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Identifying Your Sleep Demons

The process of falling asleep is, for many, simple. They lie down. Eyes close. And then, simply, sleep. For others, this process is anything *but* simple, and for the more than one third of the population who habitually experience insufficient rest, the barriers and variables that lead to this pattern create chronic fatigue and mental health symptoms. But by identifying your sleep demons, you can begin to create the restful sleep your body and mind are craving.

Jen is one of the millions of people suffering from poor sleep. She has trouble getting to bed at a good hour, and once she does fall asleep, she struggles to stay asleep. Most nights, she wakes up, restless and frustrated. Often, she will drink a couple glasses of wine before bed to help calm down and, as she puts it, “feel more relaxed.” But then, she worries that she is becoming too dependent on the alcohol to help her relax. “I just lie there and think about all the things I didn’t get done during the day,” she tells me. “And then I worry about what’s going on with the kids, and my mom, and the world at large. It’s really quite overwhelming.”

Jen’s case is representative of many, stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle. Anxiety and stress keep the mind racing instead of resting. This, in turn, results in a night devoid of quality sleep. The state of fatigue that follows, in turn, dulls your decision-making and creates those same mental symptoms, leading to days that don’t set you up for rest--and you in turn find yourself in the same situation, night after night after night, staring at the clock, ruminating, and counting down the hours left until the next day begins.

If you’ve suffered from sleep issues, you may have heard the term “sleep hygiene.” This refers to the collective habits, choices, and environmental factors that influence and dictate

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the quality, ease, and consistency of your sleep. These are the variables over which each of us has agency, and yet, for many of us, sub-optimal routines have become so ingrained that it can be difficult to imagine any alternative. But by making even just a couple simple changes, and by being intentional about phasing out some of these “sleep demons,” you can start to see a massive improvement in the quality of your sleep, and as a result, improved mental health..

A 2011 study showed that nearly half of all Americans bring their phone to bed with them before sleep, with even more young people doing so. Even if you don’t bring your phone with you, usage of tablets, computers, and other devices in the evening hours has been linked to reduced sleep quality and lower levels of melatonin, the hormone that produces that sleepy feeling. A lot’s been made about the lingering effects of blue light screens on the eyes and brain. And while we don’t fully understand this relationship, we know that bright lights in general are not conducive to good quality sleep.

We should look past the LED lights and consider the activities inherent to these devices. When you’re scrolling, what information are you seeing? News, social media--rapid fire content that riles up your brain and can put you in a stimulated, anxious state.

The importance of a routine often gets overlooked, particularly on days off from a work schedule, but the brain’s cyclical time mapping doesn’t exactly take time off. Experts, myself included, recommend developing a nighttime sleep routine that works for you and then doing your best to stick to it, seven days a week.

I want you to consider the environment you create for sleeping. Check your five senses. Is the room dark? I mean, really dark? Think about it--for millennia, humans never had access to electricity or lights at night. We simply followed the day-night cycle and slept when the sun went down. Now, however, artificial lights are everywhere and they can wreak havoc on our sleep physiology and therefore mental health. Light exposure at the wrong times

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can alter your body's internal sleep clock, which, as you probably guessed, keeps your sleep-wake cycle in rhythm, and darkness is correlated with increased melatonin production. So begin fading your lights down up to one to two hours before you go to bed. Invest in curtains--blackout or otherwise--or, if it's easier, an eye mask. Listen to your surroundings--what helps you relax? Is it silence, or do you prefer a little background noise. If the latter, consistent and ambient noise--like white or pink noise can be helpful for many. And how much do you consider smell? There are actually eleven randomized controlled tests showing a positive correlation between diffusing essential oils and improved sleep quality. It's not that there's anything mystically curative going on with the oils. It just means that there's a clear connection between ambient scent, ambient noise and healthy sleep.

Also, think about what you're putting into your body. We've already talked at length about nutrition. --The foods and specific nutrients we mentioned there will do wonders for creating health but they can also support good sleep. Particularly pay attention to foods rich in magnesium, which has been linked to better sleep and overall decreased anxiety and depression.

And a note on caffeine: I urge each of my patients to take a look at how much caffeine they're consuming throughout the day, and when. Though it may seem like a harmless pick-me-up, most don't realize that the caffeine in that 2pm cup of coffee has a half-life of roughly six hours. Six hours! So you will almost certainly still have plenty of caffeine in your system by the time you're winding down for bed at 9 or 10pm. I probably don't have to tell you that the stimulant properties of caffeine are the exact opposite of what you want when trying to accomplish -restful, consistent, quality sleep that leaves you feeling rejuvenated the next day.

Take a look at your own life, at every stage of your day, and I imagine you'll begin to see the factors that are contributing to less-than-exceptional sleep, and by identifying these, you



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can begin to make small changes that will have a massive impact on your overall brain health and mental health. Sleep is one of the most key factors in our quest to help you heal from depression and anxiety and take care of your modern brain.