

The Night Before the Night Before

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When a normal person goes to sleep they do not enter dream sleep for maybe 90 minutes after falling asleep. When narcoleptics like myself fall asleep we enter dream sleep right away. I am still awake when I begin to dream and I experience my dreams as hallucinations. Believe me, they are very, very real. If I dream that I got bit, I can feel it.

—Melody Zarnke, forty-five years old

In *Esquire's* book *What It Feels Like*, one woman describes her narcolepsy. For some reason, the editors at *Esquire* did not include what it feels like to take the ACT. Strangely, though, the nightmarish qualities of the ACT are remarkably similar to what the woman reveals. And your understanding of sleep patterns can make a significant difference in your ability to perform well on the test.

Harvard medical researchers have concluded that a good night's rest consolidates memory. Furthermore, any successful coach will tell you that performance in competition is enhanced by resting well the night before the night before. Lack of sleep always catches up with you on the second day. In other words: sleep—plus practice—makes perfect.

In one particularly memorable episode of the animated television show "King of the Hill," Peggy Hill preps to participate in a book discussion group. Her efforts include memorizing pertinent facts about famous authors from an encyclopedia.

All right, Kafka. Kafka born 1883. Wore glasses. Burdened by father. Loved to sleep in. Yes, Peggy, you are ready.

Even if you are unfamiliar with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, you don't want to wake up the morning before the ACT as a cockroach. And it's certainly not the time to sleep in. Wake up! Starbucks awaits.

Be Happy, Be Healthy

Increasing evidence shows that personality, stress, and social life can all influence your vulnerability to cold symptoms. Psychologist Sheldon Cohen of Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh compares it to kindergarten: those who "play well with others" are better off. What does this mean? Well, according to Marilyn Elias in *USA Today*:

- Happy, relaxed people are more resistant to illness than those who tend to be unhappy or tense. And when happy people do get sick, their symptoms are milder.
- The more extroverted a person is, the less likely he is to catch cold.
- The longer people live with bad stress, the more likely they are to catch colds.

As you know, an exercise program can improve your state of mind by reducing anxiety. Moreover, you will have more oxygen getting to your brain, and you will be better able to think and to concentrate. The extra energy you gain from regular physical preparation will help sustain you during the latter parts of the exam. If you take regular exercise breaks during your study periods before the exam, your productivity will increase. Endorphins are your friends. Don't exercise, though, right before going to bed. Such activity can make restful sleep difficult.

Finally, eat smart. Now is not the time to be a junk-food junkie. Consume the low-fat protein in fish, skinless poultry, beans, and legumes. Just say no to sugar and fat. These substances increase stress and lower immunity. Remember: Mom knows best. Ask her. So all you really need to do is to change your entire personality. And make sure you get plenty of sleep the night before the night before.

Sweet dreams, slugabed.

