

WOOING THE SANDMAN: Nonprescription Ways to Get More Sleep

by Melanie Bowden

One morning, after weeks of insomnia problems, I woke to a foul odor in my kitchen. I sniffed around until I found a curdling carton of milk inside a cupboard. The day before I had placed the milk on the cupboard shelf instead of in the refrigerator. My sleep-deprived brain never registered the mistake.

I can laugh about that day now but, at the time, it scared me. I wondered if I could make a much more dangerous error--maybe while driving--that wouldn't be funny.

One out of three adults suffers from insomnia. In school we learn about how to eat properly and exercise, but no one teaches us how to get the best night's sleep. No wonder so many adults are stumbling through the day tired and then falling into bed worried that they won't get the sleep they need.

Whether you suffer from insomnia or just need more hours of sleep, there are ways to improve your sleep habits.

WHY YOU CAN'T IGNORE SLEEP DEBT

It's important to understand the concept of "sleep debt" as defined by Dr. William C. Dement, the author of, "The Promise of Sleep." If you don't get enough sleep one night, that puts you into sleep debt and the debt accumulates. Dement, who is considered the world's leading authority on sleep, says that "accumulated lost sleep is like a monetary debt: It must be paid back."

For example, let's say a good night's sleep for you means eight hours. If one night you only get six, and then sleep eight the next night thinking you're back on track, you're not. You still have two hours of sleep debt.

Over time the debt adds up and can affect your physical and emotional state, as well as your mental competency. Sleep debt is the reason for countless accidents including the Exxon Valdez and Challenger disasters. It's also why parents of newborns can feel like they're losing their minds.

SLEEP-SMART STRATEGIES

If you experience daytime sleepiness--yawning, craving a cup of coffee, rubbing your eyes--you have sleep debt. How can you lower it? First make sure you're living what Dement calls a sleep-smart lifestyle. Don't drink caffeine or alcohol in the evening, have your evening meal at least three hours before bedtime, and stick to a set bedtime along with a ritual like a hot bath or reading.

Your bedroom environment is also very important. It should be kept cool and quiet. Your mattress, pillow, and bedclothes should be very comfortable. Your bed should only be for sleeping and sex, so no reading or TV watching in bed. Exposing yourself to sunlight during the day and exercising regularly will also help you sleep better.

Going to bed as little as a half an hour earlier can make a difference in how you feel. Dement says, "The task is to work down your sleep debt until you are alert and energetic all day... You'll work more efficiently when you are well rested, and working more efficiently will, in turn, give you more time for other activities."

TIPS FOR THE STRESSED OUT

So you're determined to get more sleep, but you end up lying in bed thinking about tomorrow's to-do list. What can you do?

Old standbys like counting sheep or counting backwards from 100 are good to try. Here's a great mental game that my mother-in-law taught me: Go through the alphabet searching for one-syllable boys names for each letter. For example: Ames, Blake, Cal. If you make it to "Z", then start over with one-syllable girls names, then two-syllable boys names, and so on, but you'll probably be asleep way before then.

Another way to clear your mind is to write out your to-do list for the next day before you go to bed. You can also designate a set amount of time for worrying--say 15 minutes--every evening or write your concerns in a worry journal. The goal is to get the worries out of your mind so you will be able to ease into peaceful slumber.

Stress reduction techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, meditation, and massage can also improve your sleep according to Barbara Heller, a psychotherapist and the author of "How to Sleep Soundly Tonight." To discharge stress and prepare for bed she advises you "take a deep breath in through your nose, and then let it out audibly through puckered lips, as though you were blowing out a candle. Repeat."

An informal survey of my insomniac friends yielded the following stress suggestions: drink a cup of plain chamomile tea before bed, transport yourself mentally to a relaxing locale to drift off, and don't live near neighbors with barking dogs! If you do wake in the night, don't check the time. That will only make you worry about how many hours you have left until you need to get up.

MULTI-TASKING, EVEN DURING SLEEP!

If you find it difficult to set your worries aside at night, try sleep thinking--putting your night brain to work on issues and problems that you face during the day. This technique is outlined in Dr. Eric Maisel's book, "Sleep Thinking."

Here's how it works. Think of an issue you want to find a solution to and then pose it as a question to yourself as you fall sleep. One of Maisel's tips is: "Fall asleep with a wonder, not a worry." For example instead of thinking, "What am I going to do about my hideous job?," rephrase it as, "I wonder what I could do to improve my worklife?" Phrasing the question as a wonder makes you more receptive to possibilities. In the morning write down anything relevant you remember from your sleep or dreams.

Even if you don't actually solve any problems this way, "Sleep thinking promotes a good night's sleep because you go to bed relaxed and curious, not stressed out and worrying," according to Maisel. "Also, you go into a deeper sleep which allows you to feel more rested."

Maisel's clients find that sleep-thinking lowers stress and reduces insomnia. Most insomniacs lie in bed worrying. With sleep thinking, you learn how to refocus that worrying into positive problem solving.

KNOW YOURSELF

If you try various nonprescription suggestions and still aren't sleeping well, be sure to check with your doctor. Insomnia can be a symptom of other health problems such as asthma or depression. Heller says, "Chronic medical problems often don't respond to self-help remedies." She advises that if your sleep problem is persistent or periodically recurs, then you should seek medical treatment.

And remember, not every tip will work for you--or even be right for you. In the interest of keeping my milk fresh, there are a lot of things I'll try in order to get a good night of sleep. But give up reading in bed? Never.

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