Jet lag -- Monster or myth?

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"If human beings were meant to fly, why don't they have wings?" So goes an only partially humorous question challenging the idea of air travel. The query, which no doubt originated in the days of Orville and Wilbur, is seldom heard in today's jet-age society. But it may well have given rise to another more pressing question that is currently heard more and more — from doctors and scientists along with mere skeptics. That is, "If human beings were meant to fly, why do they get jet lag?"

Why indeed? With the ever-improving quality of commercial aircraft and the corresponding decrease in flight times, one might assume that the physical discomforts associated with air travel would have decreased accordingly. And so they have — at least while the passenger is still aloft. It's when the long-distance traveler reaches his or her destination that that notorious malady, commonly known as jet lag, rears its ugly head.
“It makes the worst hangover seem pleasant in comparison!” said firm architect Bob Wynkoop when asked to describe the sensation of jet lag. Other DH&S travelers were equally eloquent in telling of their personal bouts with the affliction. From the extreme cases – “totally zonked,” “all out of sync,” “like a zombie” – to the mildest ones – “slight slowdown,” “a bit out of kilter,” “sort of the blahs” – it’s clear that the majority of our long-distance travelers have, at one time or another, experienced some degree of what might be called jet lag.

More properly called “time-zone fatigue” (because its symptoms occur when several time zones are rapidly traversed), jet lag is caused by an interruption of the circadian rhythms (normal daily cycles) around which many of our bodily functions are patterned. Sleep, appetite, heart rate, respiration, body temperature and blood pressure are only some of the biological mechanisms that can be affected by rapid changes in time zone. And although many veteran travelers, business executives in particular, like to think that they can defeat jet lag by a simple exercise of “mind over motion,” experience has shown that the latter is more often the victor.

An informal survey of some of the firm’s most frequent travelers showed that the majority do not consider themselves to be seriously affected by jet lag. Most do concede, however, that they have been bothered by disruptions of their normal sleeping schedules after traveling across time zones. The phrase “lying awake staring at the ceiling” was often used to describe the results of traveling east to west, picking up several hours of time and then being unable to sleep in the wee hours of the following morning.

“I always wake up at the crack of dawn my first day in the west,” said EO meetings coordinator Bill Lawler; “and I know that I’m not alone in this problem. On the occasions when I’ve gotten up to jog as a way of passing time, I’ve always come across a group of sleepy-eyed people in the hotel lobby – all of them from the east.”
Jogging is just one of the many ways resourceful DH&S travelers have found to fill those restless predawn hours. EO director Len Pace likes to use that time to get some work done or write letters to his family. Bill Quinlan, partner in Executive Office, employs his "85-percent rule" on such occasions. "When I wake up in the very early morning, I just stay in bed and relax," Bill explained. "I've heard that your body gets 85 percent of the normal benefits of sleep that way."

Director Richard Skelly of Miami sees nothing to do but just "lie in bed and wait for the darn sun to come up."

EO partner Hector Anton, on the other hand, relishes those extra hours of rest. "When I'm awakened early by my internal clock, I just turn right over and go back to sleep!" he said.

Many people offered their own "tried and true" methods of inducing rest as a preventive of jet lag. "The trick is to stay up very late the night before a trip," said EO manager Joe Lopez. "That way you can sleep soundly both on the plane and when you reach your destination."

Hector Anton confided that his best weapon against jet lag is a pair of "blinders" (light-proof eyeshades). "They enable me to sleep on any flight," he said. "I never travel without them." Another EO partner, Tom Hogan, has a unique instrument for insuring uninterrupted rest in flight - a DO NOT DISTURB sign, printed in nine languages. "When I want to sleep on an airplane, I put that thing right across my chest," he said laughing, "and nobody bothers me." Tom's favorite travel story, in fact, is about an occasion when his in-flight sleeping abilities worked a little too well.

"It happened on a nonstop flight from Frankfurt, Germany to New York," Tom began. "Knowing that it would be a long trip, I went to sleep as soon as I boarded the plane. I awakened sometime later during the flight, looked at my watch and determined that we had been flying for about six and a half hours. So I asked the stewardess if she would please get me something to eat and drink before we landed. 'But sir, we won't be landing for another five hours,' she said. 'That's impossible!' I insisted, 'we're due to land in an hour and a half.' The stewardess repressed a smile as she replied, 'I'm afraid not, sir. A mechanical failure laid us up in London for almost four hours, and you slept right through it.'"

West-to-east travelers, of course, have the opposite problem. When reaching their eastern destinations, they find themselves going to bed several hours before the normal time and then having to get up that much earlier. "You can always pick out those who have traveled east to a firm conference," Bill Lawler reported. "They're the ones who are up playing cards until 3:00 A.M. the first night."

Portland manager Ron Mundt avoids this predicament by staying very active on his plane trips east. "The longer you can keep awake on the plane by talking, reading or whatever, the less trouble you'll have sleeping when you arrive," he explained.

