

# HOW TO SLEEP BETTER

## DR AART OOSTERHUIS



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# **INTRODUCTION: AWAKENING THE POWER OF RESTFUL NIGHTS**

Sleep, the silent orchestrator of our lives, is a universal need that transcends cultural boundaries and individual differences. From the restless nights of famous historical figures like Napoleon to the deep, contemplative slumbers of intellectuals like Einstein, our approach to this essential aspect of our existence is as varied as the stars in the night sky.

In the grand tapestry of our lives, sleep weaves its own intricate pattern, occupying roughly one-third of our earthly journey. It's during these nocturnal hours that we embark on a voyage of rejuvenation, leaving behind the weariness of the day and embracing the promise of new energy that awaits us upon waking. The quality of our sleep intimately influences the other two phases that complete our daily triad—work and relaxation. Far from being a luxury, sleep is an indispensable sanctuary where we regenerate, repair, and refuel for the demands that await us in the waking world.

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**SLEEP IS NOT A LUXURY, BUT A  
NECESSITY**

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## **NAVIGATING THE SLEEPSCAPE**

Just as each person navigates the waking world uniquely, our journeys through the realm of sleep are equally distinctive. While some effortlessly slip into the embrace of sleep, others wrestle, their minds dancing through the twilight hours. The rhythm of our sleep—like a

melodic symphony—can differ from person to person, creating a variety of sleep patterns that reflect our individuality.

## **THE DREAM OF IDEAL SLEEP**

What do we desire from our nightly sojourn into the land of dreams? The collective aspirations for an ideal night's rest often echo common themes:

- **Effortless Slumber:** The ability to effortlessly drift into sleep, preferably within the window of fifteen to thirty minutes.
- **Seven to Eight Hours of Sleep:** A peaceful, uninterrupted seven to eight hours of rest, with at most a fleeting awakening or two, akin to a gentle ripple on the surface of a tranquil pond.
- **No Nightmares:** A reprieve from unpleasant occurrences such as nightmares or other disruptions.
- **A Refreshed Dawn:** Waking up at the dawn of a new day feeling revitalized, free from the shadows of headaches and the heaviness of tired limbs.
- **One Period, One Cycle:** A single, satisfying sleep period, ideally during the night, completing its cycle within the span of 24 hours.
- **Quality That Echoes Through the Day:** The assurance of good sleep quality that resonates through our waking hours, rendering us alert, comfortable, and adept at navigating the challenges of work and life.

Yet, should our sleep deviate from these expectations, it is not a sign of inadequacy or malfunction. The sleep journey is as unique as the individual sleeper, and understanding our individual sleep patterns is the first step on the path to unlocking the potential of restful nights. In this self-help exploration, we will try to decipher the intricacies of sleep, demystify its challenges, and empower ourselves to embrace the profound influence it wields over our waking lives. Welcome to the quest for the quality of sleep you deserve.

# EMBRACING SLEEP DIVERSITY

In the intricate tapestry of humanity, one undeniable truth emerges: not everyone is the same, especially when it comes to the realm of sleep. The nocturnal voyage, where we replenish the energy expended during the day, is as diverse as the individuals who embark upon it. Understanding this diversity is the key to unlocking the potential for restful nights and rejuvenated mornings.

## THE ENERGY EQUATION

In the waking hours, we are dynamic beings, constantly consuming energy as we navigate the challenges of our lives. Sleep becomes the period where the energy reservoirs are replenished, and the goal is simple—balance. The energy gained from sleep should ideally match the energy expended while awake. It's a delicate equilibrium that, when achieved, defines the essence of successful sleep.

However, the terrain of energy consumption varies from person to person. Factors such as age, lifestyle, and temperament contribute to the dynamic nature of this landscape. A person leading a calm, measured life might expend less energy than someone embracing a hectic, vibrant lifestyle. And so, the equation of energy replenishment becomes a highly individualized endeavor.

A person who expends considerable energy throughout the day can still thrive with adequate, restful sleep that provides the necessary replenishment. Conversely, a less active individual might find their optimal balance with a slightly different duration of sleep. The duration of sleep required is not a one-size-fits-all metric; it's an intricate balance between the energy expended and the quality of sleep attained.

## DEEP SLEEP VS. LIGHT SLEEP

The quality of sleep, often measured by its depth, plays a pivotal role in this equation. A "deep" sleeper requires less time compared to a "light" sleeper to achieve the same amount of replenishing energy. This inherent variability means that some individuals can function optimally with less sleep than others, debunking the myth that less sleep is inherently inadequate.

Individuals who deviate from the perceived "normal" sleep duration often find themselves grappling with the belief that their sleep is insufficient. It's crucial to recognize that the

canvas of sleep patterns is painted with a myriad of hues, and each stroke is unique to the individual.

## **THE LIFECYCLE OF SLEEP: FROM CRADLE TO SILVER YEARS**

As we traverse the lifespan, the demands of our sleep evolve. Infants require a substantial period of up to sixteen hours of sleep, gradually consolidating into more structured periods. Children, in their varied stages of development, dance between the realms of nighttime and daytime sleep, each phase tailored to their specific needs.

As we age, our energy expenditure undergoes a transformation, leading to a reduction in the required duration of sleep. The average adult sleeps for seven to eight hours per night, with one or two brief interruptions. However, the twilight years bring forth a different cadence, with individuals aged 65 and older resting for six to seven hours, often punctuated by multiple interruptions towards the end of the night often due to physical triggers.

Yet, the intricacies of sleep go beyond mere duration. The time it takes to fall asleep, the number of awakenings, and the overall sleep quality fluctuate significantly among individuals. It's a reminder that our sleep experiences are as unique as our fingerprints, shaped by an interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

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**THERE CAN BE A HUGE DIFFERENCE  
BETWEEN PEOPLE IN THE DURATION OF  
SLEEP AND SLEEP ONSET TIME**

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## **THE UNYIELDING DICTATOR: THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK**

Embedded deep within the recesses of our brains is the unyielding dictator of our sleep-wake cycles—the biological clock. Configured early in life, this internal timekeeper dictates when it's time to sleep and when it's time to wake up. Attempts to modify this inherent

setting are met with resistance, giving rise to the distinctions between evening people and morning people, or long sleepers and short sleepers.

## **CHRONICLES OF THE NIGHT: EVENING AND MORNING PEOPLE**

Diverging from the "normal" sleepers, evening and morning people carve their unique chronicles of the night. Their ideal bedtimes deviate by three to four hours from the average, creating distinct sleep patterns that are often intrinsic and familial. Medications seldom prove effective in reshaping these innate sleep tendencies, emphasizing the indelible mark of the biological clock.

However, the resilience of the biological clock allows for adaptation, albeit to a limited extent. Light, darkness, and external factors like irregular work shifts can influence the internal clock to align more harmoniously with our lifestyle.

## **THE SLEEP EXTREMES: LONG AND SHORT SLEEPERS**

Beyond the temporal variety of evening and morning people, there exists a spectrum of sleep duration that ranges from those who require a significant amount of sleep—more than eleven hours—to those who thrive on very little—less than five hours. Similar to their evening and morning counterparts, these sleep patterns are etched into the configuration of the biological clock.

In this exploration of sleep diversity, we navigate the intricate pathways of individual sleep experiences. By understanding the nuances of energy consumption, the interplay of deep and light sleep, and the influence of the biological clock, we embark on a journey towards personalized solutions for managing sleep disorders. The landscape of sleep is vast, and within its folds lie the keys to unlocking the rejuvenating power of restful nights. Welcome to the first chapter of your sleep odyssey.



# UNRAVELING THE SLEEP PUZZLE: ASSESSING YOUR SLEEP PATTERNS

In the nocturnal pattern of our lives, the contours of our sleep are both intricate and unique. Yet, amidst this ebb and flow of nightly rhythms, how do we discern whether our sleep is harmonious or disrupted? This chapter focuses on self-examination, guiding you through a journey of introspection to unravel the mysteries of your personal sleep patterns and assess whether a genuine sleep problem lurks in the shadows.

## IDENTIFYING THE WHISPER OF DISCONTENT

"Do I have a sleep problem?" This question echoes within the corridors of our minds, prompting us to explore the nature of our nightly experiences. Sleep, an indispensable aspect of our well-being, can sometimes elude its grasp, leaving us to question its quality and impact on our waking hours.

As we delve into this exploration, it's essential to recognize that everyone encounters occasional sleep challenges. The sporadic night of restlessness or a fleeting encounter with difficulty falling asleep doesn't necessarily signal a persistent sleep problem. Expectations about sleep perfection often set us up for undue worry. The truth is, we don't need flawless sleep every night to maintain our health and well-being.

## THE POWER OF SELF-EXAMINATION

If you find yourself pondering your sleep quality, it's a cue to embark on a journey of self-examination. By carefully scrutinizing your sleep patterns, you can gain valuable insights into the nature and severity of your concerns. The following set of questions serves as a compass, guiding you through the labyrinth of your sleep experiences:

1. How many nights did I sleep poorly last week?
2. What distinguished my best night from my worst night in the past week?
3. How do I feel during the day after a night of poor sleep?
4. If I sleep poorly, is it due to difficulty falling asleep, insufficient sleep duration, or frequent awakenings?
5. What distinguishes my current sleep from the time when I didn't have sleep complaints?

