

Sleep is the new status symbol

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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 author, 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, director of the Sleep and Neuroimaging Laboratory there, is working on direct current stimulation as a cure for sleeplessness in the aging brain. He is also sifting through the millions of hours of human sleep data he has received from Sense, a delicately lovely polycarbonate globe 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.”

In Paris, Hugo Mercier, a computer science engineer, has raised more than \$10 million to create a headband that uses sound waves to induce sleep. The product, called Dreem, has been tested on 500 people (out 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.

It is his second sleep contraption. His first, the Re-Timer, 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’s sold 30,000 pairs in 40 countries.



For years, 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 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 U.S. at \$411 billion — a gross domestic product loss of 2.28 percent.

Companies now fight “presenteeism” — the lackluster performance of sleep-deprived employees — with programs like Sleepio, an online sleep coach, and sleep fairs, like the one hosted for LinkedIn last month in Manhattan by Nancy H. Rothstein, director of Circadian Corporate Sleep Programs.

If sleep used to be the new sex, as trendspotter Marian Salzman 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 entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley and beyond have poured into the sleep space, as branders like to say, formerly inhabited by 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 Dreem 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 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.

I was just as wary of the Re-Timer goggles, \$299, which make for a goofy/spooky selfie in a dark 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 — and knocked off a half-hour earlier than usual.

I was up at 3 a.m., 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 nightstand 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 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 favorite: “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.

One of its creators, Khajak Keledjian, said it aims to make meditation both secular and modern: a “mindful luxury.” The practice is guided by a recording made by an Australian — “We call her ‘Skye.’”

It was lunchtime on a rainy Tuesday, and I settled onto a soft mat outfitted with a bolster, a pillow and a cozy fleece blanket. “Skye” urged me to stay awake, and then delivered a script like Rothstein’s. I drifted once or twice, and from the muffled snorts of the other attendees, they did too. That night, I slept until dawn.