

Self Improvement Challenge #1: Switch To A Polyphasic Sleep Cycle

Dave Schneider

This post is the first in a series of monthly self improvement challenges. I believe that we should all be making efforts to improve ourselves through constant learning and skill development, no matter how old we are. I aim to prove that there are many, worthwhile endeavors that can be taken in only a month's time and can make us more interesting, well rounded individuals and, at the same time, potentially improve our business. Remember that your business is closely related to yourself, so improvements of yourself will inevitably improve your business.

A few months ago I made the decision to attempt to transition to polyphasic sleep. I am going to be discussing my reason for doing so as well as my proposed sleep schedule here on the blog. As time goes on I plan to give continued updates on my progress, essentially making a case study out of myself.

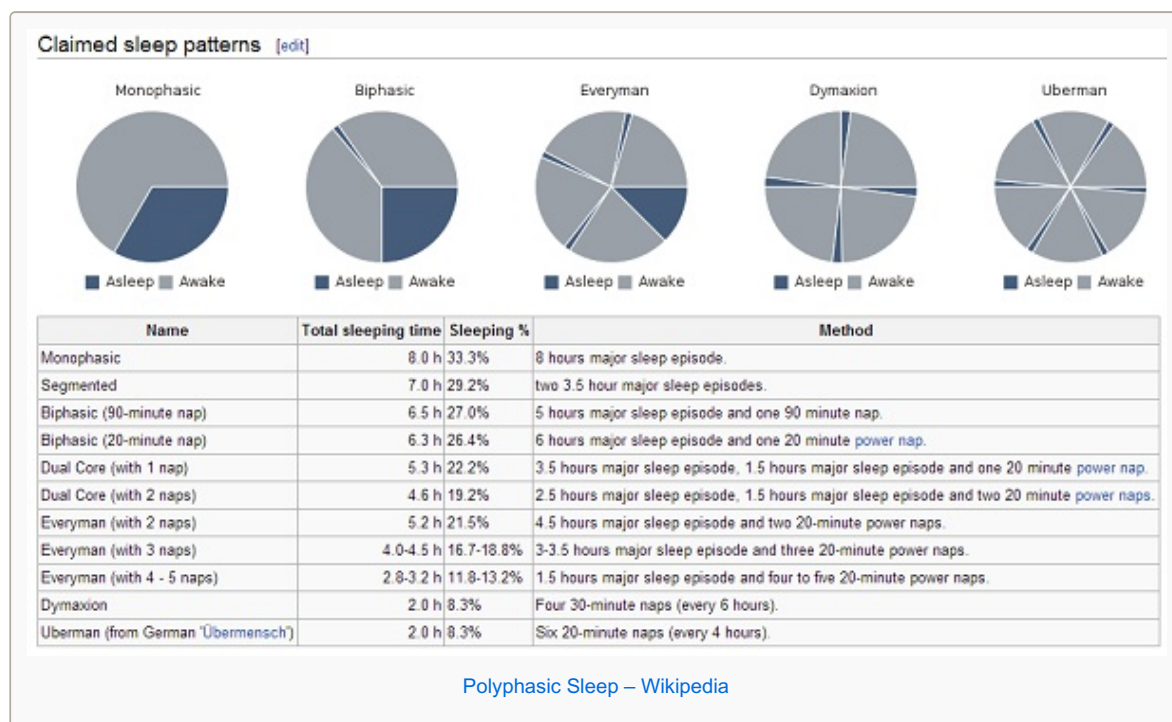
What Is Polyphasic Sleep?

The easiest way to describe it is through its differentiation with monophasic sleep. Monophasic sleep is what most of us do. It means that at night, we get tired, and we wake up 7-9 hours later only to do it all over again the next night. We have one continuous sleep.

Polyphasic sleep partitions our sleep throughout the day into tiny increments (naps), the goal of which is to hone in on the key necessities of our sleeping process and be more efficient. You see, every night the body goes through various sleep cycles. The theory behind polyphasic sleep is that most the time we spend sleeping is unnecessary as a result of transitioning in and out of various sleep stages. In actuality we only need Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep and if we train our body we can get to it quite quickly and cut out the rest. This is usually accomplished by a nap that takes us straight to REM. There are many different kinds of polyphasic sleeps cycles, which, depending on how many naps you are taking, have you sleeping between 2-6.5 hours a night.

The one I am attempting is considered one of the easiest ones and will involve sleeping 6.3 hours a night.

Here are some of the different schedules. I will be doing a [biphasic sleep model – siesta style](#), but more on that later.



What Are The Benefits Of Polyphasic Sleep?

Naturally the biggest benefit of polyphasic sleeping is the amount of time you get back. Imagine life if you only had to sleep 6.5 hours in a 24 hour period and felt completely refreshed when you did so. For me, this would mean getting about another 2 hours of my day back.

If you do a little math this has some staggering consequences in terms of time spent awake. For example, if I am currently sleeping about 9 hours a day then I am awake for 15. If my new sleep schedule has me sleeping only 6.5 hours a night, then I am gaining 2.5 hours of awake time, which represents a 15% increase over my current schedule. If you extrapolate this out to say another 60 years of living, that is essentially like a “free” 9 years. Of course that is incredibly optimistic but you can’t argue that the math is very clear on this – there are huge strides to be made even if I attempt this for only 6 months to a year (a year would be an extra 45 days). On top of that, these strides are made during “the best years”. That is to say that it isn’t like extending my life from 80 years to 100 years, but actually getting more out of my 20s and 30s, when I feel at my peak.

I hardly have to explain the benefits of extra awake time; essentially more time working, more time for leisure, more time spent with loved ones. Personally, I’m most looking forward to being able to transition to a more night oriented work schedule, allowing me the bulk of the day to spend enjoying myself and the daylight. Imagine more walks on the beach without the guilty conscience of not being productive.