6. Is there a difference between my sleep during weekdays and weekends?
7. Since when have I been experiencing sleep problems?
8. Did my sleep issues start suddenly, or was there a trigger?
9. What time do I prefer to go to bed? How long do I want to sleep? If I slept well, would I prefer to wake up early or late?
10. Is there a family history of sleep problems?
11. Have my evening habits before bed changed? (For example, increased alcohol consumption or engaging in activities like exercising before sleep?)
12. Am I satisfied if I sleep well at least four nights per week?
13. Do I feel restless when trying to fall asleep? Is the restlessness physical or related to anxious thoughts or emotions?
14. What does my partner think about my sleep? Has anything changed during the day according to my partner?

Take a moment to reflect and jot down your answers, creating a roadmap for self-discovery.

# THE SLEEP DIARY: ILLUMINATING THE NIGHT

In conjunction with the questionnaire, maintaining a sleep diary becomes your nocturnal companion. This tool, included later in the book, captures the essence of your nightly experiences. Covering night 1 to night 7 in a weekly schedule, it provides a canvas for recording when and how you slept each night. Remember, accuracy is paramount, so complete the diary in the morning after waking up rather than in the midst of nocturnal awakenings.

## Sleep Diary

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Start date: \_\_\_\_\_

Morning							
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Day of week:							
What time did you get into bed?	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM
What time did you try and go to sleep?	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM
How long did it take you to fall asleep?	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.
What time did you wake up this morning?	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM
How many times did you wake up during the night?							
No. of times							
No. of minutes							
Last night I slept a total of:	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.
How would you rate your sleep quality?							
Very Poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Was your sleep disturbed by any factors? If so, list them here (ex. allergies, noise, pets, discomfort/pain, etc.)							
Any other comments about your sleep worth noting?							

Evening							
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Day of week:							
I consumed caffeine in the: (AM) morning, (PM) afternoon/evening, (LN) late night, (NA)							
AM, PM, LN, NA							
How many?							
How much exercisedid you get today?							
No. of minutes							
Time of day AM, PM, LN, NA							
Did you take a nap? (check one)	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
If yes, for how long?							
List all medications, vitamins, and supplements you took today							
Approximately 2-3 hours before getting to bed, I consumed:							
Alcohol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1+glasses of water, juice, milk, etc.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A heavy meal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caffeine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
NA	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My nighttime routine included: (ex. taking a bath/shower, stretching, reading a book/ magazine, using mobile devices or a computer)							

At the end of the book, a full-size printable sleep diary awaits you, ready to document the nuances of your nightly journey.

## ALIGNING PERCEPTION WITH REALITY

Our perception of our own sleep is often shaped by a few nights of restless slumber, creating a distorted reality. The combined information of the questionnaire results and the sleep

diary serves as a powerful lens to discern whether subjective evaluations align with objective observations.

The true test begins when poor sleep persists for at least three nights per week, extending over periods of three weeks or longer. If this criterion resonates with your experience, the next step is to delve deeper into the nature of the problem.

## **DECODING THE NATURE OF SLEEP PROBLEMS**

As you navigate the landscape of sleep, it's crucial to categorize the issues you encounter. A genuine sleep problem typically manifests when poor sleep becomes a consistent factor, persisting for three or more nights per week over a span of three weeks or more.

### **Insomnia**

Difficulty falling asleep becomes a concern for individuals under 50 if the time between bedtime and the onset of the first uninterrupted sleep period exceeds 30 minutes. For those over 50, this period shouldn't exceed 45 minutes. This should occur at least three times per week.

### **Sleep Maintenance Insomnia**

If periods of wakefulness exceed 30 minutes for individuals under 45 or one period exceeds 60 minutes within the first six hours after falling asleep, it's a sign of sleep maintenance insomnia. For those over 65, three or more periods exceeding 30 minutes during the first four to six hours of the night denote this problem, occurring at least three times per week.

### **Combination of Both**

Some conditions give rise to a combination of sleep problems, creating a unique sleep-wake pattern. Factors like pain may lead to difficulty falling asleep and frequent awakenings, while depression can contribute to both difficulty falling asleep and early morning awakenings. This pattern might resemble changes seen in older individuals, but with nuanced differences.

### **Non-Restorative Sleep**

If your sleep diary reveals that you consistently wake up feeling unrefreshed despite seemingly adequate sleep, it may indicate poor sleep quality. Symptoms like flu-like sensations and an increased need for sleep may accompany this type of sleep problem.

By unraveling the intricacies of your sleep through self-examination, you gain the compass to navigate the terrain of potential sleep problems. This knowledge forms the bedrock for seeking tailored interventions and treatments to enhance your sleep quality and, in turn, elevate your overall well-being. Welcome to the gateway of self-discovery and transformative insights into the realm of sleep management.

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SLEEP

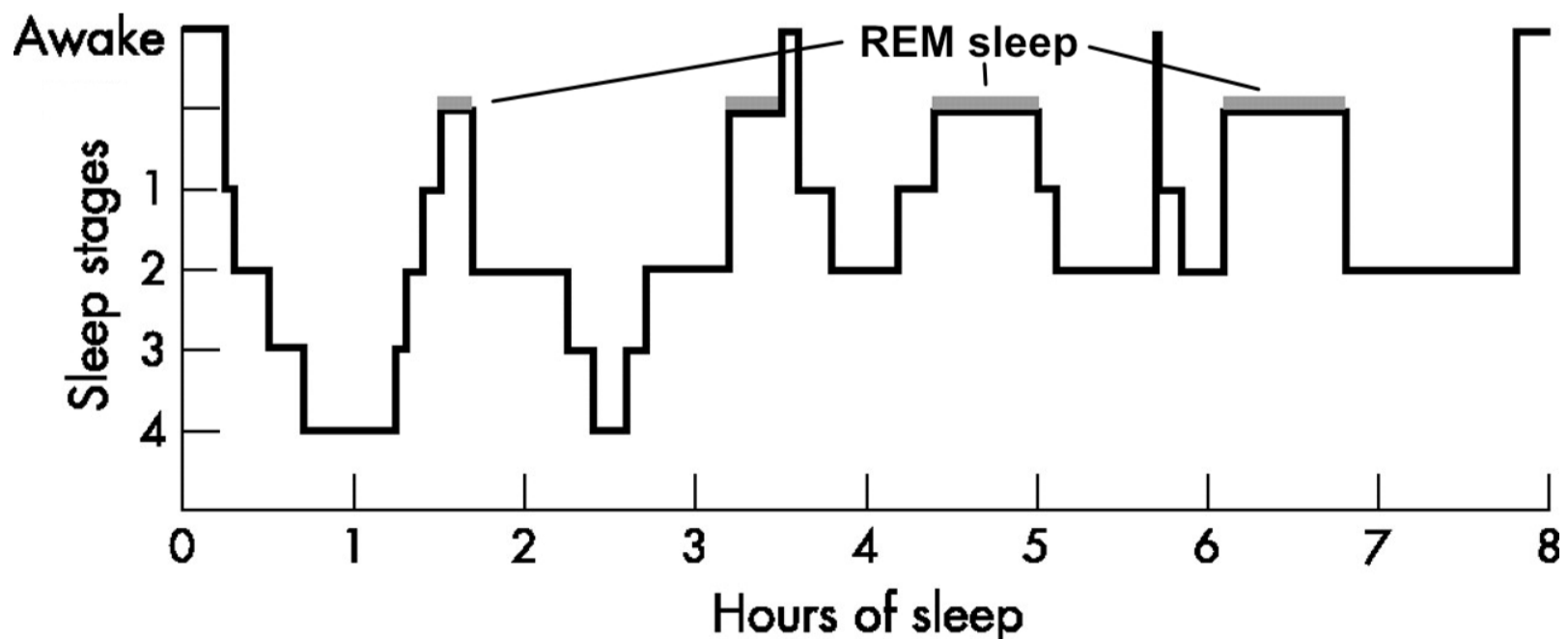
## THE MULTIFACETED ROLE OF SLEEP

It's a universal truth that a night of poor sleep leaves us feeling far from our best, but what about the long-term consequences of persistent sleep deprivation? While the precise function of sleep remains a subject of ongoing exploration, its undeniable connection to the restoration process shapes our understanding of its vital role in our lives.

