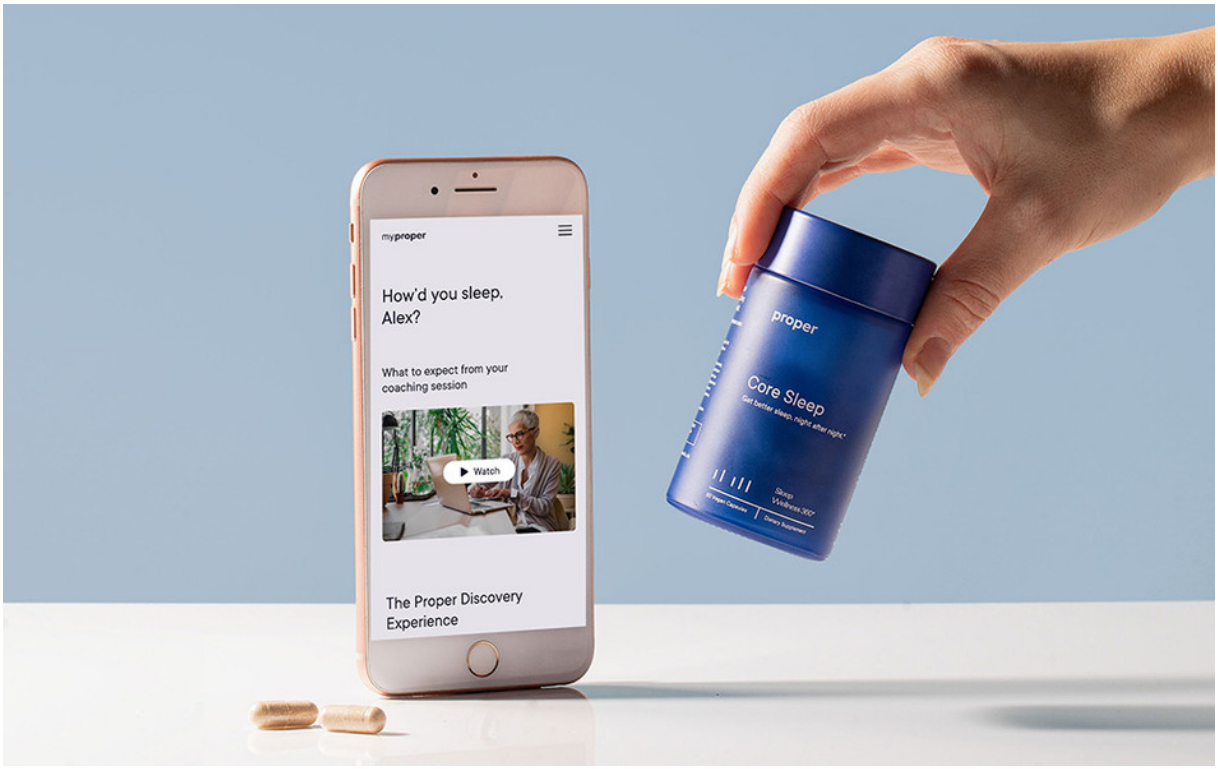
Alumni

Can’t Sleep? This Startup May Have Solutions

Kamiu Lee ’14BUS, cofounder of Proper, says her company can help people have better nights — and better days.

By
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|
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Proper

Kamiu Lee ’14BUS never had trouble sleeping. “I could sleep sitting on a train or on a plane,” she says. Even as a grad student at Columbia, taking a full course load plus internships — one or two every semester — Lee says her sleep was sound. But then a particularly stressful job as CEO of an influencer marketing company changed

things.

“I had so much more responsibility,” she says. A good night’s sleep “went completely out the window for a year and a half.” She realized that work stress was the culprit, and she struggled to feel rested. “I tried all sorts of things — over-the-counter sleep aids, breathing exercises, apps.”

So when Lee was asked to join Proper, a new Internet startup promoting sleep health, the company’s mission resonated. “I knew how much better a leader I was when I had a good night’s sleep. It really changes your ability to get things done.”

Sleep has been called the third pillar of health after nutrition and exercise. The CDC, even before the pandemic, identified lack of sleep as a major public-health issue, citing the fact that about 70 million Americans have sleep disorders, which can not only reduce productivity but also raise the risk of injury, disease, and mental illness. Proper, which launched in July 2020, is dedicated to finding healthy, holistic ways for people to improve their rest, says Lee, who is a cofounder and the chief operating officer. The company offers a variety of natural supplements as well as telehealth sleep coaching from wellness experts who create customized “sleep action plans” to help clients fall and stay asleep.

The supplements, which were conceived as alternatives to over-the-counter sleep aids, are a mix of natural compounds that target specific issues, Lee says. The Core Sleep supplement contains ashwagandha, GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), and several other natural extracts. Other formulas contain ingredients like melatonin, hemp extract, and zinc, which are said to help restore a natural sleep cycle, relieve stress, and support immunity. “We’re doing a lot of work to help people find the right formula and open them up to positive behavioral changes,” says Lee.



Kamiu Lee

Lee’s path to becoming a sleep entrepreneur wasn’t direct. She began her post-college career in investment banking, “where the mentality was ‘You sleep when you’re dead,’” she recalls. She knew she didn’t want to be a banker for the rest of her life. “I loved the people and the experience, but I didn’t see myself becoming a managing director.”

Columbia’s MBA program was part of Lee’s strategy to redirect her career path. “I thought e-commerce and digital media seemed interesting,” she says. “New tech companies were popping up in NYC, and I wanted to get involved.” Columbia offered her the opportunity to take interesting classes, continue building her network, and learn more about these new industries. “Those two years gave me the room and the time to explore.”

Proper is the culmination of that exploration. Lee says that in the year and a half since the company launched, they’ve found that their products appeal to a wide range of customers, including entrepreneurs, small business owners, creatives who need intense focus, and other professionals in high-pressure roles. “Our biggest target customer is a woman who has a career, has kids, and may also be a caretaker

for her parents,” says Lee. With so many people depending on them, these women need to be at the top of their game.

The sleep problems Lee experienced at her previous job were a sort of wake-up call, so to speak, and she says she’s excited to now be part of a solution: “It’s great to be able to help folks make healthy changes.”

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