



Not So Sweet Dreams?

HOW TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke

It's 2 a.m. and you're pacing like a polar bear in a zoo enclosure. You should be sleeping – but your mind races. You need a job. Your daughter hates her teacher. The car makes a grinding noise when you turn. What if you can't find a good job? Should you call the principal? Can you afford car repairs? Revved up already, you search for the Iraqi souvenir your son wants to take for show-and-tell. You haven't seen it since the last PCS.

Everyone has difficulty sleeping now and then. According to the National Institutes of Health, about 35 percent of adults report symptoms of insomnia within a given year, and 12 percent experience chronic insomnia. Though sleeping poorly for a few nights isn't likely to hurt you, significant sleep loss can be devastating. Fatigue, anger and depression, and memory impairment are common consequences. And the National Sleep Foundation reports obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are linked to the hormonal effects of sleep loss. Though we're biologically built to catch up on needed sleep, relaxing isn't always easy.





» **TOO STRESSED-OUT TO SLEEP**

Life in the military is busy, and changes we can't predict or control can knock us off balance. The body's stress response kicks into gear when we're under pressure. Our hearts pound and we take rapid, shallow breaths. Adrenaline activates our

The stress response focuses our thinking on what's wrong. We become especially sensitive to danger signals, which grab our attention and hold on, even if we know they're irrational. As our minds wander, we're seized by nagging questions and possible problems. Did I pay

make matters worse. We may snap at people we care about, alienating them when we need support. The fatty, sugary foods we crave make us gain weight and feel lousy. Our thinking magnifies stress, too. We may resist what is happening to us or try to wish it away. Or, we rehash

all the reasons we have to worry. Ruminating about problems and dwelling on worst-case scenarios provokes greater panic.

ALTHOUGH SLEEPING POORLY FOR A FEW NIGHTS ISN'T LIKELY TO HURT YOU, SIGNIFICANT SLEEP LOSS CAN BE DEVASTATING. FATIGUE, ANGER AND DEPRESSION, AND MEMORY IMPAIRMENT ARE COMMON CONSEQUENCES."

muscles, preparing us to fight or flee. Since we're unlikely to need to run away from a saber-toothed tiger in modern life, we find ourselves wired for action without an outlet, said Jay Winner, MD, author of "Take the Stress Out of Your Life" (De Capo Press, 2008).

the rent? Is my husband safe? Why didn't he e-mail?

STRESS ISN'T ALL BAD

"Our body's response gives us energy and keeps us focused on problems so we can fix them," Winner said. But our reactions to stress can

MANAGE STRESS FOR SWEETER SLUMBER

Don't wait until bedtime to dial down the mental madness. Keep stress in check during the day, and you'll sleep better at night.

EAT RIGHT

Hunger isn't the only reason we eat. You may be using food to soothe your emotions, boost energy, or

banish boredom. Or you may skip meals altogether, using caffeine to keep going. Eating well is within your control, even when the stresses in your life aren't.

Calcium, magnesium, and B-vitamins are especially important, advises Janet Kinoshian, recovered insomniac and author of "The Well-Rested Woman: 60 Soothing Suggestions for Getting a Good Night's Sleep" (Conari Press, 2002). Calcium calms the nervous system and promotes high-quality sleep. Get it from low-fat dairy products, almonds, and dark leafy vegetables. Magnesium aids calcium absorption and has a sedative effect; whole grains, nuts, legumes, and fish are good sources. B-vitamins help regulate amino acids depleted by stress. Molasses, walnuts, and bananas are rich in B-vitamins.

GET MOVING

Exercise improves sleep. Many insomniacs get themselves into a cycle of sleeplessness, low energy, lack of exercise, and thus even less sleep, said Kinoshian. "Your body was meant to be used."

Exercise floods the body with feel-good chemicals, provides an outlet for stress-induced energy, and stimulates deeper, more restorative sleep. It's best to exercise about four hours before bedtime — that way, the rise and fall in body temperature will get you ready for sleep. Strive to be active everyday.

BREATHE

Diaphragmatic breaths stimulate the relaxation response, and you can do them anytime, anywhere. To practice, Winner recommends you lie down, close your eyes, and place one hand on your abdomen. Take a deep, slow breath, using the muscles in your diaphragm, not just your chest muscles. Your hand should rise and fall as you inhale and exhale.

