

How To Give Up Insomnia

I am writing this on a Sunday morning following a very restless night when sleep just didn't want to be my friend. I have suffered with insomnia for many years but, by using a combination of techniques, it is more or less under control.

Yesterday, I spent much too long working on changes to my website. I was enjoying it, so the time shot by. I ended up sending out for a big Chinese meal late in the evening. A vast quantity of spicy food was washed down with several glasses of wine. If you want to lie awake half the night, just do as I did. The remedy is simple and obvious. Time to get a grip on the lifestyle.

Self-inflicted insomnia is easily cured. What I call "real" insomnia is a beast of a much deeper hue, debilitating and much harder to defeat. Even so, it is not impossible to overcome and there is a whole range of things you can do to get the upper hand.

Here I should state that I do not pretend to have any special medical or therapeutic knowledge and I would not advise anybody to stop taking their prescribed medication. I am just sharing my experiences in the hope that they might help other people who are struggling through wakeful nights.

The following tips for getting off to sleep are pretty well known but I think they are worth repeating.

1. Keep the bedroom just for bed with no reminders of daytime activities like work or study. Decorate the room in restful colours and use soft lighting. Make sure the temperature is comfortable and the ventilation adequate. Hang curtains which are heavy enough to block out the early morning light.
3. Have a bedtime routine. This does not involve doing anything special, it is just a matter of doing the same things in the same order each night. We all have things we do regularly: empty the dishwasher, put out the cat, lock the front door, set the alarm, brush teeth etc. These routine things are our steps away from the activity of the day, towards the restful night.
4. Make a soak in a warm bath part of your nightly ritual. Adding a few drops of aromatherapy oil to the water makes it doubly relaxing, soft background music makes the experience positively decadent.
5. Don't drink alcohol late at night. A nightcap might make you feel drowsy but it will disrupt your natural sleep rhythms and exacerbate your problem.
6. A warm milky drink is the best thing to have last thing at night. (Yes, our mothers were right when they made us drink cocoa.) There are tons of instant milky drinks available and most ranges have low fat options. If you don't like this milky, chocolatey type of drink, try out herbal teas but avoid anything containing caffeine.
7. Exercise is important but should be performed several hours before bedtime otherwise the adrenaline will still be pumping around your system and keeping you awake.

What if you follow the above tips, fall peacefully asleep and then wake up three hours later, in the dark middle of the night? To me, this is the most distressing type of insomnia. I know how it feels to wake up at 2.00 am, listen to the clock chime every hour round to 7.00 am, fall asleep and be rudely awakened by the alarm at 7.30. I always feel worse after that final snatched half hour of sleep than I felt in the middle of the night and sometimes get up insanely early to avoid it. The following tips can help you get back to sleep.

1. Recognise why you are awake. If you are too hot, cold or uncomfortable in any way, fix that problem. I often wake up thirsty, so I always have a jug of water at my bedside. Sometimes a drink of water is all that's needed to get back to sleep.
2. Relax by breathing slowly and deeply and by concentrating on tensing and then relaxing every muscle in your body, one by one, starting with toes and working upwards to your head.
3. Keep a pen and paper by your bed so if you are worrying about things you have to do, you can write them down in a list. This way you can stop worrying about forgetting anything important. As you write each thing down, visualise it leaving your brain and lodging itself on paper where you will find it safely in the morning. I find this exercise helps a lot if I have things on my mind.

If all this fails, you have been awake for over half an hour and know you are in for a long wakeful night; give up, get up, go do things. You won't feel any worse and you will probably feel better. There is no point in wasting those hours just lying there worrying about insomnia. If you feel sleepy further into the night, you can always go back to bed.

I gave up insomnia by sleeping whenever I could and getting up and doing things when I was wide awake even if it was

the middle of the night. I decided to sleep when I could, not worry if I woke up at strange hours and not waste time tossing and turning in search of sleep. The decision to stop worrying was the key to my recovery.

I was fortunate in that I was not tied to a 9-5 work schedule, most of my work was done at home or in the library. All I had to do was make sure I was there for my children who were all school age.

Over a few weeks I "enjoyed" a strange lifestyle. I would go to bed at my normal time, get up at any time of night when I couldn't sleep (usually between 3.00 am and 5.00 am) and read or write essays or do quiet household chores. Then I would get the children up and see that they had breakfast and got off to school. I would then, depending how I felt, carry on working or go to bed. My alarm would be set so that I did not have to worry about being asleep when the children came home from school (I never was: I think mothers have an internal alarm clock). I would sleep for as long as I needed and then get up and carry on with my day. At weekends I could sleep while the children were doing homework or out with their friends.

Gradually, my night-time sleep became longer and my spells of daytime sleep grew shorter. Without any effort or worrying, I reverted to a normal sleep pattern and resumed a conventional timetable.

Several years afterwards I came across this quotation: "If you can't sleep, then get up and do something instead of lying there and worrying. It's the worry that gets you, not the loss of sleep". -- Dale Carnegie. I couldn't have put it better myself!

If you have commitments which prevent you from using this "cure", I suggest you give it a try over a holiday weekend or any other time you can manage to be home for three or more consecutive days. You will not find sleep if you search for it or worry about it, relax and it will come to you.

About the author:

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