### Restoration

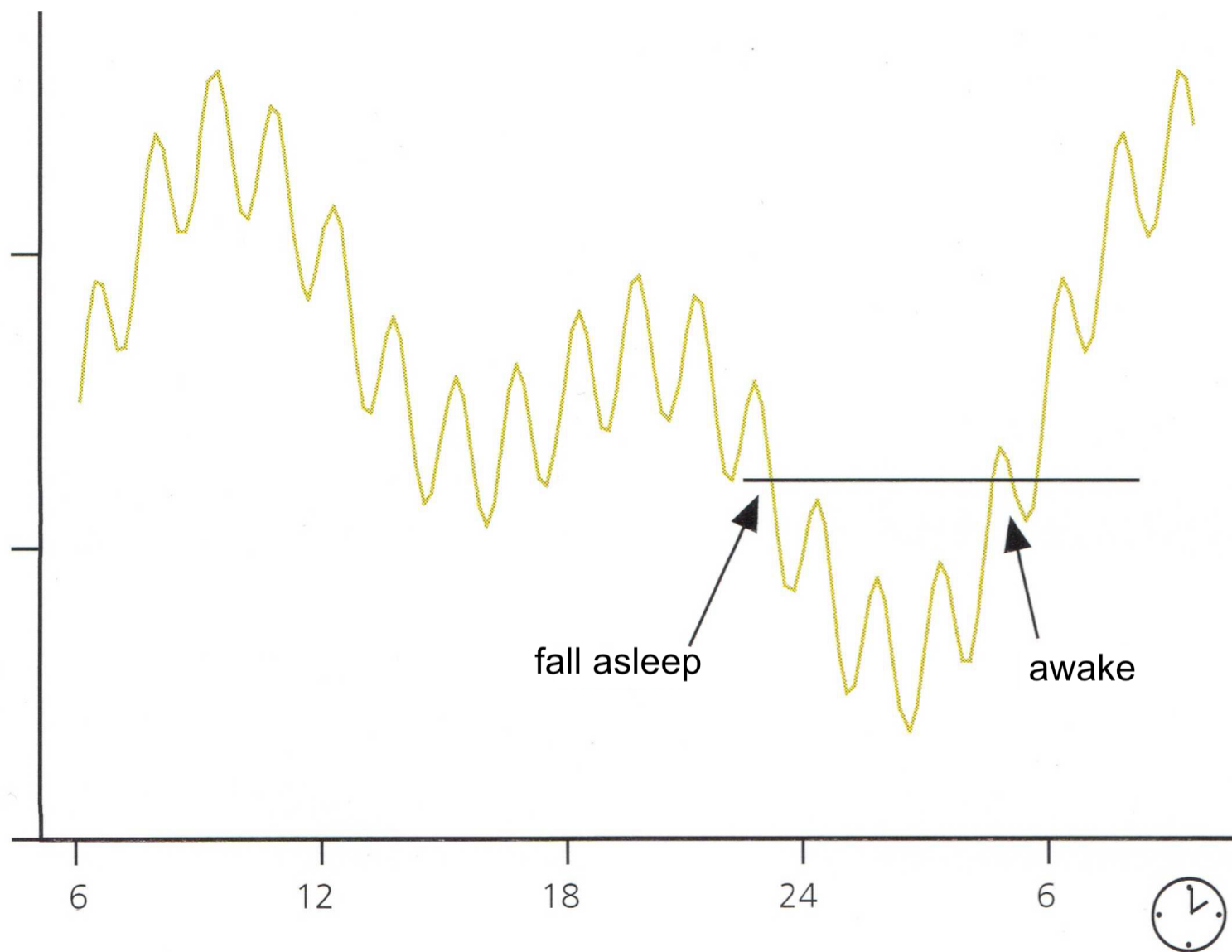
Our sleep patterns, deeply embedded in our biological framework, follow a rhythm that resists manipulation. Despite assertions from so-called "sleep hackers" like Thomas Edison, who dismissed sleep as a waste of time, their attempts to circumvent this fundamental biological need have often ended in disappointment.

Prolonged sleep deprivation exacts a toll on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It casts a shadow over cognitive function, memory consolidation, attention span, and decision-making abilities. The repercussions extend beyond the immediate, increasing the risk of chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and a compromised immune system. On the mental health front, the impact reverberates with higher susceptibility to depression, anxiety, and mood disorders.



## The Sleep Pattern

The graphical representation of the sleep pattern reveals a recurring cycle of approximately ninety minutes. Within this rhythm of your sleep, a phase of deep sleep emerges, vital for physical restoration. Alongside it, the dream sleep phase intertwines with emotional recovery, likely playing a role in organizing and storing information in our memory.



This biological rhythm, evident even during waking hours as depicted in the graph, is intrinsic to our being. Attempts to align your sleep with the demands of a hectic agenda often result in transient issues, akin to the challenges posed by jet lag.

Yet, chronic deprivation of rejuvenating sleep carries weighty consequences. In the past, these consequences were trivialized, often seen merely as symptoms of depression. Modern understanding, however, underscores that poor sleep is intricately linked to a disrupted stress regulation system, often preceding symptoms of anxiety and depression rather than being secondary to them.

Moreover, those grappling with poor sleep are not only at an increased risk of accidents but also contend with memory lapses, concentration issues, and persistent fatigue. The repercussions extend to a heightened risk of developing serious health conditions, including cardiovascular diseases, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and potentially even Alzheimer's disease.

## **Prioritizing Sleep: A Shortcut to Optimal Well-being**

Understanding the gravity of sleep's importance and acknowledging the perils of prolonged deprivation is paramount for maintaining optimal health. Prioritizing quality sleep and embracing healthy sleep habits emerge as crucial steps in enhancing overall health and wellbeing.



# UNMASKING THE ORIGINS OF SLEEP STRUGGLES

Sleep troubles often don't surface in isolation; they are intricately influenced by a myriad of factors. Identifying a sleep problem is just the first step; the real journey lies in uncovering the underlying causes, recognizing that multiple forces may conspire to disrupt your nightly repose.

## STRESS AND TENSION

A significant portion of sleep complaints finds their roots in stress, tension, and a misregulated stress response system. External pressures, whether from work, relationships, or life changes, can manifest as a disruptor to your sleep sanctuary. Delve into your inner world with these self-reflection questions:

- Am I haunted by the fear of inadequate sleep?
- Have familial dynamics shifted?
- Is there a change in my relationship with my partner?
- Have alterations occurred in my work or my partner's work situation?
- Are my leisure activities no longer a source of joy?
- Do family or friend dynamics present challenges?
- Does the empty nest syndrome leave me feeling lonely and purposeless?
- Have recent relocations unsettled my sense of security?

Addressing stress and tension at their roots should be your primary focus if they underpin your sleep challenges. Seeking support from those around you or professional guidance can be instrumental in navigating these turbulent waters.

## **The Vicious Nexus of Stress and Poor Sleep**

Stress is not merely a consequence of poor sleep; it is a contributor to the very cycle of sleep disruption. A night of restlessness can easily breed irritability and stress, escalating the likelihood of further sleep woes. Long-term exposure to stressful events can even reshape your stress response system through neuroplasticity, heightening the risk of chronic sleep problems.

Coping mechanisms are crucial here, involving relaxation exercises, challenging negative thoughts, and embracing mindfulness techniques. Rewiring your stress response is key to breaking free from this intricate web.

## **THE STRESS REGULATION SYSTEM**

In the orchestration of our life, the stress regulation system plays a pivotal role in shaping our daily experiences, particularly when it comes to the realm of sleep. Understanding the intricacies of this system is crucial for anyone seeking to manage sleep disorders.

### **The HPA Axis: the Basics of the Stress Response**

At the heart of our stress regulation system lies the HPA axis—Hypothalamus, Pituitary, and Adrenal glands. Picture it as a finely tuned symphony, with each component playing a distinct role in responding to stressors. When a perceived threat arises, the hypothalamus signals the pituitary gland, which, in turn, activates the adrenal glands. The adrenal glands release cortisol, the primary stress hormone, initiating the body's "fight or flight" response.

In ancestral times, this system was a survival mechanism, preparing our ancestors to face immediate physical threats. In the modern world, however, the stressors have evolved from physical dangers to complex, psychological challenges, often lingering for more extended periods. The HPA axis, designed for short bursts of stress, can become a persistent player in our daily lives, impacting not only our waking hours but also the precious hours we spend in the embrace of sleep.

### **Survival Mechanism and Sleep**

Our brains, marvels of evolution, developed stress response mechanisms to navigate a world filled with predators and uncertainties. While these mechanisms were vital for survival, they were not designed to distinguish between immediate physical threats and the chronic stressors of contemporary life. As a result, our stress regulation system can be triggered by a

demanding work deadline, a challenging relationship, or financial worries, activating the same survival response that once protected our ancestors from imminent danger.

This delicate balance between the ancient survival mechanism and the demands of modern life can profoundly impact our ability to achieve restorative sleep. Persistent stress signals to the brain that danger is imminent, creating a heightened state of alertness that is incompatible with the relaxation necessary for sleep. It's as if the brain, ever-vigilant, refuses to lower its guard, perpetuating a cycle of sleeplessness.

## **Stress and Negative Thinking**

The intricate relationship between stress and negative thinking further complicates the sleep landscape. Chronic stress not only activates the stress regulation system but also triggers a cascade of negative thoughts. The mind, under the influence of heightened cortisol levels, tends to focus on perceived threats, potential dangers, and worst-case scenarios. This negative thinking pattern becomes a persistent companion, infiltrating the quiet moments of the night when the mind should ideally find solace in the embrace of sleep.

Breaking free from the clutches of stress-induced negative thinking requires a multi-faceted approach. Recognizing the interplay between stress and negative thoughts is the first step. Once acknowledged, strategies such as mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation techniques can be employed to reshape thought patterns and create a mental environment conducive to restful sleep.

In the chapters that follow, we will delve deeper into these strategies, offering practical tools and insights to regain control over the stress regulation system. By unraveling the threads of stress woven into the fabric of our sleep, we can foster a harmonious relationship between the ancient survival mechanisms of our brain and the demands of the modern world, ultimately paving the way for nights of rejuvenating, undisturbed rest.

