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FASHION & STYLE

Sleep Is the New Status Symbol

By PENELOPE GREEN APRIL 8, 2017

At M.I.T.'s Media Lab, the digital futurist playground, David Rose is investigating swaddling, bedtime stories and hammocks, as well as lavender oil and cocoons. Mr. 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. Dr. 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 Dr. Walker is the chief scientist.

In Paris, Hugo Mercier, a computer science engineer, has invested in sound waves. He has raised over \$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, Mr. 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 Mr. 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, 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 federal 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 Corporation 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 percent.

Companies now fight “presenteeism,” a neologism that describes the lackluster 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 last few years, Ms. 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,” Dr. Walker of U.C. Berkeley 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.

“I can see sleep being another weapon in competitive parenting and career-building,” Ms. Salzman said. “If you want your child to succeed, do you have to buy them these sleep devices? Sleep is personal, it’s class, not mass, and now the sleep industry is based on technical services, customized for me. It’s a bizarre marriage of high tech and low tech. Chamomile tea is going to have a resurgence, as the antithesis to the whole pharma thing.”

The familiar paradigm of success used to center on the narrative of the short sleeper: Corporate titans and world leaders — like Martha Stewart and our last two presidents — counted abbreviated rest as proof of their prowess. It turns out that