'Bedtime Procrastination' Is A Big Problem, But The Solutions Are Surprisingly Simple

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Children do it. Adults do it too. But *why* do we wind up putting off pillow time even when we're dead-tired?

Scientists at Utrecht University in the Netherlands have dubbed this peculiar phenomenon bedtime procrastination -- and they show in a new study that it may be more harmful and more widespread than previously believed.

"Bedtime procrastination appears to be a very common phenomenon," study co-author Dr. Floor Kroese, an assistant professor of health psychology at the university, told The Huffington Post in an email. "Typically, we see that up to half of our participants report going to bed later than they wanted at least twice a week. Remarkably, going to bed or sleeping behavior has not earlier been studied from this self-regulation approach."

For the study, 177 men and women completed an online survey about their sleep patterns, tendencies to procrastinate, and individual lifestyles. Dr. Kroese and her colleagues then analyzed the survey responses, measuring links between procrastination and individual behavior.

What did they find?

"People who generally have trouble resisting temptations and adhering to their intentions are also more likely to delay going to bed," Dr. Kroese said in the email. "This perspective opens up new pathways for strategies that could potentially be effective in improving people's sleep behavior, which is important because sufficient sleep is getting acknowledged more and more as being essential for well-being."

After all, previous research showed that there are many health benefits to getting adequate sleep -- from increasing your attention span to helping you maintain a healthy weight.

So, how can you get more sleep by beating the urge to check your email one last time at night?

"People may benefit from more specific planning, specifying a time (11 p.m.) or situation (right after walking the dog) as a cue to go to bed," Dr. Kroese said. "This may decrease chances that, even without noticing, people stay up later than they wished. We are currently testing these and other strategies, so hopefully in a year or so we will be able to say more about it."

The National Sleep Foundation recommends these tips to improve sleep:

- Have a consistent sleep schedule not just during the week, but on weekends too.
- Start to relax with a hot bath or soothing music an hour or more before the time you want to fall asleep.
- Sleep in an area that's dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex (so avoid watching TV, using a computer or reading in bed).
- Finish eating at least two to three hours before the time you want to fall asleep.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol products close to bedtime.

The study was published online in the journal Frontiers on May 30, 2014.