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Beyond Counting Sheep

From bedtime yoga to moon ragas; our prescription for catching quality ZZZs

by Elizabeth Barker

Remember "bedtime," that nightly event that faithfully delivered storytelling and song, maybe some warm milk and a turn in the rocking chair? With our cribs and their attached mobiles outgrown, childhood's pre-slumber pleasures have largely been abandoned—along with those long nights of sweet, easy sleep. Now we unceremoniously collapse into bed, our bodies exhausted but our brains still racing from the day's excitements and emergencies. It's no wonder that, without any ritual to soothe us into sleep, an estimated 60 million Americans regularly suffer through restless nights each year.



Illustration: Colleen Smith

"Insomnia is a common response to the normal stress of daily life," says Donna Arand, PhD, spokesperson for the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and clinical director of the Kettering Sleep Disorders Center in Dayton, Ohio. But with the help of anti-stress mind-body practices, herbal remedies and self-care routines, you can gently ease the tension and anxiety built up throughout your day. So long as your insomnia isn't caused by a larger medical problem (such as hypoglycemia or depression), creating a relaxation regimen could soon have you sleeping like a baby. In fact, says Oakland-based yoga teacher Ann Dyer, acting like a baby might be the best way to find sound sleep. "Treat yourself as you would an infant that you're preparing for bed," Dyer suggests. "Have a bath, put on comfy pajamas, play calming music. Instead of a bottle, drink a cup of chamomile tea. All of these things slow your mind down and contribute to better sleep."

But most grown-ups, who spend their days zipping to and from marathon meetings, workout sessions and multiple visits to Starbucks, need a more intensive slowing-down than the average infant. With the high speed of modern-day living in mind, Dyer has developed the DVD program *ZYoga: The Yoga Sleep Ritual* (available at sleepgarden.com). "A few years ago, I noticed that the students in my yoga classes were in a constant state of exhaustion, and many suffered from insomnia," Dyer remembers. "They were living such active, stressful lives that yoga class had become another source of struggle and strife." Determined to find a yoga-centered solution for insomnia, Dyer created a nighttime routine to lull sleep-starved yogis to rest.

Designed to be practiced just before bed, the 40-minute *ZYoga* guides viewers through 11 hatha yoga poses, all basic enough for beginners to master. "Hatha yoga poses are split into two categories—what stimulates us, and what calms us," she says. "The practice can have a strong influence on the nervous system." The session ends with several minutes of voice work and sitar-playing by Dyer, a concert vocalist and recording artist. These tenderly hummed "moon ragas" have a nearly hypnotic effect, likely to transport even the most stressed-out souls swiftly from corpse pose to sweet dreams. "Using ragas in yoga practice isn't common in America, but I believe in calling all of the senses," says Dyer. "We have a very primal response to sound, so the moon ragas can work very immediately in drawing us toward sleep." Although few published studies have explored the link between yoga and healthy sleep, an ongoing National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine-sponsored clinical trial is now looking at yoga's impact on adults with chronic insomnia.

For the yoga-averse—or anyone still counting sheep long after rolling up the yoga mat—other mind-body techniques can be just as snooze-conducive. "For some people, meditation, deep breathing or any relaxation-promoting practice can reduce alertness and arousal," says Arand.

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When you can't get to sleep or find yourself jolted awake in the middle of the night, Arand recommends this guided imagery exercise: Close your eyes, choose an activity that you equate with delicious tranquility (floating on a raft in the middle of a quiet lake, getting a massage at your favorite spa), and imagine yourself in the midst of that experience. "If, for example, you love skiing, focus on skiing down an unending ski slope, meandering back and forth, coasting along and taking in the nature around you," she suggests. Or try progressive muscle relaxation: Starting at your feet, tense your muscles, hold the tension as long as you can, then release. As you move up the body, breathe deeply and concentrate on the relaxation that takes over your muscles. "Either practice moves your attention away from whatever might be causing you stress," says Arand. "It keeps you from lying awake thinking, 'I need to get my taxes done! I need to do them right now!'"

Naturally sound sleep can also come in capsule form, through a drug-free alternative to the sleeping pills currently prescribed to about 42 million Americans. A derivative of the amino acid tryptophan, the supplement 5-HTP converts into serotonin and helps initiate sleep. "5-HTP decreases the time it takes to fall asleep, as well as increases the duration of the more important stages of sleep (REM and deep sleep)," says Koren Barrett, ND, an Irvine-based naturopathic physician. Barrett typically recommends taking 500 mg of 5-HTP a half-hour before going to bed, noting that the supplement isn't likely to lengthen overall sleep time. And since 5-HTP needs vitamins B3 and B6 and magnesium to convert into serotonin, make sure you're getting sufficient levels of each in your diet, in a multivitamin or supplement form.

The body-clock-regulating hormone melatonin may help to both induce and maintain sleep, Barrett says, but check the label before choosing a supplement; in a report last year from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, researchers found that most commercially available capsules contain more than 10 times the effective amount of melatonin. The body needs just .3 milligrams for restful sleep, according to study author Richard Wurtman, MD, and higher doses tend to become ineffective after a few days of use.

For an herbal route to slumberland, valerian might be your safest, most effective choice. A 2002 study from the *European Journal of Medical Research* found that the nonaddictive sedative worked just as well as the Valium-like drug oxazepam in treating insomnia, but without any adverse side effects. Passion flower and hops also act as sleep-inducing sedatives, says Barrett, who likes to use all three herbs in liquid extract form. "The absorption seems to be better in liquid form," she says. "You can get a quality extract at [natural food] stores, but an extract specially formulated by your doctor will be more potent."

When it finally comes time to turn down the covers, your eyelids may drop more quickly if you follow the same pre-sleep pattern each night. "A regular bedtime ritual is key to achieving healthy sleep," notes Arand. Sticking to the same sleep time each night, take a moment—or many moments—to devote yourself to some healthy, tension-melting pampering. "You might try infusing your bath with lavender oil, or sprinkling a few drops of your favorite calming essential oil inside your pillowcase," suggests Lesa Werner, ND, a Beverly Hills-based naturopathic doctor. A foot massage with sesame seed oil also does the trick, says Dyer, while Barrett recommends indulging in a protein-rich snack.

No matter what routine you adopt, it's crucial to resist fretting over your sleep (or lack thereof). "You might think of perfect sleep as what you had when you were much younger," says Arand. "Even if your sleep does get disrupted a few times during the night but you're still functioning well during the day, that can still be healthy. We have to have a realistic perception of what our sleep should be."

Elizabeth Barker is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer who can't sleep without her chamomile tea, fuzzy slipper socks and lavender-stuffed teddy bear.



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