## **Syncing the Biological Clock with Life's Demands**

One often underestimated catalyst for sleep disorders is the misalignment between our internal biological clock and the demands imposed by our daily agenda. Our circadian rhythm, influenced primarily by light and darkness, orchestrates our sleep-wake cycle. In the modern whirlwind of life, however, external factors like work schedules, social obligations, and technology disrupt this delicate balance.

## **The Modern-Day Dilemma**

In today's fast-paced world, our agendas often dictate when we should be active, productive, and, yes, even when we should sleep. Work schedules, social commitments, and technological distractions can disrupt the natural flow of our internal clock. This misalignment between our biological clock and the demands of our agenda can have profound consequences and extend beyond mere restlessness:

- **Insomnia:** A desynchronized biological clock can lead to difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or experiencing deep, restorative sleep.
- **Fatigue:** Battling against your internal clock can result in perpetual fatigue, draining your energy for the day.
- **Mood Disturbances:** An imbalanced biological clock may contribute to mood swings, irritability, and, in severe cases, emotional disorders like depression and anxiety.
- **Reduced Productivity:** When your sleep-wake cycle clashes with your daily agenda, both personal and professional productivity may suffer.

## **LIFESTYLE: CRAFTING THE BLUEPRINT FOR HEALTHY SLEEP**

Many sleep problems are caused by a way of life that is incompatible with a healthy sleep pattern. Dietary habits are part of this. Consider the following questions:

- Do I often go to bed at different times and regularly stay in bed later than desired, especially on weekends?
- Do I frequently go to bed unusually early in the evenings?
- Do I primarily use my bedroom for sleeping or as a cozy space for activities like reading books or watching TV, which keep my brain engaged and make it harder to fall asleep?
- Am I disturbed during sleep by abnormal noises (such as a partner's snoring)?
- Do I engage in intense physical exercise within three hours of bedtime?
- Do I eat right before going to bed or when I wake up during the night?

Substances that stimulate the brain (like coffee, tea, and nicotine) can delay the onset of sleep and reduce total sleep duration. After consuming a few glasses of beer, wine, or spirits, we typically fall asleep quickly, but a few hours later, our sleep can become restless, compromising its quality. Sometimes, it can even lead to anxiety-related dreams.

If we go to bed hungry or thirsty in the evening, we might wake up a few hours later with the urge to eat or drink. On the other hand, consuming a heavy meal or excessive fluids can lead to stomach or bladder discomfort, unintentionally causing us to wake up. Overeating and excessive drinking are generally detrimental to sleep quality.

Sleep problems caused by lifestyle factors can often be resolved by making changes on your own. By adjusting your habits and lifestyle, you can improve your sleep. Relaxation exercises, reframing negative thoughts, and practicing mindfulness can help if adjusting your lifestyle causes stress. In the following chapters, you can read more about these topics. If breaking certain habits proves to be very challenging, seeking assistance is advisable.

## **EXTERNAL INFLUENCES: A DARKENED ROOM AND TRANQUIL SURROUNDINGS**

During summer, when daylight hours are longer, we tend to go to bed later and wake up earlier compared to winter. Sunlight has an activating effect on our biological clock, and there is little we can do to change that. However, one essential requirement for a bedroom is that it should be completely dark.



Sometimes, an environment with excessive noise can prevent us from falling asleep properly. Older individuals, in particular, may struggle to fall back asleep after being awakened during the night. If the noise is caused by others (neighbors, snoring partner), it's important to communicate with them about the issue and, if needed, seek their cooperation.

### **OTHER CAUSES**

In some cases, it is advisable to seek the help of a healthcare professional (e.g., a doctor) for sleep problems resulting from certain causes. Examples include physical ailments, medication use, or psychiatric conditions like depression.

Physical ailments are often a common cause of sleep problems, especially as we age. Consider the following examples:

- Restless legs and sudden muscle twitches
- Pain and stiffness (e.g., arthritis)

- Itching (e.g., eczema) and allergies
- Urinary problems (e.g., prostate issues)
- Symptoms associated with menopause
- Shortness of breath due to heart or lung conditions
- Inability to sleep in a preferred position (e.g., after a fall or surgery)

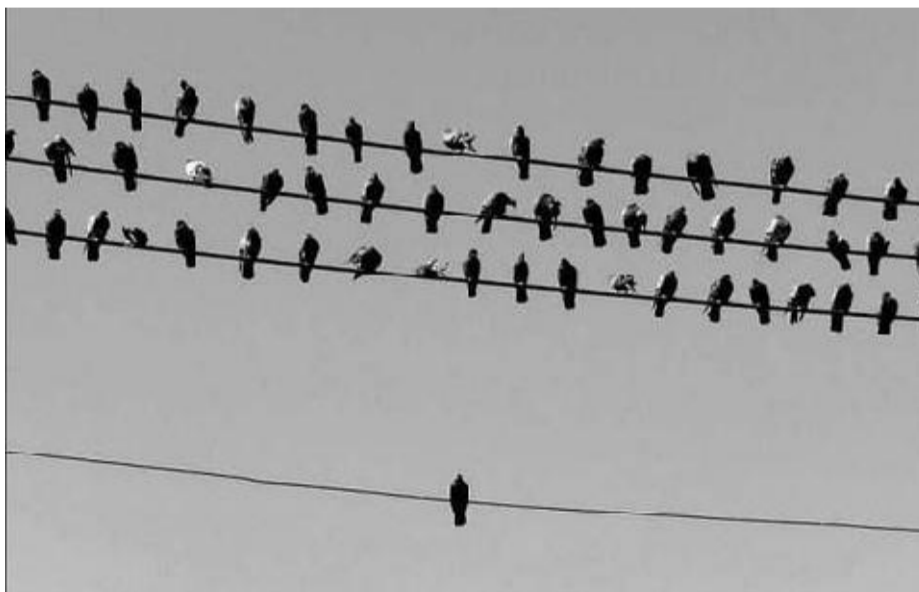
Remember, identifying the underlying cause of your sleep problem is crucial for addressing and resolving it effectively.

## **THE USE OF MEDICATION**

The use of medication can significantly affect our sleep. Many medications, such as anti-itch drugs and cough syrups, have a sedative effect, which can make us less active during the day and disrupt our sleep at night. Medications prescribed for high blood pressure or shortness of breath can also lead to poor sleep. If you are taking medication, it is advisable to consult your doctor or pharmacist about the potential impact on your sleep.

## **LONELINESS AND BOREDOM**

Loneliness and boredom can result in spending too much time in bed, leading to a serious disruption of our sleep pattern. If you believe that your sleep problem is caused by



loneliness or boredom, it is recommended to seek help from your doctor. They may be able to refer you to individuals or organizations that can provide assistance.

## **DEPRESSION**

Individuals who suffer from depression often have a tendency to go to bed early. Falling asleep becomes difficult and is followed by shallow sleep with frequent awakenings. They tend to wake up too early in the morning. Sleep is often accompanied by vivid, sometimes anxious dreams that can occur early in the night. Throughout the morning and day, they feel tired and gloomy. It is only in the late afternoon and early evening that their mood improves. If sleep problems are caused by depression, it is advisable to seek help from your doctor as a first step.



# SLEEP MEDICATION: SOLUTION OR PART OF THE PROBLEM?

Now that you've unraveled the threads of your sleep problem and pinpointed its roots, it's time to address the cause head-on. If external factors like a snoring partner or noisy neighbors are at play, initiating a conversation with them is a wise first step. Should this prove challenging, seeking support from a trusted friend or advisor can be invaluable. Alternatively, consulting your doctor for guidance remains a viable option. If the issue lies within yourself, the pivotal question arises: do you take on the challenge independently or seek professional help? In any case, your sleep problem is now on the table for discussion.



When you visit your doctor regarding a sleep problem, it's crucial to provide them with detailed information about the potential cause. However, doctors often have limited time to identify the cause of a patient's sleep complaint and to help them learn the art of good sleep. As a result, this frequently leads to the prescription of sleep medication.

One out of five people occasionally uses sleep pills, while one out of 25 uses them regularly or daily. However, there are significant drawbacks associated with sleep medication. They can be useful for bridging a short period of poor sleep caused by significant temporary stress and emotions, as well as preventing exhaustion. However, they are never a standalone solution for a long-term sleep problem.

Only a doctor can prescribe sleep medication, but many individuals take sleep pills that are handed to them with good intentions by acquaintances or housemates from their own medicine cabinet. Due to the adverse effects this can have, it's wise to be aware of the key facts about sleep medication.

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## **DOES "REAL" SLEEP MEDICATION ACTUALLY EXIST?**

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### **SLEEP MEDICATION**

There is no ideal sleep medication. The following drawbacks apply to all sleep medications to a greater or lesser extent:

- Sleep medication affects the quality of sleep, often making it shallower and reducing the function of dreaming.
- The effectiveness of sleep medication diminishes after a few weeks, leaving only the psychological influence. Increasing the dosage in such cases only provides a temporary solution, while intensifying the negative side effects.
- Virtually all sleep medications have lingering side effects when one is awake, which can include drowsiness, dizziness, headaches, and lack of concentration during the day.
- Discontinuing the use of sleep medication leads to withdrawal symptoms, which can cause tension and subsequently contribute to poor sleep.

Withdrawal symptoms occur because the body needs to readjust to the absence of the harmful substances it had adapted to. When these substances are withheld, the body undergoes a transition back to its normal, healthy state. Common withdrawal symptoms include:

- Experiencing an excess of dreams, meaning a significant portion of sleep is spent in dreaming. These dreams can turn into nightmares.

