

Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science*

October 29, 2019

Edited by C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic covered in this peer-reviewed APS bimonthly journal, which features reviews covering all of scientific psychology and its applications.

[The Benefits of Humble Pie](#)

[Teaching Sleep to the Sleep-Deprived](#)

The Benefits of Humble Pie

By C. Nathan DeWall

[Van Tongeren, D. R., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., & van Oyen Witvliet, C. \(2019\). Humility. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28, 465-468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419850153>](#)

Ta-Nehisi Coates has every reason to brag. He grew up learning to weather adversity in Baltimore's Mondawmin neighborhood. Police brutality, murder, and the crack epidemic were parts of daily life. Coates overcame these obstacles to earn acceptance to Howard University, write influential magazine articles and bestselling books, and testify before the US Congress. At age 40, he received a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant." But you will never hear Coates boast. He shies away from describing himself as famous or well-regarded. "I have my limitations," he said in a recent interview, "and I'm okay with that" (Gross & Miller, 2019).

Is Coates's humility linked to his success? According to APS Rising Star Daryl Van Tongeren and colleagues (2019), humility underpins professional success, supportive relationships, and well-being. Humble people form bonds that endure hardships, which may explain why humility predicts better physical and mental health (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulse, 2016). When relationship conflicts inevitably arise, humility works as a lubricant to reduce relationship friction (Davis et al., 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014). Hence, students may benefit when you encourage them to learn about and discuss humility.

What is humility? People often think of humility as thinking less of yourself. A closer definition, based on psychological science, is "thinking of yourself less." Van Tongeren and colleagues argue that humility has an *intrapersonal* component (accurate self-view) and an *interpersonal* component (being other-oriented). Like Coates, humble people know their strengths and weaknesses, which makes them better equipped to select and solve certain challenges. Humble pie is a dish often served with company, as humble people build long-lasting and supportive relationships. This was true of Coates, who formed a close bond with his first editor and remained loyal to the magazine that hired him rather than accepting

competing job offers.

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, instructors can ask their students to complete the following activity.

The Presidential Humility Activity

Slide #1

Instructions: This activity is about **humility**. Humility means that you have accurate awareness of your strengths and weaknesses. Humble people are also other-oriented rather than self-oriented. In this activity, you will use your laptop, tablet, or smartphone to gain information about two former US presidents so that you could complete a questionnaire about them. The items come from a validated humility scale (Davis et al., 2011).

Slide #2

Spend the next 5 minutes online learning as much as you can about former U.S. President **Abraham Lincoln**.

Discuss your search results with a class partner. What did you learn?

Slide #3

On the basis of your knowledge, search results, and partner discussion, please complete the following questions using the following scale:

____ Lincoln had a humble character

____ Lincoln is truly a humble person.

____ Lincoln thought of himself too highly.

____ Lincoln had a big ego.

____ Lincoln knew himself well.

____ Lincoln knew his strengths.

Slide #4

Spend the next 5 minutes online learning as much as you can about former U.S. President **Richard Nixon**.

Discuss your search results with a class partner. What did you learn?

Slide #5

On the basis of your knowledge and search results, please complete the following questions using the following scale:

____ Nixon had a humble character

____ Nixon is truly a humble person.

____ Nixon thought of himself too highly.

____ Nixon had a big ego.

____ Nixon knew himself well.

____ Nixon knew his strengths.

Now it's time to compute Presidential Humility scores for Lincoln and Nixon. Compute the following by averaging responses for each president:

Global Humility: Average the responses to Questions #1 and #2.

Superiority: Average the responses to Questions #3 and #4.

Accurate View of Self: Average the responses to Questions #5 and #6.

With your partner, discuss the scores you gave each president. Who was rated higher on global humility, superiority, and accurate sense of self? Why?

As a last part of the activity, ask students to visit Wikipedia's [Historical Rankings of Presidents of the United States](#) page. How did the two presidents differ in their average ranking? Was greater humility linked to greater success in office? If so, should companies try to hire humble employees (and weed out nonhumble employees in the application process)? Should people value humility in political candidates? Realizing that correlation does not imply causation, is it possible that becoming a U.S. President could lead otherwise arrogant people to become humble? Could you identify a potential alternative explanation for these differences (e.g., the years in which a particular President was in office).

