

ADHD vs. Alarm Clock

By Neil Petersen

Hyperactivity is a core ADHD symptom, but you'd never know that if you saw me most mornings. No matter how many times I promise myself I'm going to start my day at a certain time *tomorrow*, waking up always turns out to be an intricate process.

In college, this led to me being late to a lot of my morning classes, or sometimes just missing them entirely. By my last year, I'd just decided to sign up for all afternoon classes.

And the thing is, as much as I hate waking up, I'm really not a fan of going to sleep either. If I'm awake, I'd rather just stay awake. If I'm asleep, I want to stay asleep.

According to my psychiatrist, this can be ADHD-related in that people with ADHD have trouble transitioning from one state to another. If you think about it, trying to wake yourself up at a specific time in the morning is the ultimate test of executive functioning.



Whatever the reason, the outcome is that I tend towards being an extreme night owl because I put off going to sleep and waking up as long as my schedule will allow. Yes, ADHDers can procrastinate on anything!

I found out a few years ago that there's a formal name for really, really not being a morning person: *delayed sleep-phase disorder*. It also turns out DSPS (aka being a pathological night owl) is linked to ADHD. Not that this little nugget of information makes it any easier to get out of bed when my alarm clock tells me to, but it's interesting to know.

I've tried a few different strategies for making myself more of a morning person, with mixed results:

1. I got a **light box** since [light therapy](#) is sometimes used to treat DSPS. But I ran into an unfortunate chicken-and-egg problem: to use the light box you have to wake up, but to wake up you have to fix your circadian rhythm, and to fix your circadian rhythm you have to use the light box. So I would wake up as late as possible, then wouldn't have time to use the light box before leaving in the morning.
2. I then tried to get a little more sophisticated and bought an **alarm clock with a built in bright light** that would go off whenever I set the alarm for. However, I'd generally just roll over and face away from the light after the alarm went off, often without having any memory of having done so.
3. On days when I absolutely have to wake up at a specific time that's earlier than what I'm used to, I just set **between five and ten alarms at increasingly narrow intervals** (so there's one minute between the time the second-to-last and the time the last alarm goes off). However, because this technique is somewhat cruel and unusual, I reserve it for special occasions.
4. To help with the going to sleep side of things, I wear **blue-light blocking glasses** before going to bed (e.g., see [this NYT article](#)). Not sure whether these have much effect on my sleep beyond placebo, but you can pick up a pair for less than \$10, so it doesn't hurt if you're going to be in brightly lit rooms or working on screens before bed.

Some other techniques I've heard of people using that might be worth a shot are:

- **Keeping ADHD meds by your bed** and setting an early alarm to take them before your regular alarm goes off
- [Clocky](#), **the alarm clock that has wheels** so you have to get out of bed and chase it to turn it off

But at the end of the day (or should I say the beginning of the day?), my sleep habits haven't changed a whole lot. I'm banking on hopefully becoming more of a morning person as I get older.

In the meantime: waking up in the morning sucks! That is all. Thank you.