

Sleep is the new status symbol

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By [Penelope Green](#)
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At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, the digital futurist playground, David Rose is investigating swaddling, bedtime stories and hammocks, as well as lavender oil and cocoons. Rose, a researcher, an inventor-entrepreneur and the author of "Enchanted Objects: Design, Human Desire and the Internet of Things," and his colleagues have been road-testing weighted blankets to induce a swaddling sensation and listening to recordings of Icelandic fairy tales — all research into an ideal sleep environment that may culminate in a nap pod or, as he said, "some new furniture form."

"For me, it's a swinging bed on a screened porch in northwestern Wisconsin," he said. "You can hear the loons and the wind through the fir trees, and there's the weight of 10 blankets on top of me because it's a cold night. We're trying a bunch of interventions."

Meanwhile, at the University of California, Berkeley, Matthew P. Walker, a professor of neuroscience and psychology and the director of the Sleep and Neuroimaging Laboratory there, is working on direct current stimulation as a cure for sleeplessness in the aging brain. Walker is also sifting through the millions of hours of human sleep data he has received from Sense, a delicately lovely polycarbonate globe designed to look like the National Stadium in Beijing that measures air quality and other intangibles in your bedroom, then suggests tweaks to help you sleep better.

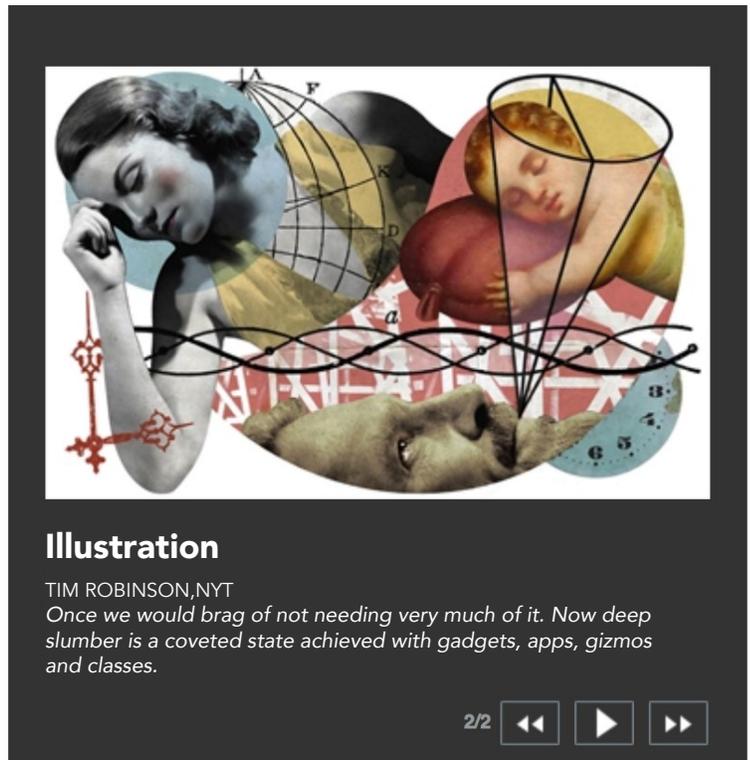
"I've got a mission," he said. "I want to reunite humanity with the sleep it is so bereft of." Sense is the first product made by Hello Inc., a technology company started by James Proud, a British entrepreneur, for which Walker is the chief scientist.

In Paris, Hugo Mercier, a computer science engineer, has invested in sound waves. He has raised more than \$10 million to create a headband that uses them to induce sleep. The product, called Dreem, has been beta-tested on 500 people (out of a pool of 6,500 applicants, Mercier said) and will be ready for sale this summer.

That is when Ben Olsen, an Australian entrepreneur, hopes to introduce Thim, a gadget you wear on your finger that uses sound to startle you awake every three minutes for an hour, just before you go to sleep. Sleep disruptions, apparently, can cure sleep disruption (and Olsen, like all good sleep entrepreneurs, has the research to prove it). It is his second sleep contraption. His first, the Re-Timer, a pair of goggles fitted with tiny green-blue lights that shine back into your eyes, aims to reset your body's clock. He said that since 2012, he had sold 30,000 pairs in 40 countries.

For years, studies upon studies have shown how bad sleep weakens the immune system, impairs learning and memory, and contributes to depression and other mood and mental disorders, as well as obesity, diabetes, cancer and an early death. (Sedated sleep — hello Ambien — has been shown to be as deleterious as poor sleep.)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls sleeplessness a public health concern. Good sleep helps brain plasticity, studies in mice have shown; poor sleep will make you fat and sad, and then will kill you. It is also expensive:



Last year, the RAND Corp. published a study that calculated the business loss of poor sleep in the United States at \$411 billion — a gross domestic product loss of 2.28 per cent.

