# Sweet Dreams

by Emily O. Gravett

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It's that time of year when I just want to eat Staff of Life breadsticks, wear XXL sweatpants, and swaddle myself in a fuzzy pink robe in preparation for the long winter ahead, just like one of those bears in the brackets of "Fat Bear Week" up north. (The possibility teased in this *NY Times headline* is soooooo enticing!) It's dark. It's cold. The starchy root vegetables are back. It must be time to sleep!

But sleep is a challenge for many of us these days. It will come as a surprise to exactly no one that a lot of us are not getting the recommended seven hours of sleep per night. The pandemic has been particularly disruptive of sleep, due to stress, anxiety, and depression, not to mention actual illness or grief over lost loved ones. There's a name for this, I've learned: "coronasomnia" or "covidsomnia." Of course, there are all sorts of reasons we might not be sleeping well at any given time: certain medical conditions, medications, early appointments, late-night responsibilities, caretaking, jetlag, light pollution, noisy neighbors, caffeine, alcohol, as well as excitement, pets, revenge bedtime procrastination, the allure of the latest Netflix show (here's looking at you, *The Chair*). In the past, there have definitely been times I've chosen to eat Trader Joe's Coffee Bean Blast ice cream right before bed, knowing full well what will happen when I do ¯\\_(ツ)_/¯. But, recently, I've started taking melatonin gummies at night because waking up at 1:30am and not being able to fall back asleep just wasn't seeming super sustainable, and reading myself *Go the F\*\*k to Sleep* wasn't working as well as I had hoped. My students are struggling too, especially as final exams approach. There's a lot of yawning in class. I routinely get emails well after midnight. Some can't get out of bed. (Back when I was teaching fully online, some students simply attended class *from* bed.) When I ask how they're doing, the word "tired" always looms large in the online word cloud. We're all having more of a "Enter Sandman" experience than a "Pony Man" one.

Poor sleep can affect us in all sorts of ways. Tricia Hersey, of the Nap Ministry, frames sleep deprivation as a social justice issue. ("REST IS RESISTANCE" is their motto.) Horrifyingly, driving drowsy is not all that different from driving drunk. I know that, when I am tired, I am less sharp in my thinking, I can't remember as much, I am quick(er) to anger and tears, I eat way more unhealthy food, I feel sluggish and unmotivated. As Eileen Myles wrote in her poem "Noggin": "If I get / this little / sleep / I'm butter / pulling / the greasy / details / over everything." I also know I am not alone. It may be no shock to you that sleep deprivation is detrimental to learning capacity and academic performance too (Curcio et al. 2006). It has been associated with lower GPAs and it negatively predicts graduation (Chen and Chen, 2019). One could go down a rabbit hole—at 3am, of course—learning about all of the different ways that sleep deprivation can impact our day-to-day functioning (for example, here and here), even as we continue to glorify it.

So how can we help our students get better sleep, without—this is key—making them feel shamed or judged or somehow "less than" if they, for whatever reason, cannot? And not just during Winter Break, when we all idyllically imagine that we will have a chance to catch up on zzzzz's (far be it from me to dash our collective hopes…), but before, during the final days of the semester. (Of course, there will be those of us who think, *This isn't my job*. I get it! For me, because sleep, or lack thereof, affects my students' learning, I want to help, if/as I can.)

- We can introduce our students to good "sleep hygiene." In my case, this is always more of a "do as I say, not as I do" type of lesson. Trusty tips include: Use your bedroom only for sleeping. Put your phone away well before bedtime. Go to sleep and wake up around the same time. Exercise. Avoid drinking alcohol or coffee too close to bedtime. Limit naps (sob). Create a sleepy-time ritual to wind down. (You know, basically everything that is the opposite of college culture.) This Harvard blog post with similar tips could be shared directly with students in class or on Canvas.
- We can tell our students about the research on sleep and learning, like Chen and Chen's work (cited above), Okano et al. (2019), Mazza et al. (2016), or Michael Scullin's interesting study (2018), which showed students performed better on a test by sleeping eight hours than by staying up late studying. (You might even consider offering extra credit for sleep, just as Scullin did, though do consider alternatives to offer to students for whom eight hours is a biological, psychological, or other impossibility; we wouldn't want to further compound their troubles!)
- We can remind students of what they learned from their GenEd Cluster 5 requirements, which includes at least one course on "wellness." Perhaps wellness involves rest and relaxation?
- We can make simple, small adjustments to our teaching to avoid our classes getting in the way of students' sleep. A few years ago, for example, I shifted some of my assignment deadlines to 5pm instead of my usual 11:59pm, because students would turn in their assignments at the very last minute and I imagined that encroached upon their sleep for that night. (Now, they may not get good sleep after turning my assignments in by 5pm anyway, but there's only so much I can do!)
- We can be open to rethinking our assessment approach, in the future. Having only a few, high-stakes, summative assessments (like one midterm and one final) incentivizes cramming (which is, unfortunately, quite effective in the short term); I remember such study sessions in my college days lasting into the wee hours of the morning. If we, instead, spread out tests or other projects (a la "the spacing effect") across the semester, students may break their study hours into smaller, more manageable chunks, leaving more time for rest.
- We can create opportunities for students to get to know themselves better, through, for instance, reflective journaling, which might include consideration of their own sleep rhythms, habits, and preferences. Some of my friends are night owls; some I know I can text at 5am. (The others have long since learned to silence my notifications!) Students' sleep tendencies will vary too. If they can admit that they aren't morning people, then maybe this will help them avoid signing up for early classes. If they know they drag in the afternoon, but are trying to avoid napping, perhaps they can choose to schedule an energizing activity for that time, like exercise (or perhaps they might encounter energizing activities in our classes, as Kayla detailed in the previous Toolbox).

- We can prompt students to brainstorm and commit to self-care strategies, as Daisy's Toolbox encouraged earlier this semester. Self-care could include prioritizing sleep. (Self-care could also include not continuing to beat oneself up over sleep habits and patterns that are out of our control or that 'deviate' from the so-called 'norm'!)

I hope, too, that you all will prioritize taking care of yourselves during finals and over Winter Break. Try to get some rest. We all deserve it.

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