK SCHEDULE UPSIDE DOWN

HOME-DECORATING BLOGGER and mom of three Serena Appiah, 39, of Silver Spring, Maryland, used to stay up until 1 a.m., slog-ging through work projects with the TV on and convincing herself this was quality me time. "But the later it got, the less productive I became, so it took twice as long to write blog posts or edit videos," she admits. Plus, "I'd be so tired in the morning, I'd fall asleep at my desk or even at a stoplight."

Her fix: Swap all-nighters for early-morning work sessions. "I started waking up at 5:15 a.m. to blog for about three hours," she says. "I'm insanely productive because no one else is up, and it's far easier to avoid email, TV, and social media." At 8 a.m., Appiah switches into mom mode, showering and getting the kids ready for school. Thanks to this giant head start on her day, her evening hours are freed up for watching *This Is Us* or *Scandal*, then hitting the sack by 10 p.m.

STRATEGY 5
SWEAR OFF SURFING AND SCROLLING

"I CAN'T THINK of a single sleep specialist who would stamp approval on looking at the news or social media before bed," says Medalie. Blue screen light suppresses the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, and news reports can rev you up so much that your stress response kicks in. Some research shows that social media doesn't necessarily leave us feeling happy; rather, "it confirms our feelings of 'I'm not good enough,'" notes Durvasula.

Pare back using the Freedom app (\$7 a month; freedom.to), which blocks websites and social media from your devices, or Unplugged (free; iTunes), which puts your phone in airplane mode for a prescribed length of time. Position your charging station somewhere in your home that is incompatible with lounging, suggests Melissa Gratiias, PhD, a psychologist in Savannah, Georgia, who specializes in productivity. A kitchen counter or cabinet is better than

a bedside table. Before you open any app, ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" If you're feeling lonely—a wildly common driver of late-night scrolling, says Durvasula—use your phone to call someone, or have a conversation with your partner or roommate...who's maybe in another room on the phone, too.

STRATEGY 6
FIND OTHER TIME FOR ME TIME

FOR LATERSA BLAKELY of Holly Grove, Arkansas, me time takes place twice a week at Barnes & Noble, between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.—after her part-time shift as a hotel front-desk assistant ends but before her kids finish school. "I order a latte or water, settle into a comfy window chair, and lose myself in motivational, spiritual, and business books," says Blakely, 39, who also works as a life coach.

Gratiias likes this idea because it pairs a relaxing pursuit with a time of day when your energy naturally tends to dip, so in general you'll feel calmer. If you're a stay-at-home parent, you may want to slate your me time during the kids' early-afternoon nap times. If you're working, use your lunch hour to listen to a podcast, text with a friend, pick up a new lipstick, or take a walk near some water or through a park.

STRATEGY 7
HAVE FUN!

"WE SPEND SO much energy and time focused on productivity that we no longer recognize fun when we see it," says Scritchfield. Make a list of some hobbies you love but never seem to have time for. Then use your me time to dive in. If you enjoy baking, make some biscotti. If you miss playing basketball, shoot hoops in the driveway. Appiah paints furniture she scored while thrift shopping. Scritchfield plays Cards Against Humanity with her husband. Anything that makes you laugh or brings you joy will turn me time into happy hour—margarita optional. ■



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