GLAMOUR

‘Revenge Bedtime Procrastination’ Is Real, According to Psychologists

You know that thing where you stubbornly stay up late for no reason because you feel like you didn't get any time to yourself? Here's how to stop.

It’s late and you’re exhausted. You barely had time to eat dinner and shower after work. Maybe you watched a few episodes of a show, read a chapter of your book, struggled through your skin-care routine. Now you’re in bed, and you know you should sleep. But you keep scrolling—past the point that feels good. Your eyes start to close and you have to be up at 5 a.m. for work, but you’re not ready for rest. Some part of you is unsatisfied.

This activity has a name: bedtime revenge procrastination.

It’s a phrase popularized by millennials and Gen Z in China, which literally translates to “sleepless night revenge,” Sandra, a 24-year-old Mandarin speaker living in Paris, told Glamour. In the U.S., the pandemic has exacerbated everything that was already broken in a culture where work determines access to health care and sense of value. “The combination of a capitalist workday, mixed with work-from-home life and an ever growing attachment to our technology is the perfect storm that contributes to ‘revenge bedtime procrastination,’” says Aliza Shapiro, a clinical social worker and therapist in Manhattan. “Intuitively, we know we need to rest in order to become productive again, so when we lack the resource of relaxation during the day we try to find it in other places and times—even if it's at the expense of our sleep.”

It’s deeply validating to learn that this habit has a name, and that you are not alone in doing it. The term “bedtime revenge procrastination” has spread on social media, each “heart” and “it me” like a little collective sigh of relief, a loss of shame.

Last June writer Daphne K. Lee introduced it to English-speaking Twitter as “a phenomenon in which people who don’t have much control over their daytime life refuse to sleep early in order to regain some sense of freedom during late night hours.”

Saman Haider, a 20-year-old pre-med psychology student at the University of Iowa, discovered the phrase in January when she found herself awake one night at 3 a.m., and started googling. “I came across this term, and as soon as I read the definition, I was like, ‘This is me,’” she says. It felt so good to name her problem that she made a TikTok video to share the idea, and to see whether other people could relate.

“Fun fact, did you guys know that there’s this thing called revenge bedtime procrastination,” she asks in a video that has now been viewed 13.6 million times. “Where people will refuse to sleep because they don’t have much control over their daytime life, so they will sleep very late at night, even if they’re super tired, because they just don’t want that free time to end at night, and they don’t want tomorrow to start?”

Haider’s video, bleakly relatable with its stark background and drained Starbucks cup, garnered millions of likes and tens of thousands of comments. “Okay, so it has a name” and “I do this” are common variants. “I feel personally attacked,” reads one comment liked more than 50,000 times.

Why do we do this?
Chel’sea Ryan, a clinical social worker and therapist at the Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS in Phoenix, says she has both personal and professional experience with this phenomenon. After a day of office work and an evening of caring for her kids, she would lose sleep in favor of unwinding, reasoning, “This is my only time to breathe, be human, be a woman.” But her late-night habit created an anxiety spiral that eventually resulted in panic attacks. She’s seen it in her patients too. “A lot of clients have kids, or multiple jobs, or home life isn’t that great,” she says. “So they’re picking and choosing times when they can really cater to themselves, and usually that’s at night.”

If we’re really going to cater to ourselves, why not do a few minutes of yoga, or drink tea, as we've been told to do 5,000 times by freakishly cheerful wellness influencers? Why fall face-first into our phones? “For many of us, when we finally put away all of our technology at the end of the night, it is the first time that we are left alone with our thoughts and feelings without any distractions,” says Shapiro. “If we're afraid of what we may find, or—perhaps more commonly—know that we will be met with uncomfortable, complicated, or heavy thoughts or feelings, we are going to unconsciously try to avoid them. Engaging in the late-night scroll may be an attempt to either push off the flood of emotion that may hit us when we close our eyes, or to exhaust ourselves to the point that we instantly fall asleep and don't have to think at all.”

Dark! Accurate! And, ultimately, Shapiro says, not going to work. “We're trying to protect ourselves, but we forget that avoidance actually makes the emotions stronger and we enter into a cycle of late-night anxiety,” she says.