- Feelings of restlessness and stress.
- Physical complaints such as excessive sweating, nausea, involuntary muscle movements, and fever.
- Sleep problems often arise in the third to fifth night after discontinuing sleep medication.

Sleep problems resulting from withdrawal symptoms usually occur between the third and fifth night after stopping sleep medication. The severity of withdrawal symptoms is determined by the level of addiction and the amount of sleep medication present in the body. Avoid abruptly stopping the use of sleep medication; instead, gradually reduce the usual dosage, for example, over a week, before finally stopping. Withdrawal symptoms typically last for two to three weeks and should not be a cause for concern.

If you are currently using sleep medication and wish to discontinue its use, always do so in consultation with the doctor who prescribed it. Utilize this book to develop a plan for addressing your sleep problem without sleep medication.

## **MELATONIN**

One of the substances that has recently been promoted as a sleep aid is melatonin. Melatonin is sometimes referred to as the "sleep hormone." It is a substance naturally produced in your body. Melatonin is broken down when you expose yourself to blue light, such as daylight or the LED light from laptops, tablets, or phones. If the breakdown doesn't occur, the level of melatonin in your body increases as it gets darker, making you feel calmer. In this way, melatonin regulates your sleep-wake cycle.

Melatonin is also available in pill form. Since it can make you feel a bit drowsy, some people mistakenly believe it is a sleep medication. However, the reality is quite different. Melatonin is a substance that can have a positive effect on jet lag or sleep disorders involving a disrupted sleep-wake rhythm. However, it is not effective for ordinary insomnia or trouble staying asleep. In fact, it can significantly disrupt your sleep-wake cycle, potentially leading to more sleep problems.

## **CBD OIL**

Another product frequently mentioned in sleep forums is CBD oil, also known as medicinal cannabis oil. CBD oil is sold as a dietary supplement in the Netherlands and is claimed by manufacturers to help with almost everything, including cancer. However, the health claims

made by these manufacturers are largely unsubstantiated. This applies to the alleged sleep-enhancing effects of CBD oil as well.

Another issue is that there is no quality control of CBD oil because it is considered a dietary supplement, not a medicine. Research conducted by the television program Radar revealed that in many cases, the actual amount of CBD oil in a bottle did not match what was stated on the label. One of the tested products contained less than 1% of the advertised 10% CBD oil. The same investigation found that many of the tested CBD oils contained THC, despite it being illegal according to the law. THC is the component of marijuana that produces a "high" feeling. The National Poison Information Center regularly receives reports of hallucinations as a side effect of CBD oil. Given this knowledge, CBD oil can hardly be considered a safe remedy. Its use is not recommended.

## **A LASTING SOLUTION**

Regardless of the type, sleep medications only offer a temporary and limited solution to a sleep problem. To find a lasting solution, you need to address the underlying cause of your sleep problem in a different way. It requires personal commitment and perseverance. Keep in mind that improving your attitude towards sleep is often the best method for resolving sleep issues.

You have already taken an important step by thoroughly examining your problem with the help of the questionnaire and sleep diary. Now, continue with the daily completion of the sleep diary for the time being. By following the steps described in the following chapters, you will see the changes that occur.

# MY SOLUTION TO SLEEP PROBLEMS

## STEP 1: CHANGING HABITS

Understanding the intricacies of sleep problems unveils the significance of transforming entrenched habits. These habits, often woven into our lifestyle, can either be the root cause of sleep disturbances or perpetuate existing issues. It can be important which of these factors you are addressing, the initial cause of the sleep problem or the factors that maintain the disrupted sleepcycle.

A comprehensive evaluation of your daily routine is the first step towards cultivating restful nights. In this journey, three primary aspects demand your attention: dietary habits, physical exercise, and the sleep-wake cycle.

### DIETARY HABITS: NOURISHMENT FOR QUALITY SLEEP

The impact of dietary habits on sleep is profound, with certain choices acting as saboteurs to a good night's rest. A classic example is the consumption of caffeinated beverages, notably coffee. Caffeine, a powerful stimulant, can linger in our system, disrupting sleep. The key is to halt the intake of caffeinated drinks and foods approximately three hours before your typical bedtime. Be mindful not only of coffee but also of other culprits like cola, tea, and chocolate, as they may harbor caffeine or related substances.



Nicotine, akin to caffeine, possesses stimulating properties. Research underscores that smokers encounter prolonged sleep onset compared to non-smokers. The impact extends further, with smokers often experiencing diminished periods of deep sleep, aggravated by the infamous smoker's cough.

While alcohol is commonly associated with relaxation and the proverbial nightcap, its influence on sleep is nuanced. Contrary to the initial calming effect, larger quantities of alcohol can severely disrupt sleep architecture. Even minimal amounts can trigger disturbances for some individuals. Additionally, alcohol's sedative effect is transient, wearing off after approximately two hours. It's crucial to recognize that alcohol, far from being a sleep aid, can exacerbate issues like snoring, further complicating the quest for restorative sleep.

## **PHYSICAL EXERCISE**

Delving into the realm of sleep improvement, we encounter the transformative influence of regular physical exercise. Those who integrate consistent physical activity into their lives often find themselves reaping a multitude of benefits, ranging from lower blood pressure to enhanced stress resilience.

### **Beyond the Notion of Extreme Exertion**

Contrary to the misconception that strenuous workouts are the sole pathway to improved sleep, it's essential to recognize the potency of moderate exercise. Activities such as walking, cycling, or engaging in gymnastics exercises for as little as fifteen minutes to an hour, three to five times a week, can usher in positive changes. The key lies not in the intensity but in the regularity of these exercises.

### **Timing Matters**

Timing plays a pivotal role in maximizing the sleep-enhancing benefits of physical exercise. Given that exercise initially activates the body, it's prudent to avoid engaging in strenuous activities right before bedtime. Instead, a strategic approach involves scheduling physical activity three to four hours earlier. This allows the body to harness the invigorating effects of exercise without disrupting the winding-down process crucial for a seamless transition into restful sleep.

## **Personalization is Key**

Incorporating physical exercise into your routine demands a personalized approach. Tailor your exercise regimen to align with your preferences and lifestyle. Whether it's a brisk walk outdoors, a cycling session, or the rhythmic flow of yoga exercises, the choice is yours. The goal is not perfection but consistency.

## **RESTORING THE SLEEP-WAKE CYCLE**

Seeking better sleep unveils a complicated relation between nighttime wakefulness and a myriad of behaviors that act as hindrances. Poor sleepers often find themselves entangled in activities during the wee hours, creating a complex web that obstructs the path to restful sleep. From the glow of screens to late-night snacks, the bedroom morphs into a multi-functional space, losing its essence as a sanctuary for sleep.

## **Embrace a Relaxing approach to Sleep**

To reclaim your bedroom as a place to sleep, a strategic approach involves cultivating a consistent and soothing evening ritual. This can include simple yet powerful actions like locking up the house, tidying the room, savoring a glass of milk, or indulging in a calming shower. The key is to perform these activities in a set order, signaling to your body that it's time to unwind and transition into a state conducive to sleep.

## **Steer Clear of Sleep-Disruptive Stimulants**

Avoiding activities that heighten arousal or excitement before bedtime becomes paramount in nurturing a tranquil sleep environment. This includes steering clear of smartphones, laptops during the evening and night. Keep the sleep space dark, cool, and quiet.

## **Learn to recognise sleepiness**

The concept of bedtime is more than merely lying down when the clock dictates. It's about recognizing the gentle waves of sleepiness and using them as a signal that your sleep rhythm prepares you for the sleep phase.

## **Use your bed for sleeping**

Restricting activities in bed to sleep-related functions, with exceptions for intimate moments, contributes to solidifying the association between the bed and rest. No television, no reading, just sleeping.

## **The Thirty-Minute Rule**

If sleep remains elusive after about thirty minutes, a strategic retreat to another room is recommended. The goal is not to engage in prolonged wakefulness in bed but rather to rekindle the bed's exclusive connection with sleep. The hiatus in another room is as long as needed, ensuring that the return to bed only occurs you feel sleepy again. If you still don't fall asleep, repeat the procedure.

## **Productivity, Enjoyment, and Midnight Activities: Striking a Balance**

Should nocturnal activities beckon, a delicate balance is key. Engage in activities that are neither overly productive nor overly enjoyable to avoid heightened arousal that could hinder a swift return to slumber.

## **Rise and Shine: The Morning Routine**

Consistency extends beyond the night into the morning. Regardless of the preceding night's sleep duration, greeting the morning at the same time daily, even on weekends, reinforces the body's internal clock.

## **Napping with Purpose: A Scheduled Siesta**

While daytime naps can be unavoidable, adhering to a fixed schedule for napping prevents disrupting the delicate balance of nighttime sleep.

## **Harmonizing with the Daylight: Outdoor Exposure**

Bolstering your circadian rhythm involves embracing the rejuvenating embrace of daylight. Spend time outdoors during daylight hours to synchronize your internal clock with the natural rhythms of the day.

## **Consistency is the Key: A Fortnight of Transformation**

Research attests to the effectiveness of these guidelines, but their magic unfolds with adherence over at least fourteen consecutive days, weekends included. Commit to this transformative journey, and witness the profound shifts that await in the realm of restful and rejuvenating sleep.