Focus on the sensation of air flowing in your nostrils, the fullness in your lungs, and the release of the breath. Enjoy it. That revved-up, stressed-out feeling should dimin-

coming and curious attitude. You might note "I'm thinking it will be a difficult reunion." Don't resist the thought or get carried away by it. Just let it be.

"Thoughts are very transient things," you can watch them float by like clouds in the sky, Winner suggested. When you notice a stressful thought, accept it. Then gently let it go. You can practice these skills using the six minute meditation exercise at www.StressRemedy.com.

BE PRESENT

When we're stressed, we focus on past

Write Off Anxieties

Lighten your mental workload by getting thoughts out of your head and onto paper.

1. Concerned you'll forget important tasks? Try a To-Do List. Carry it with you and add tasks as you think of them. Each evening, download remaining tasks onto the list, so you won't lie in bed rehearsing tomorrow's to-dos.
2. Calm anxieties with a Worry Book. Divide your page into two columns. On the left, write your worry. On the right, note corresponding actions you'll take to address it. Make your actions small and specific. You don't have to solve the problem immediately, just move toward a solution.
3. Do unspoken words disturb your dreams? Pen Letters You Never Send. Write to your obnoxious boss or the guy who cut you off in traffic. Don't hold anything back - this is your chance to vent. When you're done, tear up the letter and move on.
4. Gratitude is the fastest way to arrest a bad attitude. Keep a Gratitude Journal to remind yourself of the good in your life. As part of your bedtime routine, list five things you're grateful for that day. Reread your grateful thoughts when your spirits need a lift.

ish immediately. When tension mounts, breathe. With a renewed sense of balance, you're better able to respond to what's happening.

LET THOUGHTS GO

Meditation techniques can help you tame stressful thoughts from moment-to-moment. "It's not the thoughts that cause stress, but what you do with them," Winner said. Observe your thoughts with a wel-

problems and future failures. Present-moment thinking interrupts the negativity. To quiet your internal chatter, focus completely on a present moment sensation, like your breathing or the sounds you hear. Stay centered by gently redirecting your attention to the present moment when thoughts intrude. You can practice present-moment thinking when walking, washing dishes, or eating. Tune in to your sensory world.





UNWIND WISELY

Ease into relaxation. The harder you try fall asleep, the less successful you'll be. Winding down takes time – and you can't force it.

BANISH BAD HABITS

If you struggle to sleep, bad habits may be to blame. Caffeine and nicotine stimulate the body and the brain. Alcohol and over-the-counter sleep aids are addictive, and they compromise your ability to handle household emergencies. Late-night exercise arouses. Working in bed makes you think about business when it's time to relax. Bright light from the TV or computer sends wake-up signals to the brain – and the late-night news gives you more to worry about.

Honestly evaluate your sleep habits. Good sleep hygiene isn't complicated, but "you have to be very disciplined to change bad habits," Kinoshian said. Be kind to yourself – changing behavior takes persistence.

KEEP A SLEEP ROUTINE

If you have children, you probably lead them through a bedtime routine. Perhaps they take a bath, put

time to sleep. Dimming the lights tells the brain to relax and stimulates melatonin production naturally. Daily journaling gives closure.

SAY "BAAA"

If you've never tried counting sheep, maybe you should. Counting sheep works because you stay focused on a peaceful, repetitive image. This is the hallmark of self-hypnosis. When you're lull-

name each one. Let other thoughts fade and keep counting until you drop off.

EXPECT AWAKENINGS

We all wake up in the night. When you wake, settle back to sleep by focusing on your breathing or counting sheep. Avoid the temptation to watch television or check e-mail. If you still can't get back to sleep, read a boring book until you get drowsy.

You may wonder how much sleep you really need. The simple answer is you need enough sleep to feel rested – without it, your mental, emotional, and physical health are at risk. If you tune up your sleep

skills but still struggle to get the rest you need, talk to your doctor. Insomnia can be caused by other health problems, and your physician can help you determine what's going on, Winner said. Taking good care of yourself should be top priority. **MSM**

ing yourself to sleep, it's the repetition that matters, not the imagery, Kinoshian said.

Choose a peaceful scene. Woolly lambs jumping a fence. Fish swimming under a bridge. Snowflakes falling. Visualize their movement in your mind's eye, and count or

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on pajamas, play a game, then read a story. With a prayer and a kiss, they're off to bed.

Nighttime routines can help grownups unwind, too. A warm shower or bath before bed calms the body by inducing a drop in temperature. Pajamas signal work is over, it's