This has been a huge struggle for Vicky and I as we transition to self-employment. Essentially, you can spend your entire day working since there is always something to be done and always some time zone where things are “on”. With some extra time I could make sure to focus on actually enjoying the life I am building for myself.

There seem to be many ancillary benefits as well as reported by many people who have done and are doing this, for example, the ability to fall asleep quickly. I’ve always been one to toss and turn at night for upwards of 1-2 hours before finally falling asleep. Even if I go to bed tired sometimes it still takes me a long time. I hate this. It’s such a waste of time. I’m not getting anything done and I’m not getting rest. Polyphasic sleep requires you to train your body to quickly fall into a deep sleep since naps are limited to only 20-30 minutes. Many people who attempt Polyphasic sleep and then transition back to monophasic sleep still report this benefit years after the transition is over, so even if the experiment fails there still might be long last benefits.

Another aspect is an increased alertness. Again, skeptics will probably assume that a person simply can’t function on only 6.5 hours a day everyday, but many people who have made this transition attest to feeling more rested and alert than when they were doing monophasic sleep. Part of it stems from the fact that you are finally investing in your sleep and sticking to a routine/schedule. Even on monophasic sleep we could all benefit from having a more predictable schedule that our body could adapt to. I’ve had plenty of mornings where I wake up after getting 9+ hours of sleep and I still feel like crap. The reason for it is exiting sleep at an inconvenient time. Polyphasic sleep is especially timed based on our natural rhythms to make sure this doesn’t happen. Moreover, with polyphasic sleep you are shortening the duration in between sleep cycles, and therefore you should be experience less of that low energy, down feeling we all get in the afternoon.

What Are The Risks Of Polyphasic Sleep?

Of course like all things there are risks, especially when you are talking about cutting out several hours of your sleep. It’s important to note that there are not a lot of long term case studies of people who have attempted polyphasic sleep. That’s not to say that it hasn’t been around for hundreds of years. In fact, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, as well as many other famous entrepreneurs, are said to have been polyphasic sleepers. Still, aside from the individual case studies of people having done it for a few months or a few years the research is relatively thin.

Another flaw is the rigidity of the schedule. Of course, different sleep schedules have different degrees of flexibility, but for the most part you want to stick to your schedule as your body is specifically timed that way. This means in the middle of the day I am going to have to lay down for 20-30 minute naps, which might not be the most convenient thing. Often when you see people switch back to monophasic sleep from polyphasic sleep, it is not because they felt unwell, but largely because adapting to a sleep schedule that is different from 99% of the world can make life difficult and inflexible. To some degree, polyphasic sleep trades in a little bit of day time for a lot more night time, and it should be noted that day time hours and night time hours are not necessarily created

equal.

Are People Really Doing This?

Believe it or not there is definitely a community of polyphasic sleeps out there. In fact there is a [whole Reddit community for it](#). Naturally it is not a majority or anything close to it but it does happen, especially among college students or people who work strange shifts.

The primary reason why you don't see it that often, aside from of course people thinking it is incredibly unhealthy, is that it doesn't fit with most people's schedules. The world is on a monophasic sleep schedule and everything is designed around that. Between work, school and family commitments, few of us could realistically take time out of our day to go nap for 30 minutes. In fact, I have had this idea in mind for years now but it is only recently, since we stopped traveling and settled into being self-employed that I finally feel like I have the opportunity to attempt this.

What Schedule Am I Doing And Why?

Originally the schedule I was looking at was called the Everyman schedule. It involves one core sleep for about 3 hours taken from say 1am to 4am, and three 30 minute naps spaced throughout the day. It is not the most aggressive schedule (that would be the Uberman) since it still involves a core sleep of 3 hours at night, but it does give you a significant increase in awake time and by many is considered to be fairly flexible.

Recently, however, after talking with a few people who had attempted the Everyman schedule for a month and "failed" I decided to dial it back a bit to a biphasic sleep model.

This will involve 6 hours of sleep at night between 130 AM and 730 AM, and then a 20-30 minutes nap in the middle of the day around 2pm.

Although I'm a bit disappointed about having to dial things back I think it is for the best, at least, given the advice I heard from others. Depending on how this goes I can still try to transition into the Everyman schedule from my biphasic model, but at least I won't have to sacrifice any entire month of alertness trying to adjust and possibly failing.

I also like this schedule because it only involves one quick nap in the middle of the afternoon. A lot of schedules propose several naps (in order to compensate for a drastically shortened core sleep), some of which take place at rather awkward times, like between 4 PM -7 PM.

How Long Will It Take To Adapt?

Well, we will find out (if I can manage). I am expecting about a 1-2 week transition.

Honestly, I have never exerted much will power in the face of sleep, so this will be a challenge and not one that I am necessarily going to overcome. Still, I'm motivated by potentially gaining another 9 years of awake time so it is not to be taken lightly.

What To Expect For Updates

I am going to be updating my "status" sometime around the end of the month, hopefully with some data around my exact sleep times and my general feeling during the entire time. I have read a lot of blogs where people talk about polyphasic sleep, but the data is thin at best. Hopefully this will add some insight and be useful for anyone else wanting to attempt the same thing.

Useful Articles On Polyphasic Sleep

This article is not an in depth guide to the science behind polyphasic sleeping. It is the beginnings of a case study. If the topic interests you and you wish to learn more, I recommend the following articles/websites.

- [Polyphasic Sleep Society](#)

- [Polyphasic Sleep Facts and Myths](#)

Also always, you should not read this as medical advice in any way, shape, or form.

SHARE IT!0100000