Why is this so much worse right now?
“Demands on our time have gotten higher during the work-from-home period of time, not lower,” Ashley Whillans, Ph.D., a researcher and behavioral scientist at Harvard Business School, tells Glamour. She’s been studying how people are using their time during the pandemic in five countries, including America—her group’s research found that women, especially mothers, are spending more time on childcare and household chores than fathers do. (Surprise, surprise.)

They also found that young women, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, spent less time on leisure than their male counterparts. This may be because we have more demands on our time—maybe we're parents, managing Zoom school, or scrambling to pay the bills with a second job, or doing the seemingly endless work of a job search, or simply allowing a 9-to-5 to balloon into an 8-to-6. “Our workdays last longer because there’s no clear separation of when we should stop,” Whillans says. This is not healthy. “Emotional detachment from work is hugely important for job satisfaction!” she says. “But the end-of-our-workday ritual has gone missing in the virtual environment.”

And on top of that, we’re lonely. Tea and yoga just aren’t relevant when your deepest urge is not for tranquility but for human connection. “We’re inherently social animals, and social media provides us

with an access, a conduit to other people's social lives that especially right now is less available," Whillans says. "So it absolutely does not surprise me at all that we are trying to take back control over a very stressful time." Scrolling through your phone at night, she says, allows us to "imagine alternative realities of things we could be doing." Overdoing it on social media is an understandable reaction to social distancing, Ryan agrees. "A lot of my patients are struggling during the pandemic with quarantine depression because everything is remote, isolated—their days kind of run together," she says. Of course we're trying to scroll our way into feeling better.

So how do we stop?
Laurie Santos, Ph.D., the director of the Comparative Cognition Lab at Yale, whose class on the psychology of happiness has become world-famous, has the answer you might not want to hear: "There's lots of research showing that feeling like you have a bit of free time is super important for well-being," she says. But at the same time, "many of the problems that drive revenge sleep procrastination—feeling depressed, being too burned out to enjoy your day, and so on—can be helped by simply getting more sleep," she adds. "So I worry that people are creating a vicious cycle by ruining what leisure time they do have by not getting enough sleep." Of course, we all know that we should get more sleep. But Santos offers it not as an annoying cure-all, but as a real, strategic opportunity to potentially break the "revenge bedtime" cycle.

You can also do more to optimize the time you do spend on your nighttime "revenge," she says. "Often, when we get free time, we flop down and watch TV or scroll through social media. These leisure activities don't really give us the well-being bump we assume." We would feel more satisfied at the end of the day, she says, if we spent time on leisure activities that let us learn or give us a sense of "flow." (Apparently the gentle movement of Netflix's "next episode" button does not count as "flow.")

Ryan and Shapiro both recommend carving out breaks while it's still light outside—calendaring them in and taking them seriously. Ryan, knowing that later in the evening she'll be busy with her kids, builds 15 minute segments into her workday. "I shut my office door, I put my music on, and I just breathe," she says. But it would be okay to use that time just to watch half a TV show, she adds. Shapiro says that, to avoid the mindless scroll later at night, you have to practice not being afraid of your thoughts. Meditate, even for five minutes. Actively stopping and asking yourself how you're doing throughout the day will help you avoid an outpouring of negative feelings—and subsequent hours of scrolling—at night. A bonus: If you do this during work, you can hopefully get "revenge" (or in this case, basic workers' rights) by taking time out of your workday, not out of your free time.

Haider, whose TikTok launched a thousand "It me"s, says her DMs are currently flooded by people who want to change. Me too—I find myself fighting sleep a few nights a week, desperately grasping for a few more moments of positive emotion before I pass out and start the day again. I think the thing about bedtime revenge procrastination is that, however bleak its origins are and whatever toll it takes, it's a quiet reminder from your unconscious that you really do like being alive. There are so many good things in life that you don't want to fall asleep and miss them. We want one more funny video, one more text from a friend, one more moment feeling awake, and happy, and free.

By Jenny Singer

https://www.glamour.com/story/revenge-bedtime-procrastination-is-real-according-to-psychologists?utm_source=pocket-newtab-global-en-GB