## STEP 2: RELAXATION

When you feel tense, it becomes difficult to fall asleep. By practicing a series of exercises, you can learn to relax. These exercises don't require much time, but it's essential to perform them daily. Set a fixed time for yourself to do these exercises. You'll notice that as you achieve physical relaxation, your thoughts naturally calm down as well.

This chapter describes three types of exercises:

- Breathing exercise
- Relaxation exercise
- Muscle relaxation exercise

It's important to follow the order of these exercises as mentioned above. Here are some points to keep in mind:

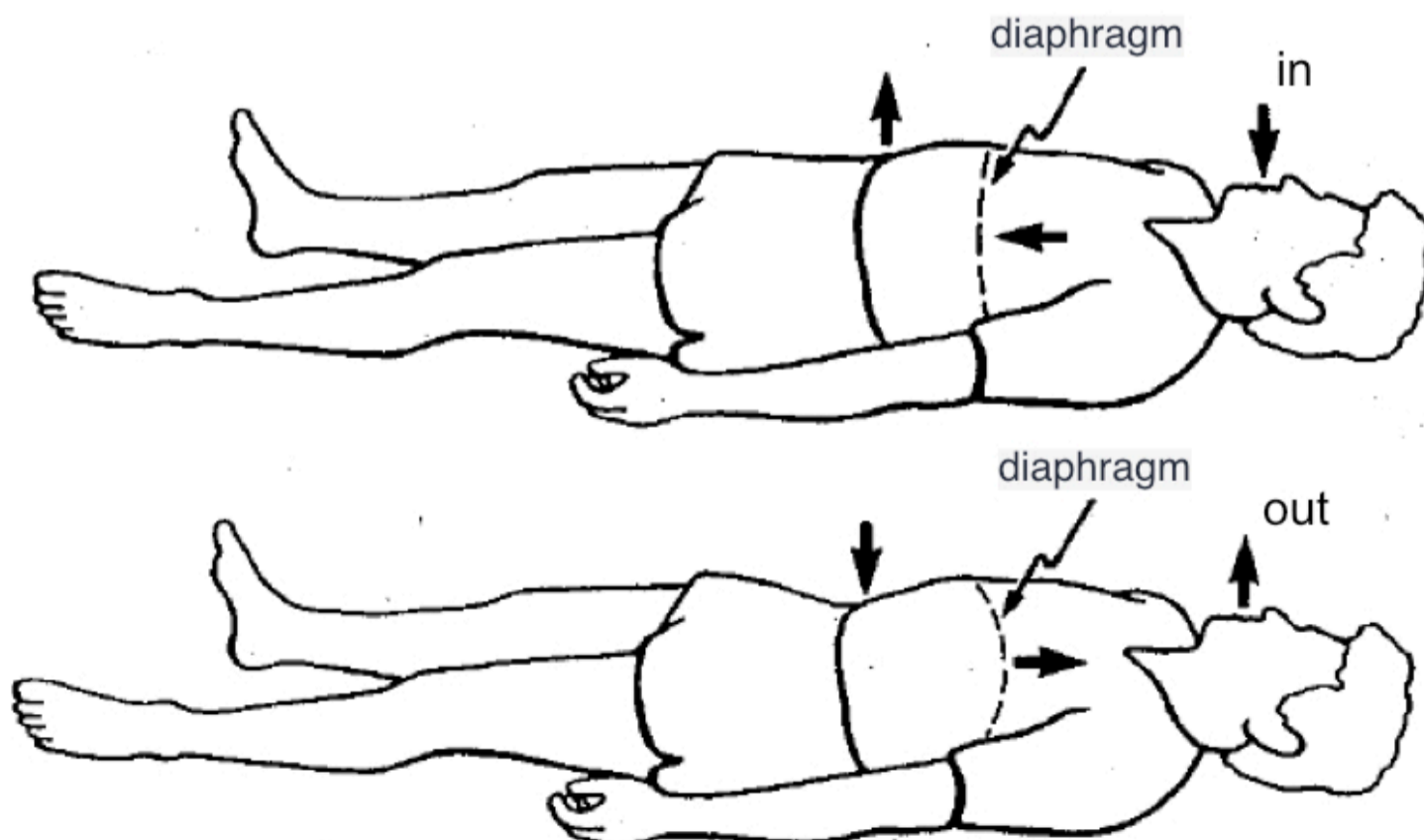
- Wear comfortable, non-restrictive clothing.
- Lie down on a bed or sofa in a room where you won't be disturbed.
- Ensure that you're in a comfortable position. Support all parts of your body adequately. For example, place a pillow under your head and a rolled-up towel under your knees.
- Avoid looking at the clock; estimate the durations instead.
- Before starting the exercises, spend a few minutes lying with your eyes open. Then gradually close your eyes.
- Focus your attention on the exercise and try not to think about other things.
- The intention is not to fall asleep, but if it happens, it's okay (as long as you have enough time).
- You don't need to tense your muscles to the extreme. A light to moderate tension is sufficient.
- Avoid sudden muscle tension; instead, gradually increase the tension.

- Similarly, don't release the tension abruptly. Try to relax gradually.
- Remember to pay attention to your breathing during the relaxation exercise and muscle relaxation exercise.

## **BREATHING EXERCISE**

Proper breathing is essential for relaxation. The best way is to practice abdominal breathing. Practice this daily, preferably several times a day. Always begin the relaxation exercises with a few breathing exercises. If you have limited time, you can focus solely on the breathing exercise. Here's how to do it:

- Lie down as comfortably as possible.
- Close your eyes.
- Place your hands on your abdomen to feel how it rises and falls with each breath.
- Breathe in, expanding your abdomen.
- Breathe out and feel your abdomen becoming flatter with your hands.
- Breathe in while mentally counting.
- Breathe out, counting in your mind for the same duration as the inhalation.



- Take a pause that lasts as long as the inhalation or exhalation. Count again in your mind.
- Then, begin inhaling and counting once more. Repeat the exercise several times.

## **RELAXATION EXERCISE**

Always precede the relaxation exercise with a few breathing exercises, and continue to focus on your breathing during the relaxation exercise. Practice this at least once a day.

Below is a text used for relaxation exercises. You can record it on your phone and use it during practice. Alternatively, you can use the exercises available on our website. You'll find the link at the end of this book.

Take your time while reading the text. Pay attention to your breathing. Pauses are indicated with ellipses (...).

*Start by directing your attention to your breath. Notice the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. In and out...*

*Imagine that with each exhale, you release a bit of tension. Gradually, little by little...*

*And as you focus on your breath, you begin to relax more and more.*

*Perhaps consciously or unconsciously, you can already feel it somewhere in your body. Maybe a sense of heaviness or warmth. You will know exactly how it feels for you.*

*Direct all your attention to that feeling of relaxation.*

*The more you concentrate on it, the stronger the feeling becomes. Stronger and stronger, so you become more and more relaxed.*

*Continue to let go of any tension or tightness in your body. Allow your muscles to soften and relax. Feel the weight of your body sinking into the surface beneath you.*

*Now, let's focus on each part of your body individually and consciously release any remaining tension. As I mention each area, bring your attention to it and imagine the tension melting away.*

*Start with your toes. Imagine the muscles in your toes becoming loose and relaxed. Feel the tension dissolving, leaving your toes feeling light and at ease.*

*Move up to your feet. Visualize the tension in your feet being released, as if it's flowing out of your body. Feel the relaxation spreading through your feet, allowing them to completely relax.*

*Now, bring your awareness to your lower legs. Picture the tension in your calves and shins gradually dissipating. Experience a sense of relief and relaxation in your lower legs.*

*Shift your attention to your knees. Imagine any tightness or discomfort in your knees melting away. Feel a soothing sensation of relaxation in this area.*

*Continue to your thighs. Visualize the tension in your thigh muscles slowly loosening and relaxing. Sense the weight of your thighs sinking deeper into relaxation.*

*Move up to your hips and pelvis. Feel any tension in this area being released, as if a gentle wave of relaxation is washing over your hips. Let go and allow the muscles to unwind.*

*Now, focus on your lower back. Visualize any tightness or stiffness in this area dissolving away. Feel the muscles in your lower back becoming soft and supple.*

*Shift your attention to your abdomen. Imagine the tension in your abdominal muscles gently melting away. Experience a deep sense of calm and relaxation in your core.*

*Move up to your chest and upper back. Feel any tightness or tension in these areas gradually loosening and releasing. Allow your breathing to become deep and effortless.*

*Bring your awareness to your hands. Visualize the tension in your fingers and palms dissipating. Feel a sense of warmth and relaxation spreading through your hands.*

*Now, focus on your arms. Imagine any tension in your forearms and upper arms melting away. Experience a profound relaxation flowing through your entire arms.*

*Shift your attention to your shoulders. Picture any tightness or heaviness in your shoulder muscles being released. Feel your shoulders gently sinking down, away from your ears.*

*Move up to your neck. Visualize the tension in your neck muscles gradually dissolving. Experience a sense of ease and freedom in your neck as it relaxes.*

*Finally, bring your awareness to your head and face. Imagine any tension in your scalp, forehead, eyes, jaw, and cheeks melting away. Feel a sense of serenity and softness in your entire head and face.*

*Take a moment to appreciate the deep state of relaxation you have achieved. Enjoy the sensation of calmness and tranquility flowing through your body. Stay in this relaxed state for as long as you like.*

Remember, you can revisit these relaxation exercises whenever you need to unwind and prepare for sleep. Practice them regularly to cultivate a peaceful and restful state of mind.

