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Sweet dreams

Monday 30th September

Serial insomniac Alice Hoey, 34, was desperate to find her "off" switch. Could the professionals help?

A recent Mental Health Foundation survey of the UK's sleep habits found that more than a third of us experience insomnia, resulting in low energy levels for the majority and poor concentration for three-quarters of sufferers.

Having struggled through bouts of sleeplessness most of my adult life, I was keen to get to the root of the problem and so I made an appointment with cognitive hypnotherapist Mark Davis (www.inspirehypnosis.co.uk (<http://www.inspirehypnosis.co.uk>)). After listening patiently, he began to question and challenge some of my beliefs about sleep and my insomnia. How much sleep do I really need, how much do I get and to what extent is sleeplessness impairing my performance? As we talked, it became apparent that it was the anxiety and fear of insomnia that was impacting on my waking hours far more than genuine exhaustion.

According to Andrew Meredith, Consultant ENT Surgeon at Benenden Hospital and Director of East Sussex Health Trust Sleep Disorders Service, I'm fairly typical. Most sufferers underestimate the amount of sleep they get and overestimate the effect it will have the next day.

"People are often surprised to hear it's normal to wake during the night," he says. "Deeper core sleep is followed by a period of lighter sleep, with more periods of REM sleep later on. So, if you're dipping in and out of sleep in the early hours of the morning, you don't necessarily have a sleep problem."

Unless these problems have a physical cause, such as sleep apnoea or restless leg syndrome, there are likely to be psychological issues that need addressing. The Mental Health Foundation says insomniacs are four times more likely to be experiencing relationship problems than good sleepers. Add to that our fast-paced lives and all-pervading technology and it's unsurprising that many of us are overstimulated and anxious come bedtime.

A good night's rest

According to Davis, each of us has what he calls a critical level of arousal, above which we either find it difficult to drop off or wake up too early. Lack of sleep then causes us additional worry the next day, increasing this arousal. It's this snowball effect that makes insomnia such a difficult nut to crack and often such a long-term problem.

The answer lies in refocusing our attention away from sleep and allowing ourselves to drift off naturally. Guy Meadows at the London Insomnia Clinic advocates accepting, rather than trying to control, your sleep. He points out that whereas an insomniac may have an elaborate bedtime routine involving hot baths, relaxation exercises and aromatherapy, a good sleeper will simply put their head on the pillow and drift off. Rather than actively trying to fall asleep, Meadows recommends concentrating the mind on a particular sound or feeling. This shifts focus away from thoughts or worries and back to the here and now.

Davis agrees that focusing too much on sleep is a no-no but believes exercises to aid relaxation can reduce stress and tension, both during the day and at bedtime. Because our minds and bodies are inexorably linked, it's essential to ease physical tensions if we're to drop off.

Each night following my consultation, I practised progressively relaxing every tiny muscle in my face and body. It was very effective at stilling my racing mind and also distracted me from my usual worries. As the weeks passed, I slept increasingly well and so worried about it less and less. The pattern had been broken.

Every now and then, the day's events may get the better of me, preventing me from drifting off. But rather than clock-watching, getting angry and tense, I now have the tools to deal with it. I accept my sleeplessness, set it aside and simply relax – my body takes care of the rest.

How to Relax: expert advice

Cognitive hypnotherapist Mark Davis suggests the following exercises to encourage your body to fall asleep: "Become aware of a part of your body (e.g. your legs) and note how it feels, or they feel. Take a deep breath in through the nose, hold for a moment and, as you hold, imagine that you are holding that part of the body. Then exhale slowly through the mouth, letting go of every last bit of tension in that part of the body. Relaxing the facial muscles will tend to reduce thinking and anxiety – particularly by relaxing the jaws, the eyes and the forehead.

Your bedtime routine

- Have a regular bedtime and a regular waking time.
- Leave stimuli such as the TV outside the bedroom.
- Don't do anything too mentally challenging within 90 minutes of bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine, as it's a stimulant and alcohol. The latter is a sedative but will make you wake up later on.
- Wrap up the day by making a list of any concerns or tasks and how you plan to deal with them.
- Go to bed when you're feeling sleepy and tired.
- Body temperature naturally dips before bedtime, so keep the bedroom cool and avoid hot water bottles.
- If you can't sleep, get up, keep lighting off or low and do something mundane and non-stimulating for 15 minutes before returning to bed.
- Don't try to sleep. Enjoy relaxing the mind and body – it will still leave you refreshed.
- Try not to worry. You won't feel as bad tomorrow as you fear.

Note: Original source - benhealth issue 17.

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