Companies now fight “presenteeism,” a neologism that describes the lacklustre performance of foggy-brained, sleep-deprived employees, with sleep programs like Sleepio, an online sleep coach, and sleep fairs, like the one hosted last month in Manhattan by Nancy H. Rothstein, director of Circadian Corporate Sleep Programs and otherwise known as the Sleep Ambassador, for LinkedIn. For the past few years, Rothstein has been designing sleep education and training programs for a number of Fortune 500 companies. At the LinkedIn sleep fair, she taught attendees how to make a bed (use hospital corners, please) and gave out analog alarm clocks. (It was her former husband’s snoring, she said, that led her to a career as a sleep evangelist.)

If sleep used to be the new sex, as Marian Salzman, a trend spotter and chief executive of Havas PR North America, proclaimed 10 years ago, today it is a measure of success — a skill to be cultivated and nourished as a “human potential enhancer,” as one West Coast entrepreneur told me, and life extender.

“Sleep is the single most effective thing you can do to reset your brain and body,” Walker said. “We have a saying in medicine: What gets measured, gets managed.”

Sleep entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley and beyond have poured into the sleep space, as branders like to say — a \$32 billion market in 2012 — formerly inhabited by old-style mattress and pharmaceutical companies.

But the growing pile of apps, gizmos and gurus — some from unlikely corners — has led to “pandemonium in the bedroom,” Rothstein said.

Mercier sent me his Drem headset, a weighty crown of rubber and wire that he warned would be a tad uncomfortable. The finished product, about \$400, he said, will be much lighter and slimmer. But it wasn’t the heft of the thing that had me pulling it off each night. It skeeved me out that it was reading — and interfering with — my brain waves, a process I would rather not outsource.

I was just as wary of the Re-Timer goggles, \$299, which make for a goofy/spooky selfie in a darkened room. My eye sockets glowed a deep fluorescent green and terrified the cat.

The Ghost Pillow, \$85, has “patent-pending thermo-sensitivity technology” designed to keep your head cool. It is wildly comfy, but when I read what it is made from, a polyurethane foam, I lost sleep. I bought a Good Night Light LED Sleep bulb, \$28, which comes with its own “patented technology” to support your body’s melatonin production. I can’t tell if that’s what happened, but since the bulb is too dim for my middle-aged eyes, I struggled to read my go-to sleep aid, a worn copy of “The Pursuit of Love,” by Nancy Mitford, and knocked off a good half-hour earlier than usual. I was up again at 3 a.m., however, as my new Sense pod alerted me the next day, through an app on my phone. And again at 5 a.m., when the cat swatted the pod off the night stand and it glowed red in protest. “There was a noise disturbance,” the app explained.

My sleep summary, as provided by Sense, was both compelling and off-putting. Why is my air quality “not ideal”? And how comfortable am I sharing my sleep habits with a Silicon Valley startup?

Rothstein, the sleep ambassador, is less bothered by privacy concerns than by the temptation to wakefulness that phone interfaces pose. And nearly every gizmo seemed to have one.

“I’d like to have a survey done to show how many people are also reading their texts while they’re tracking their sleep,” Rothstein said. “If you want to improve your sleep, you have to make some changes. Your Fitbit and your Apple Watch are not going to do it for you. We’ve lost the simplicity of sleep. All this writing, all these websites, all this stuff. I’m thinking, Just sleep. I want to say: ‘Shh. Make it dark, quiet and cool. Take a bath.’”

Rothstein taught me her relaxation recipe, a practice that mixed gratitude with body awareness and breathing. Start with your toes, she said, and thank your body parts for their hard work. (My favourite: “Knees, I know it’s not always easy for you. You can rest now.”)

Still, the best sleep I’ve had in weeks cost \$22, and lasted 33 minutes. It was a Deep Rest “class” at Inscape, a meditation studio in Manhattan designed by Winka Dubbeldam, the sought-after Dutch architect, to evoke the temple at Burning Man, and other esoteric spaces, and created by Khajak Keledjian, a founder, with his brother, Haro, of Intermix, which they sold to the Gap for \$130 million in 2013.

Keledjian, a meditator, aims to make the practice both secular and modern: a “mindful luxury,” he said. Although there are human “facilitators” in each class, who gently touch the feet of snoring attendees if they get too loud, the practice is guided by a recording made by an Australian female member of Keledjian’s company. “We call her ‘Skye,’” he said. It was lunchtime on a rainy Tuesday, and I settled onto a soft mat outfitted with a bolster, a pillow and a cosy fleece blanket. “Skye” urged me to stay awake, and then delivered a script like Rothstein’s, in mellifluous antipodean tones. I drifted once or twice, and from the muffled snorts of the other attendees, they did too. That night, I slept until dawn.

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