## **STEP 3: QUIETING YOUR MIND**

In order to sleep, it's essential to be able to relax both physically and mentally. When you relax your body, your thoughts usually calm down naturally. However, there are times when this doesn't happen easily. Uncertainties and emotions can generate thoughts or feelings that keep us awake. Often, these are unpleasant thoughts or a whirlwind of random thoughts that circle aimlessly in our minds. Just the thought of "Will I be able to fall asleep?" can be enough to make us tense up, making it even more difficult to sleep.

You need to break free from that restlessness, tension, and those thoughts and feelings. By attentively practicing the relaxation exercises from the previous chapter, you can prevent or stop unpleasant thoughts, simply by counting or listening to the relaxation script. Another technique that can induce relaxation is mentally counting your breaths from one to ten. We'll provide you with another method to achieve a calmer mind.

Important note: Every technique requires practice and patience.

Often, ingrained habits need to be broken. Initially, this can be quite challenging, but **STICK WITH IT!** Only after two or three weeks can you assess whether a technique is truly beneficial for you.

### **Shifting Perspectives on Unpleasant Thoughts: The ABC of Albert Ellis**

Our emotions and reactions are intrinsically tied to how we perceive and think about situations. Consider anger – it doesn't arise solely from someone uttering unpleasant words; rather, it emerges from our interpretation, such as thinking, "How dare they say that to me!" The crucial insight here is that these thought patterns are learned, and if learned, they can be unlearned or reshaped more effortlessly.

Similarly, the frustration of being awake in bed isn't solely due to the wakefulness itself; it stems from thoughts like, "This is a disaster. If I don't fall asleep soon, I'll never get through that busy day tomorrow." To transform these patterns, we must question the validity of our thoughts and evaluate whether they truly serve our well-being.

Let's embark on a transformative journey using Albert Ellis's ABC approach:

**A - Activating Event:** Identify the situation or thought that triggers negative emotions. For instance, lying awake in bed.

**B - Belief System:** Examine the belief attached to the activating event. In this case, thoughts like, "This is a disaster," or "I won't get through tomorrow."

**C - Consequence:** Understand the emotional consequences of these beliefs, such as tension and worry.

Now, let's reframe these thoughts:

1. **Is it True?:** Challenge the truthfulness of your initial thoughts. Is there evidence suggesting these thoughts are not entirely or not at all correct?
2. **Alternative Perspectives:** Explore alternative ways to view the situation. Can you adopt a different, more balanced perspective?
3. **Worst-Case Scenario:** Consider the worst-case scenario and evaluate your ability to cope. What actions could you take, and what are the potential outcomes?
4. **Consequence of Belief:** Reflect on the consequences of holding onto these negative thoughts. What might change if you alter your way of thinking?
5. **Friend's Perspective:** Imagine advising a friend in a similar situation. What guidance would you offer?
6. **Action Plan:** Outline concrete actions you can take to address the problem. This helps build a repertoire of solutions for common negative thoughts.

Recording your responses ensures these reframing techniques are easily accessible when negative thoughts resurface. By engaging in this process, you empower yourself to transform unpleasant thoughts, fostering a more positive and resilient mindset.

### **Example 1: Insomnia**

**Situation:** You find yourself lying awake in bed, unable to fall asleep despite feeling exhausted.

**Negative Thought:** "This is a disaster. If I don't fall asleep soon, I'll be a wreck tomorrow."

**Reframing:**

1. **Is it True?:** Challenge the truthfulness. Is it a disaster, or are you catastrophizing?
2. **Alternative Perspectives:** Consider the possibility that even if you're awake, your body is still getting some rest.
3. **Worst-Case Scenario:** Explore coping strategies for the next day, emphasizing adaptability.
4. **Consequence of Belief:** Acknowledge the tension and worry caused by this belief and consider changing your perspective.
5. **Friend's Perspective:** What would you say to a friend struggling with insomnia? Offer yourself the same kindness.
6. **Action Plan:** Develop relaxation techniques or a calming bedtime routine.



## **STEP 4: MINDFULNESS AND LETTING GO**

As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of things that can disrupt your sleep. It could be thoughts, as described in the previous chapter, habits, an imbalanced stress response system, or even your own sleep that keeps you awake. Sometimes, the more something occupies your mind, the more attention it receives, making you more alert. Similar to negative thinking or worrying, it is often advised to "let it go." However, that is usually easier said than done. But it's not impossible.

An approach that has been frequently used lately is mindfulness. The underlying concept is that our brain is constantly scanning our environment for threats or things that are important for our safety. This can lead to various problems, such as becoming overly focused on potential dangers in our surroundings. The issue is that our brain cannot distinguish between actual external threats (like a tiger approaching) and our thoughts and fantasies. Your body reacts to thoughts and fantasies of danger in the same way it would respond to real threats. We can further get into trouble because we have an innate tendency to immediately react to such stimuli by taking action. In the case of a tiger, that may not be a bad idea, but in our daily lives, we are so preoccupied with constantly "doing" things that we often overlook the passing of our own lives.

According to the mindfulness approach, that is the core of the problem. The space for relaxation, rest, or simply "being" is becoming scarce because we quickly enter the "doing mode." We are constantly "on" and always busy avoiding boredom. Ask yourself this question: "When I have nothing to do, how often do I reach for my phone?"

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### **DOING NOTHING IS AN ACTIVITY**

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We seem to overlook the fact that we are often doing something even when we believe we are doing nothing, and yet, "down-time" is crucial for us. Neuropsychologists have discovered that our brain engages in useful self-processing when we are doing nothing. The

"default mode network" becomes active during this resting state. This activity is associated with organising memories, maintaining an overview, future planning, and creativity.

The goal of mindfulness is to learn to approach everything that comes your way in a more detached, observant manner, without immediately reacting on autopilot, and to become more aware of what truly deserves your attention.

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**"LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU WHILE  
YOU'RE BUSY MAKING OTHER PLANS."  
- JOHN LENNON**

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Below is one of the many mindfulness exercises available. The appendix contains a list of web addresses where you can find supporting audio for such exercises.

Note: Do not turn the exercise into a "task" as we often do. It is a new way of approaching problems, not a trick or a kind of sleeping aid. Remember, the more you try to fall asleep, the worse it gets.

## **EXERCISE: MINDFULNESS BY FOCUSING ON BREATHING, SYMPTOMS, AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

The goal is to practice mindfulness every day, for ten to fifteen minutes at a time, as described below. It's easy to make the commitment to do something, but actually following through is much harder. The following points can help you with this:

- Consider the ten to fifteen minutes of mindfulness as your own time, time you set aside for yourself to regain control over your life.
- It's better to practice for ten minutes than not at all, but five minutes is too short.
- Give the practice a chance, even if you feel it's useless or boring. You've probably never done anything like this before, and you need to practice it for a few weeks to see its effects.

- If possible, schedule your practice in the morning for the day.
- If your schedule doesn't allow it, schedule another practice time on the same day as soon as possible.
- If you're unable to practice on a given day, make the choice not to practice on that day. Don't leave it to chance, but choose it for yourself. If you decide not to practice on that day, stick to your decision.
- If there's a time when you don't do your practice, you may feel guilty or down. That's how we often react, but don't let it bother you so much that it prevents you from practicing next time.
- Every practice is equally valuable, whether or not you were able to practice the previous time and whether or not you know when you can do it next time.
- Your mindset when you begin the practice is not important. You don't need to feel calm or prepared in any way. The ten to fifteen minutes will be spent observing yourself, whatever you're feeling at that moment.

## **INSTRUCTION**

This exercise is very similar to meditation. The difference between meditation and mindfulness is that with mindfulness, you're not necessarily trying to achieve anything except being aware of what's happening. The goal is not to feel calm, sad, or happy, or to get rid of complaints or anything else. The intention is to observe and describe for yourself what is happening. It's possible that feelings, complaints, or thoughts may arise during the practice. You may feel calm, bored, restless, or it may not affect you at all. If you feel happy and peaceful, that's a bonus, but it's not the goal of the exercise. The goal is to create a space in your life where you can observe yourself with all the feelings and complaints that come and go, while at the same time avoiding reacting to or resisting these feelings, thoughts, or complaints.

After reading these instructions, you will do your first mindfulness exercise. Set aside fifteen minutes for it. If you don't have the time now, read the further instructions only when you can actually perform the exercise. First, read the instructions (points 1 to 6) and then proceed with the exercise. After the exercise, there will be some comments about the exercise. Read them only after you've done the exercise for the first time!

