



CHASING THE ZZZZZ

When a long-term insomniac searches for a cure, she discovers the good, the bad and the ugly BY ZARA RABINOWICZ

The first part of my day is spent in a greyish haze, perked up with caffeine, trying to keep it together on just four hours' rest. I'm snappy, shaky and find it difficult to concentrate. Although my insomnia spans 15 years, I've never accepted it as inevitable – I've tried most traditional remedies: hot baths, green tea, herbal medicine, cutting out caffeine. They all help calm me down, but none of these things puts me to sleep.

Once I'd exhausted these options I turned to medical help, and in my experience doctors are happy to

dish out pills. I started with Zopiclone when I was 18, a tiny tablet that left a sour aftertaste and knocked me out for a good eight hours. I woke feeling drowsy and sluggish, but the benefits outweighed the side effects. Inevitably my tolerance quickly built up and I moved on to harder stuff. I found Valium a great sedative, then it was anti-depressants, then Xanax (passed on to me by an American friend). Side effects grew harder to handle – massive mood swings, depression, then euphoria. (It doesn't surprise me that there are real fears about regular use of prescription

sleeping aids, linking them to cancer, and even death.) I've spent years weaning myself off these treatments, and have revived my quest for sleep, sans pills.

The tech solution: gadgets

I made-over my bedroom, investing in a posture-pedic Sealy pillow, memory foam Octaspring mattress and Mindfold eye mask that blacks out all light. I may have been more comfortable in repose, but sleep still remained elusive. This is a solution for those who just have minor sleeping problems.

Try it: Sealy Pillow, £14 (direct.tesco.com); Dormeo Octaspring mattress, from £1,095 (octaspring.co.uk); Mindfold, £10.50 (amazon.co.uk).

The scientific solution: sleep school

To investigate my sleep patterns, neuro-stratology practitioner Tej Samani hooked me up to an EEG machine for 24 hours to monitor my heart rate and brain activity prior to his five-day sleep retreat at

Grayshott Spa. The verdict was that I'm suffering from autonomic exhaustion – chronic body fatigue. I'm to get more exercise, and spend an hour a day looking at my long-term goals (these have been identified as stressors that are affecting my sleep). I need to stop my late-night technology use, too, as my heart rate is highest at 11pm, when I should be winding down for bed. It sounds easy enough but a few weeks in and I'm realising how little time I normally allot to non-work matters, so it's challenging to stick to. **Try it:** The Grayshott Spa Deep Sleep Retreat costs from £1,960 (grayshottspa.com).

The leftfield solution: regression therapy

I was sceptical that past life regression therapy could work, but sleeplessness makes you desperate. Therapist Nicolas Aujula reassured me that 'even if you don't believe what you see, it can be a metaphor that will help you'. It seems I was a Roman soldier in my past life and spent nights holding a spear in >>>

>>> preparation for battle. (I had to admit that I do clench my fists during restless nights.) Gentle exercises under hypnosis had me 'letting go of the spear', and I awoke disorientated and drowsy. Sleep came much more easily that night, but the effect didn't last. However, I have stopped clenching my hands when I try to sleep, and my body doesn't automatically tense itself any more.

Try it: A two-hour session with Nicolas Aujula costs £70 (inspired-artisan.com).

The wellbeing solution: mindfulness

At The Sleep School, Dr Guy Meadows' approach to insomnia is all about mindfulness – being more focused in the present. 'Your body knows how to sleep and what's preventing it is you,' he says. His plan of action had me embracing my insomnia: I was to take time each day to focus on the here and now and sing unhelpful phrases such as, 'I'll never sleep but I'm so tired' to the tune of *Happy Birthday* (which takes the seriousness away from such negative thoughts). He also stressed that even if I can't sleep, lying in bed still gives my body and mind rest.

Try it: Mindfulness workshops, webinars, retreats and downloads (thesleepschool.org).

The verdict

I wish I could say that my sleep issues have all been solved, but I fear this is a problem I'll always battle with. Whenever something unexpected occurs, my stress levels rise and my sleep is affected. But looking at the roots of my insomnia has forced me to accept that it's not a physical problem that can be solved with a drug – I'm being kept awake by my inability to shut down my mind.

I have added most of the experts' suggestions into my routine: I have cut out TV an hour before bedtime and I'm practising some daily mindfulness techniques, too. I might not be sleeping soundly yet, but I feel a lot calmer about nights, and that's positive in itself. It makes me wonder if the stress of insomnia is a self-fulfilling prophecy – I'm so worried that I may not fall asleep that it keeps me awake.

For breathing and mindfulness exercises to help you sleep, visit psychologies.co.uk



VICKI EDGSON is a member of the British Association of Nutritional Therapists. She co-founded The Food Doctor business and runs a nutritional therapy and naturopathic clinic in London

VITAL ENERGY

In the third instalment of her four-part series on energy, nutritionist Vicki Edgson explains how to eat your way to a better night's sleep

Without a good night's sleep, your energy levels will be on the floor; that fact should surprise no one. But a poor sleeping pattern can have significant repercussions for our health, too. It exacerbates anxiety, elevates certain biomarkers associated

with a rise in cardiovascular disease (which can lead to heart attack and stroke), as well as type 2 diabetes. Plus, it upsets the release of insulin, which can lead to unexplained weight gain.

Eating lightly

Aim to eat your evening meal at least three hours before you go to bed, to avoid waking in the early hours as a result of a drop in blood-sugar levels. Eating lightly at night helps to avoid this problem – a bowl of soup, a steamed vegetable salad, or lightly poached fish and pak choi are ideal. Stop drinking alcohol at least two hours prior to going to bed – if not, the effect of the sugars it contains will wake you mid-sleep, at the very point when your body and mind are rebuilding and repairing. Leave spicy meals for the daytime, when the stimulation that they yield can be harnessed for creative and physical energy. Avoid caffeine (including green tea), ginger, cayenne pepper and chillies after 6pm – if the food creates heat as you eat, it will wake you later as it passes through your digestive system.

Sleep hygiene

At least an hour before you plan to sleep, stop doing anything, and take a warm bath with lavender, jasmine or sandalwood essential oils. Light a candle, focus on the soothing, flickering flame, and concentrate on your breathing. This preparation for going to bed, or sleep hygiene as it is sometimes called, is essential to get the brain winding down. Taking a magnesium supplement such as Biocare Magnesium Taurate, £14.19 (planetorganic.com), an hour before bed also promotes relaxation.

For those with more chronic sleep problems, you should consider addressing your adrenal stress and managing your cortisol and DHEA output (the hormones that regulate our get-up-and-go and fight-or-flight mechanisms). Vitamin C, magnesium and vitamin B5 are all required to support chronic adrenal stress, but I would recommend that you seek the advice of a professional who will work with you personally to help you find a solution.

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