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Agenda: To Meet, Perchance to Dream?  
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We pinch our thighs, bite our tongues, pop jolting breath mints - we'll do anything during dry business meetings to keep from incurring the razzing that may ensue from our nodding off. Why? Because so many of us have been at meetings where just that has happened, often with the bonus of sound effects: snoring.

Indeed, new research shows that half of workers polled from large companies have attended meetings in which a colleague dozed. (Make that just about one-quarter of those who work for smaller employers.)

Poorly run meetings are among "the most excruciating and masochistic workplace experiences around," says Chuck McPherson. He's president of Interactive Meeting Solutions, a Santa Rosa, Calif.-based firm that helps companies run effective meetings and that commissioned the phone survey of 1,200 workers. What's more, he's heard that an estimated 11 million meetings are held in this country - each day! About half of them should be canceled, he says.

As for those that offer the most conducive snooze conditions, first prize goes to budget meetings, says Eric J. Robinson, who spent 15 years in corporate life. "There is nothing more boring than an endless parade of managers droning on with their bloated Excel spreadsheets and cutesy animations during the Power Point dog and pony show. Definitely snoozed though a couple of those," says Robinson, of Lido Beach, now an insurance agent who has more control over his meeting obligations. Next in line, he says, come those required professional development courses, followed by new product introductions, the ones often held in hotel ballrooms right after a triple-pasta buffet.

So, how to keep your eyes open? Mercifully, many of us are empowered with laptops, Palm Pilots, cell phones with which we can send messages, play games or snap pictures of head-nodding neighbors. Absent those, you can do what Elaine Taylor-Gordon says has worked for her - biting the inside of her mouth and poking herself with a pencil.

As president of WomensBiz.US, a Manhattan-based Web site and magazine, she says she sees an added dimension to this issue. People are so strung out from working long hours with few personal breaks that when they get the chance to sit back and become passive, the body's natural inclination kicks in. She knows of one sleep-deprived high performer who nodded off in a meeting, only to be reprimanded by a human resources representative for not portraying a fast-track image.

McPherson, who worked for Hewlett-Packard before starting his own firm last year, suggests you get proactive. To both help move things along and get engaged, you can start asking questions about the meeting's hoped-for outcome and the role you're expected to play. When other participants ramble, you can suggest their musings be put in the meeting's "parking lot" for topics to be discussed another time. He learned this approach the hard way: "It spawned out of greed to get my time back."

Yet another tactic is simply to surrender, developing ways to snooze with impunity. Robinson has been at meetings where attendants vie for the far-end chairs so they can lean their heads against the wall. Apart from that, he says, the key is to "slouch low enough in the chair so you can lean your head back. This prevents the inevitable head nodding." Wearing sunglasses may have promise, he says, though he's never seen that done.

This leads to the question of wake-up etiquette. Robinson says he's been in plenty of meetings where balled-up yellow Post-its have sailed across the table.

This also brings to mind the Microsoft Windows Tablet PC ad that's been running in a major business magazine. The guy on the near

side of the conference table is instant-messaging his colleague on the other side, telling her to "kick Dave," who has drifted off to la-la land.

Of course, the decision becomes more career-critical if the napper is your boss. That happened years ago when James Liskiewicz, now business development manager with Reynwood Communications in Manhattan, was working for AT&T. A new manager initiated a weekly 90-minute meeting in which "dry professional development topics were presented even more dryly by reluctant presenters."

However, says Liskiewicz, "One Friday afternoon, about a half-hour into a Power Point slide show projected on the whiteboard of a darkened room, we discovered that our manager had fallen asleep! We quietly left the room and promptly left for the day." The next week they all received an e-mail saying the meeting had been canceled until further notice.

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