1. Set a timer for fifteen minutes. It's important that you don't have to keep track of how long you've been practicing because it will distract you during the exercise. Choose a comfortable and uninterrupted place to sit. Sit upright. If you're sitting on a chair, don't lean against the backrest.
2. **Breathing.** Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath. Describe to yourself how it feels as your breath fills your chest and abdomen with air, and how it feels as the breath flows out again. Describe for each breath what you observe in your nose, throat, and lungs – "Now I'm breathing in, and the air goes into my lungs." If you feel coldness in your nose – "The air feels cold in my nose." If you feel your clothes against your abdomen as you inhale – "I feel the fabric of my clothes against my abdomen." Also, describe what happens in your body with each exhalation – "My lungs empty again," if you feel yourself relaxing – "I let my breath flow out, my shoulders relax," "My breath feels warm as I exhale." Don't try to follow a specific script or look for things to describe, but describe what is actually happening in your body at that moment. Your thoughts will often get in the way during the exercise. You may suddenly realize that you're not aware of your breathing at all or that you're completely lost in thought. Instead of trying to ignore these thoughts, it's better to observe and describe them as something you're aware of – "I'm thinking about what I need to do tomorrow," "I was thinking about the purpose of this exercise." Once you've described this thought to yourself, return to observing and describing what happens as you inhale and exhale. Do this for about two to three minutes.
3. **Complaints.** Now shift your attention to your complaints. Describe to yourself where in your body you feel those complaints. If you notice things that worry you, also acknowledge that this is a complaint that worries you – "I feel a pressure on my chest, I'm afraid I'll have a panic attack again" – and then return to describing how the complaint feels. Describe where you feel it, what part of your body it encompasses, what shape it has – "a painful sensation in the middle of my chest the size of a tennis ball." If you don't have any complaints, describe what you observe in your body. Some thoughts may be difficult to escape. You'll be confronted with them repeatedly, and as a result, you may have little time left to describe what's happening in your body. It may happen that you suddenly become highly focused on how a particular complaint feels. Describe to yourself what you're thinking and then return to describing what's happening in your body. Do this for about two to three minutes.

4. **Environment.** Open your eyes and focus your attention on your surroundings. Don't move your head, but use your eyes to take in the environment. Observe what you see, how it looks, and describe it in simple terms like: black, round, small, large, flat, box, paper. You'll notice that you frequently lose focus on what you're looking at. That's okay. If you notice that you're lost in thought, you can describe it to yourself – "This is worrying," "This is stress," "This is planning for tomorrow" – and then redirect your attention back to observing and describing your environment. Do this for two to three minutes.
5. Then shift your attention back to your breathing and start from the beginning: focus on your breathing first, then on your complaints, and finally on your environment. There's no right way to do this exercise! The only goal of the exercise is to describe where your attention goes when you focus on your breathing, complaints, and environment, and as soon as you notice that you've lost focus, describe what caught your attention and then continue describing your breathing, body, and environment.
6. Continue with the exercise until the timer indicates that fifteen minutes have passed. You don't have to interrupt the exercise to read the instructions. The only important thing stated here is: describe what you observe when you direct your attention sequentially to your breathing, complaints, and environment, and as you repeat this process. It doesn't matter how many times you repeat the cycle within the fifteen minutes allocated for the exercise. Usually, it's somewhere between one and three times.

## **READ THE FOLLOWING ONLY AFTER YOU'VE PERFORMED THE EXERCISE FOR THE FIRST TIME!**

When you're done with the exercise, keep the following in mind for the next time:

- It's extremely difficult not to be distracted by various thoughts. Most of the time, you probably haven't been focused on describing what you should have been paying attention to.
- Whenever you notice that you're lost in thought, redirect your attention back to what you should be doing in the exercise. The goal is not to be 100% focused all the time, but to notice when you're no longer engaged in the exercise and then refocus on what you were doing.
- Regardless of how you feel after the exercise: you did it! And that was the only goal. It can't go bad or good. If you think it went poorly, describe that thought to yourself – "I

think the exercise went poorly" – but don't let it discourage you from doing the exercise again tomorrow.

## **EXERCISE: MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE**

The purpose of this exercise is not for you to practice mindfulness at home for fifteen minutes a day. The idea behind it is that through mindfulness, you learn to look at your sleep problem in a different way than before. By regularly practicing mindful awareness in your daily life, you will eventually find it easier to apply it at any given moment.

The instructions for the exercise are very simple. A daily mindfulness exercise can go as follows:

- You simply continue with whatever you are doing at that moment, whether it's standing in line at the supermarket, walking to work, reading the newspaper on the train, showering, or lying in the bath. Then you remember that you need to do the mindfulness exercise again, and you decide to do it right away.
- You direct your attention to what you are doing at that moment and to what went through your mind when you thought about the mindfulness exercise. Whatever went through your mind, label it in your thoughts, say to yourself, "I was thinking about work," "I was thinking about the song I heard earlier." Whatever you are doing at that moment, describe it in your thoughts: "I'm standing in line," "I'm reading the newspaper," and so on.
- Afterward, shift your attention to the main complaint you have regarding sleep. Observe what you notice within yourself. Describe for yourself, in the same way as before, the perception of what you feel, how strong that feeling is, and where you feel it: "I have a heavy sensation in my head," "I feel quite energized," "I have the urge to yawn," and so on. Take ten to twenty seconds to focus your attention on this.
- Then continue with what you were doing.

Do this exercise a few times a day, whenever you remember. You don't have to do it multiple times in a row. The important thing is to do it a few times at different moments. If you realize that you never think about the exercise, you can schedule it in advance for yourself a few times. Choose a few situations that occur regularly where you can do the exercise.

## **EXERCISE: DAILY ACTIVITIES**

Our entire day is filled with activities that we perform completely mindlessly, without actually being aware of them. Sometimes that can be useful because if you consciously start cycling, you'll notice that it goes much worse than when you let your autopilot do the work. However, there are also many moments that pass us by without us noticing, but that could be beneficial if we paid attention to them. Do you know the situation? You walk to the bakery at noon to get a sandwich for lunch. While walking to the bakery, you're preoccupied with things you still need to do after lunch: a phone call you have to make and dread doing, the tasks you completed that morning. Without being aware of it, you find yourself at the bakery. Meanwhile, it's a beautiful day: the sun is shining, ducks are swimming with their ducklings in the canal, and a gentle breeze is blowing through your hair. You didn't experience any of it! And all your thoughts didn't yield anything except making you feel rushed because of your busy schedule.

The same often happens with eating. We often eat while the television is on. We're distracted by what we see there, and we hardly pay attention to what we're putting in our mouths. To break free from these kinds of automatic behaviors, you can start by consciously and attentively performing a daily recurring activity. Choose one of the options below, for example:

- brushing your teeth
- taking a shower
- drinking tea or coffee
- walking to the supermarket
- walking to the restroom (or the coffee machine, the copier, etc.)
- eating

Carry out the activity you have chosen with complete attention. Pay attention to what you experience with all your different senses.

# TO CONCLUDE

Once you have diligently worked through the exercises described above, taking each step carefully, you have been introduced to all the methods utilized in the treatment of sleep problems. It is my hope that during this process, you have gained valuable insights into what techniques work well for you and which ones may not be as effective. To ensure that you can effectively address and manage your sleep problem in the long term, I always recommend creating a contingency plan for yourself.

The need for a contingency plan arises from the fact that, in practice, we sometimes observe sleep problems gradually resurfacing over time. The underlying causes for this recurrence can vary significantly. It may involve situations where stress levels increase, leading to the resurgence of old habits and patterns that disrupt sleep.

In your contingency plan, it is important to document the initial signs or indicators that suggest your sleep problem is starting to resurface. By recognizing these early warning signs, you can take proactive measures to address them before they escalate. Additionally, make a note of the techniques and strategies that have proven effective in helping you achieve better sleep during the past period. This may include mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques, sleep hygiene practices, or any other approaches that have yielded positive results for you.

Keep your contingency plan readily accessible and organized alongside all the relevant information related to the techniques and methods that have worked for you. This ensures that you have everything you need at your fingertips when you need to reengage with your sleep management routine. By having a well-prepared plan in place, you can promptly pick up where you left off and swiftly return to enjoying restful and rejuvenating sleep.

Remember, consistency and a proactive approach are key to effectively managing and maintaining healthy sleep habits in the long run.



# RESOURCES

Progressive relaxation 1

Progressive relaxation 2

Progressive relaxation and focussed meditation

Sleep diary (next page)

# Sleep Diary

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Start date: \_\_\_\_\_

Morning							
Day of week:	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
What time did you get into bed?	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM	PM AM
What time did you try and go to sleep?	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM
How long did it take you to fall asleep?	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.
What time did you wake up this morning?	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM	AM PM
How many times did you wake up during the night?							
No. of times							
No. of minutes							
Last night I slept a total of:	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.	HRS. MINS.
How would you rate your sleep quality?							
Very Poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Was your sleep disturbed by any factors? If so, list them here (ex. allergies, noise, pets, discomfort/pain, etc.)							
Any other comments about your sleep worth noting?							

Evening							
Day of week:	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
I consumed caffeine in the: (AM) morning, (PM) afternoon/evening, (LN) late night, (NA)							
AM, PM, LN, NA							
How many?							
How much exercised did you get today?							
No. of minutes							
Time of day AM, PM, LN, NA							
Did you take a nap? (check one)	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
If yes, for how long?							
List all medications, vitamins, and supplements you took today							
Approximately 2-3 hours before getting to bed, I consumed:							
Alcohol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1+ glasses of water, juice, milk, etc.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A heavy meal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caffeine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
NA	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My nighttime routine included: (ex. taking a bath/shower, stretching, reading a book/magazine, using mobile devices or a computer)							