Ta-Nehisi Coates knows he isn't perfect. His humility helps him focus his efforts on where his talents lie, steer clear of activities for which he is less suited, and, in a journalistic world in which careers are made and minced in minutes, he remained loyal to his first major working relationship. Coates is an exemplar in a hidden way. Humble people never proclaim their humility. They simply go about their normal routines, allowing the rest of the world to incorporate the best parts of their lives into our own.

See coverage of this Current Directions article in [The New York Times](#).

References

Carey, B. (2019, October 21). Be Humble, and Proudly, Psychologists Say. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/health/psychology-humility-pride-behavior.html>

Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., Worthington, E. J., Van Tongeren, D. R., Gartner, A. L., Jennings, D. J., & Emmons, R. A. (2011). Relational humility: Conceptualizing and measuring humility as a personality judgment. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 93, 225–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2011.558871>

Davis, D. E., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Hook, J. N., Emmons, R. A., Hill, P. C., Bollinger, R. A., & Van Tongeren, D. R. (2013). Humility and the development and repair of social bonds: Two longitudinal studies. *Self and Identity*, 12, 58–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2011.636509>

Exline, J. J., & Geyer, A. L. (2004). Perceptions of humility: A preliminary study. *Self and Identity*, 3, 95–114.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500342000077>

Gross, T. (Host), & Miller, D. (Executive Producer). (2019, September 24). *Fresh Air*. [Audio podcast] Retrieved from
<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/24/763477150/ta-nehisi-coates-on-magic-memory-and-the-underground-railroad>

Van Tongeren, D. R., Davis, D. E., & Hook, J. N. (2014). Social benefits of humility: Initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9, 313–321.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.898317>

Van Tongeren, D. R., Green, J. D., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., & Hulse, T. L. (2016). Prosociality enhances meaning in life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11, 225–236.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1048814>

Teaching Sleep to the Sleep-Deprived

By David G. Myers

[Blake, M. J., Latham, M. D., Blake, L. M., & Allen, N. B. \(2019\). Adolescent-sleep-intervention research: Current state and future Directions. Current Directions in Psychological Science. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419850169](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419850169)

Are you or your students lethargic, accident-prone, sickly, gaining weight, unfocused, forgetful, uncreative, or depressed?

If so, there is good news. Psychologists have confirmed a simple treatment for all these conditions — one that increases concentration, improves mood, enhances energy, boosts memory, moderates hunger, strengthens immune functioning, and reduces accident risk. Moreover, the treatment can be self-administered, it feels good, and it's free!

I speak, of course, of sleep, nature's natural remedy for many of the assorted ills of sleep-deprived adolescents and adults.

The Adolescent Sleep-Loss Epidemic

For today's adolescents, sleep deprivation is prevalent, reports Matthew Blake, Melissa Latham, Laura Blake, and Nicholas Allen (2019). Despite needing 9 hours of sleep a night, adolescents average less than 8 hours on school nights, and more than a third report difficulty falling asleep. As sleep expert James Maas noted in our correspondence, "Most teens are walking zombies, for whom just one more hour of sleep would improve their energy, alertness, grades, and athletic performance."

Given the well-publicized and commonly experienced effects of sleep loss, one wonders: Why do so many teens follow self-defeating sleep schedules?

To engage students in thinking about sleep research and its implications for their lives, instructors might invite small groups to ponder two questions:

1. Do (or did) they and their adolescent friends experience sleep deprivation? Hands up, who here has experienced an all-nighter? How many of you are tired today? How does that sleep loss affect you? Students could also be invited to respond to James Maas and Rebecca Robins' (2010) sleep quiz, with such items as "I often need an alarm clock to wake up at the appropriate time" and "I often fall asleep watching TV."
2. Why do so many adolescents experience less than optimal sleep? Perhaps your students will recognize influences identified by Blake et al.:
 - Diminished parental control
 - Expanded social and work engagements
 - Increased caffeine or energy-drink consumption
 - Extended time-draining screen time and
 - Age-related lengthening of circadian rhythm (which perhaps explains why college dorms are alive at midnight while retirement center hallways are noiseless after 9 p.m.)

Possible Remedies

We all know that cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) is a go-to treatment for depression. Blake and colleagues explain that CBT interventions have also been shown to improve sleep and associated mental health for adolescents as well as for adults (see also Blake & Allen, 2019). A combination of sleep-hygiene instruction, reduced presleep hyperarousal, relaxation and/or mindfulness training, altered light exposure, and changed attitudes about sleep have produced "significant improvements" in sleep and have also reduced anxiety, depression, and other physical, social, and academic problems. Moreover, thanks to wearable monitoring devices and smartphone applications, a new era of objective sleep research has arrived.