Some west-to-east travelers solve the time-difference problem by taking the "Red Eye" night flights. They leave the west coast in the early evening, fly through the night, rest upon reaching the east coast in the very early hours and get to work after lunch. Although Red Eye devotees swear by this method, its antagonists would almost rather walk! "There's something psychologically upsetting about not having been to bed the night before," EO partner Bill Stewart commented, "even if you've been lucky enough to get some sleep during the flight."

A few people found, especially on short trips, that the symptoms of jet lag didn't catch up with them until they got home. Citing factors such as the excitement of travel and the high pressure of business responsibilities, they reported that their adrenaline levels seemed remarkably high during the trip, but ebbed very suddenly upon arrival home, leaving them utterly exhausted.

The consensus, however, is that it's easier to come home than go away - regardless of the direction from which you came or went. "I think the familiar and comfortable surroundings of home have a lot to do with that," San Francisco partner Clancy Houghton commented. "I've
never experienced jet lag after a return trip. Also, I've found that when going away, the less familiar I am with the atmosphere of my point of destination, the worse my jet lag is upon arrival.”

According to the testimony of most DH&S travelers, jet lag is a highly subjective experience. Its symptoms can vary widely, not only among person to person, but also from flight to flight. And because of these discrepancies, several of our people believe that many of the symptoms we have come to attribute to jet lag are actually caused by factors other than the “body-rhythm disruption” cited by experts.

Tom Hogan, a veteran traveler who once logged 300,000 miles of travel in a single year, proposed that too many people fail to distinguish between jet lag and common alcoholic hangovers. “During the course of a flight to Europe,” he said as an example, “the average person consumes many drinks and probably doesn’t get too much sleep. Then he lands in Europe, feels miserable and thinks, ‘Gee, I’ve got a terrible case of jet lag!’”

Tom maintains that if the same person did the same thing (drank a lot and stayed up quite late) in the privacy of his own living room, he’d probably experience a very similar feeling — even though he’d never been close to an airport.

Other factors Tom cites as causes of the feeling we call jet lag are the excitement of flying, the emotional trauma of landing in a strange place, the monotony of the plane motor’s hum, and the poor body circulation that comes from being confined in cramped quarters for a period of time. It’s because of the last problem that comes from being confined in cramped quarters for a period of time. It’s because of the last problem that comes from being confined in cramped quarters for a period of time.

Len Pace, another frequent long-distance traveler, has his own theory about the causality of jet lag. “Energy level, physical condition and attitude are the factors that determine whether or not you suffer the symptoms called jet lag,” he said, “and the last is the most important variable, because when it comes right down to it, jet lag is a state of mind, a question of mental discipline. The best way to avoid it...is to forget it.”

Many DH&S travelers agreed with Len’s feeling that there is more harm in too much concern about jet lag than too little. However, many also reported that experience had taught them to make allowance for the effects of long-distance travel on both the body and the mind. Call it jet lag, simple fatigue or what have you, there is no denying that air travel can be exhausting; and that exhaustion can have very real ramifications for mental and physical effectiveness.

“The first time I traveled to South Africa,” confessed Dick Skelly, “I made the mistake of going to work immediately upon arrival. Never again. At about 3:00 P.M. their time I just excused myself from a meeting saying, ‘I’m sorry, but I have to leave.’ The truth was that I couldn’t even hear what was being said anymore. All I could think about was sleep!”

Managing partner Charlie Steele had a similar experience at a meeting in Munich several years ago. “My stop in Munich was only one of many on that particular tour,” Charlie recalled. “I was so fatigued from the traveling that I was afraid of falling asleep during the meeting. So, every once in a while, I got out of my seat and walked a lap around the conference table to keep myself awake.” When asked if that was a little disconcerting to those who were speaking, Charlie laughed and said, “Well, yes, I guess it must have been. But I’m sure they all knew why I was doing it.”

Although the firm has no set policy on the number of hours our people should rest before conducting business at distant locations, it’s clear that DH&S travelers exercise common sense and discretion in handling such situations. “When you’re representing the firm, you have to be sharp,” Clancy Houghton said, “and if it takes a little extra rest to make you feel sharp again after traveling, then that’s what you have to do.”

If there were but one conclusion about jet lag to be drawn from these comments, it would have to be that — at least among DH&S travelers — there is no such thing as a “typical” case. And, given the nebulous nature of the affliction, the prospect for the development of a miraculous jet-lag cure seems decidedly bleak. However, a brief look at aeronautical history may lend some comfort to jet lag’s chronic victims...

In 1927, it took Charles Lindbergh 33 hours 29 minutes 35 seconds to fly from New York to Paris. Just fifty years later, the Concorde supersonic jet was able to cover the same distance in about one-tenth of that time. Now in the event that the same ratio holds true over the next half century, the year 2028 should see us winging across the Atlantic in a mere three and a half minutes! If that should come about, the issue of jet lag will surely be passé. Technology will have solved the problem neatly...by getting us where we’re going before our systems know we’ve gone!