

## Dysrhythmias

A meaningful understanding of current patterns of sleeping, dreaming, and awakening requires that we consider them in the context of the dysrhythmic culture that birthed and sustains them. Impossible demands of our work, family, and social lives routinely throw the majority of Americans out of sync with nature's circadian rhythms. The overriding rhythmic structure of modern life is irregular, hurried, staccato, and relentless. Speeding is the most common infraction of the law. We are "jet-setters" living in the "fast lane," caught up in the "rat race," and sick with "hurry sickness." We suffer from a collective tachycardia, a rapid, runaway cultural heartbeat, according to Dr. Rubin Naiman in, [Healing Night](#). As the symphonic rhythms of nature, including human nature, are persistently overridden, we become deeply entrained with the dysrhythmic cacophony of modern culture.

A standard day is no longer defined by nature's circadian timing but by culture's artificial time. Our experiences and behaviors are structured by artificial ticks and tocks, bells, beeps, buzzes, sirens, horns, and chimes. It is no longer the crow of the cock, but the buzz of the alarm that defines the arrival of morning. On the other end, Letterman, Leno, Stewart, and Colbert and the late news define the onset of night. Such culture-driven cues override natural indicators like dusk and dawn, hunger, and satiety, sleepiness and wakefulness. And we usually eat, work, exercise, rest and generally live in response to these cultural cues. We get up and go to bed when cultural time, not natural timing, dictates.

Our subjective sense of night, that is, our personal clock's designation about when we should be asleep, is referred to as our "*sleep phase*." Unfortunately, our sleep phase can be out of sync with the objective, cultural clocks designation of our sleep schedule. Such desynchrony can result in "*sleep phase disorders*," which are potent factors in various types of insomnia. In advanced sleep phase, more common as we age, our personal clocks run fast, believing it is bedtime some hours before the outer clock does. Because one's rising time is also advanced, an advanced sleep phase is frequently associated with very early morning awakenings and difficulty returning to sleep. The converse is true with delayed sleep phase, which is quite common in adolescence. Trying to get to sleep before our personal clock believes it is bedtime is common cause of sleep onset insomnia. And needing to awaken before our personal clock believes it is morning can leave us excessively sleepy upon arising.

In addition to sleep phase disorders, dysrhythmias are associated with other common conditions such as jet lag, shift work, and irregular sleep-wake schedules. Beyond their deleterious impact on sleep and dreams, many studies confirm that circadian dysrhythmias are associated with significant increases in depression, chronic illness, and even mortality. Dysrhythmias also influence our health, happiness, and spirituality in other ways that we are beginning to discover. They are ultimately the result of our incessant drive, which suppresses the rest phase of our basic rhythm.

Perhaps we struggle so with rest because in true rest can result the opportunistic emergence of suppressed psychological material. Swept up by industrial drive, we may often fail to even acknowledge our need for rest because we fear slowing down and stopping. As long as we maintain a healthy clip, we prevent all that stuff swept into the night repository from rising into consciousness. Resuming activity diverts attention from our discomfort. Incessant activity can also conceal underlying mood disturbances, especially depression, threatening to surface if we do not remain vigilant. For many, the thought of rest conjures images of tennis, golf, swimming, hiking, biking, or other athletic activities. For others, it is a good book, magazine, or movie. The question is, are they truly restful or just a substitution of other activity?

For some, being tired has become a cue to alter one's consciousness with alcohol or other substances. The need to rest conjures thoughts of a glass of wine, a cold beer, a martini. For others, rest is about rolling a joint or taking a hit of a

pipe. Altering one's consciousness with substances as a means of resting is a complex social and health issue. Though the deeper intention beneath getting high may actually be a positive desire to slow down and rest, this strategy usually backfires. Using substances or food with the primary intention of escaping, avoiding, or denying personal issues is not conducive to true rest.

If rest is not about activity, recreation, or a substance-driven escape, then what is it? Basic rest and activity cycles remind us that rest is the counterpoint to activity. Common methods of rest include meditation, prayer, yoga, and neurofeedback. Or just sitting: sitting on the porch, sitting quietly, rocking, lying on the couch, strolling in the garden. Associated with mixed EEG patterns such as alpha, theta, and even delta states, rest is a kind of slow-wave waking. Rest is healing.

While images of hell are usually characterized by endless toil, images of heaven from around the world are associated with leisure and rest. Most spiritual techniques and practices are also restful or informed by a resting posture. Meditation, yoga, tai chi, and prayer are usually practiced in a mindful, restful manner. For many of us, when we finally do rest, it is the result of sheer exhaustion, illness, or depression. Perhaps illness is the only acceptable form of meditation in America. Could it be that symptoms that force us to slow, rest, sleep, or dream have an important, underlying healing function?

Depression, often referred to as the common cold of mental illness, remains at epidemic levels in industrialized nations around the world. Buddhist philosophy teaches that depression results from excessive activation that is not properly balanced by rest. If we do not suppress its symptoms with stimulant medications, the fatigue that so commonly accompanies depression asks that we excuse ourselves from the world of activity, turn inward, and rest. Being depressed may be a spiritual call for deep rest. Carl Jung taught that "awareness is healing." We can consciously disengage from dysrhythmic aspects of culture and entrain to more health-supporting features of nature.

**The following are offered to help you become more sensitive to rest, rhythm, and resonance in your daily life: 1. Practice simply being more aware of your inner reactions – both thoughts and feelings – to your need for rest. Try to specifically identify the sensations you experience as a call for rest. 2. Practice becoming more conscious of your general tempo or pace – the timing in your life. Whatever it is you are doing, be aware of the manner in which you do it. 3. In addition to your circadian wake and sleep pattern, think about the basic energetic tempo of people you affiliate with and how that affects the tempo of your life. These would include things like the music you listen to, the hobbies in which you engage and the athletic activities you are interested in – all of which have unique rhythmic signatures that can influence the quality of your life. 4. Practice becoming extemporal, stepping out of your ordinary sense of time. Take part of a day, a full day, or even a long weekend to experiment with resynchronizing with your inner clock. Leave your watch off and respond to your own inclinations. 5. Without trying to change or alter it in any way, practice simply becoming aware of your breathing throughout the day. Become aware of the rhythm as well as the depth of your breathing. The breath is an exceptional gauge of our personal timing, the momentary rhythmic process that determines our pace or tempo.**

With few spiritual school zones left in modern life, or places where we must legally slow down, where is rest enforced? When we do rest, we become more open and receptive to our deeper nature. The essence of myth is about the process of recurrence, of restoration, of life's essential rhythmicity. It is about conscious resonance with another world, a world beyond the intrusive pounding and screeching of industrial demands. A new and more conscious regard for rhythm, resonance, and rest is our ticket on another train.