So, might some effective ingredients of sleep-boosting interventions be scaled up from face-to-face therapy to entire classrooms? The challenge, Nick Allen notes in our correspondence, is that knowledge and attitudes can be changed, but "*behavior change is hard.*" One can *know* the good — the health-

promoting benefits of controlled eating, aerobic exercise, and replenishing sleep, or the harm from smoking, vaping, and excess screen time — without *doing* the good.

This puzzling attitude-behavior discrepancy has been noted by sages across the ages — from St. Paul (“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”) to Goethe (“Thinking is easy, acting difficult, and to put one’s thoughts into action, the most difficult thing in the world”) to Robert Abelson’s (1972) summary of many social psychological experiments (“We are ... very good at finding reasons for what we do, but not very good at doing what we find reasons for”).

Yet there are, methinks, four reasons for hope.

First, social psychologists have found that specific, relevant attitudes can predict both intended and actual behaviors. Attitudes toward condoms predict condom use (Albarracin, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001), and attitudes toward recycling (but not general attitudes toward environmental issues) predict intention to recycle, which predicts actual recycling (Nigbur, Lyons, & Uzzell, 2010; Oskamp, 1991). Ergo, effective persuasion will target attitudes toward specific sleep practices, such as eschewing electronic screens (with their daylight spectrum light) in the hour before bed.

Second, people can improve their self-control by forming “beneficial habits” (Galla & Duckworth, 2015). To experiment, we can start small — going to bed 15 minutes earlier for three nights. If there is something we or our students would like to make a permanent part of our lives — to run before dinner, drink more water, go to bed earlier — we can experiment by doing it daily for 2 months—by which point it will likely start to become automatic, something we do without thinking and would find it hard not to do (Lally, Van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010). New sleep attitudes will help, but practicing new sleep behaviors will help more. New sleep attitudes are especially likely after “motivational interviewing” that engages students in thinking through the costs and benefits of more sleep and then setting their own specific and realistic goals.

Third, you and your students can brainstorm ways we could manage our sleep situation. We could, for example, change school start times. Blake et al. note that Australian high schools start, on average, 47 minutes later than U.S. high schools and that Australian adolescents average (voila!) 47 minutes more sleep (Short et al., 2013). Or, as individuals, we could have our phones cue our intention to sleep—by buzzing us 30 minutes before our planned bedtime.

Finally, Matthew Blake, Nick Allen, and their Australian and American colleagues offer—for those who would like to implement a comprehensive adolescent sleep intervention—free online resources. A search for “Sleep SENSE Workbook and Facilitator’s Manual” will take you there.

References

Abelson, R. (1972). Are attitudes necessary? In B. T. King & E. McGinnies (Eds.), *Attitudes, conflict and social change*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Albarracin, D., Johnson, B. T., Fishbein, M., & Muellerleile, P. A. (2001). Theories of reasoned action and planned behavior as models of condom use: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 142–161. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.1.142>

Blake, M. J., & Allen, N. B. (2019). Prevention of internalizing disorders and suicide via adolescent sleep interventions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.08.027>

Galla, B. M., & Duckworth, A. L. (2015). More than resisting temptation: Beneficial habits mediate the relationship between self-control and positive life outcomes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109, 508–525. <http://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000026>

Lally, P., Van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modeling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 998–1009. <http://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.674>

Maas, J. B., & Robins, R. S. (2010). *Sleep for success: Everything you must know about sleep but are too tired to ask*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

Nigbur, D., Lyons, E., & Uzzell, D. (2010). Attitudes, norms, identity and environmental behaviour: Using an expanded theory of planned behaviour to predict participation in a kerbside recycling programme. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49, 259–284. <http://doi.org/10.1348/014466609X449395>

Oskamp, S., Harrington, M. J., Edwards, T. C., Sherwood, D. L., Okuda, S. M., & Swanson, D. C. (1991). Factors influencing household recycling behavior. *Environment and Behavior*, 23(4), 494–519. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916591234005>

Short, M., Gradisar, M., Lack, L., Wright, H., Dewald, J., Wolfson, A., & Carskadon, M. (2013). A cross-cultural comparison of sleep duration between US and Australian adolescents: The effect of school start time, parent-set bedtimes, and extracurricular load. *Health Education and Behavior*, 40, 323–330. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1090198112451266>