

SLEEP PITFALLS

10 Suprising Mistakes That Are Ruining
Your Sleep and How to Fix Them



NICK WIGNALL, PHD

SLEEP PITFALLS

10 Surprising Mistakes That Are Ruining Your Sleep and How to Fix Them

Nick Wignall

1st eBook Edition

Copyright 2018 Nuthymia LLC



INTRODUCTION

Sleep Pitfalls is a guide to avoiding the most common mistakes people make with their sleep, many of which are counter-intuitive.

For example, after reading this guide you'll understand why:

- Most people who have trouble sleeping should spend *less* time in bed not more.
- Sleep Hygiene usually does more harm than good.
- You may be experiencing Jet Lag on a regular basis even if you don't travel.
- Optimal sleep is both more and less important than you think.
- The idea of accumulating a long-term "Sleep Debt" is a myth.
- TV, iPads, and blue light probably aren't as bad for your sleep as the Huffington Post would have you believe.

But before we dive in, know that many of the strategies we use and rely on to solve problems throughout our waking lives are actually unhelpful when applied to sleep. In other words, be ready to think outside the box if you want to make progress on improving your sleep.

Why you should rest easy about improving your sleep

The recommendations in this guide are not universal laws of nature that everyone must rigidly adhere to forever. They are recommendations for people who are and have been struggling with their sleep with little suc-



cess improving it over time.

If this is the case for you, it's a good idea to consider trying as many of the recommendations as are applicable. But, once your sleep improves, it doesn't mean that you have to follow each one to the letter for the rest of your life.

One of the under-appreciated benefits of effective sleep is that it's flexible. Really good sleepers break the rules all the time: They sleep in occasionally, they have deep discussions in bed at 11:30pm, they get frustrated and worry once in a blue moon when they wake up in the middle of the night, etc. But they can get away with it because these breaks in the rules are the exception not, well, the rule.

In other words, rest easy knowing that once you've established a consistent pattern of good sleep, you can loosen up a bit on some of these guidelines in a way that makes sense for you and your life.

Who wrote this guide?

My name is Dr. Nick Wignall. I'm a board certified clinical psychologist specializing in cognitive and behavioral treatments for insomnia. Outside of my clinical work with patients, I write for my personal site—NickWignall.com—where I teach folks outside of the clinical setting how to work smarter at their personal development goals using the best techniques from psychology and behavioral science.



What makes this book different than much of the typical internet advice on sleep is that it is:

1. Based on the latest research and empirical finding from medicine, behavioral science, and sleep psychology—not just my opinion.
2. In addition to explaining the problem and offering strategies for improvement, I always emphasize specific obstacles that make implementing solutions difficult and how to best overcome them. This is where most self-help falls short, and I try my best to address it.

I sincerely hope that you find this guide useful in taking steps to improve your sleep.



PITFALL #1: Playing Sleep Catch-up

Key Takeaways

- The idea of catching up on sleep is misguided since the popular idea of long-term sleep debt is a myth.
- Playing sleep catch-up can lead to many negative consequences to your sleep, including poor sleep schedules, social jet lag, and low sleep drive.
- Instead of trying to catch up on lost sleep, you should plan to wake up at the same time everyday, even after a poor night's sleep.

The Problem

One of the most common mistakes we make with our sleep is trying to catch up on sleep in order to pay off our sleep debt. Although it intuitively makes sense to try for a few extra hours rest on the weekends or your days off to make up for less sleep during the week, such attempts are both misguided and almost never worth the costs. The reason is, the popular idea of accumulating and paying off long-term sleep debt is a myth.

Contrary to the pop psychology we hear in media, there's no scientific evidence that people actually build up any kind of meaningful long-term "sleep debt" over time, even after significant losses in normal



amounts of sleep. Consequently, the benefits of sleeping in on Saturday and Sunday morning to catch up for lost sleep during the week are slim to none. But more significant than a mere lack of benefit, there are important downsides that go along with sleeping in and trying to play sleep catch-up.

Downsides to playing sleep catch-up

- 1. Inconsistent Sleep Schedules.** The first downside to trying to catch up on our sleep and pay off all that mythical sleep debt we've accrued, is that we never give our body a chance to adjust to a consistent sleep pattern. The brain is a habit forming machine, and it learns habits based on repetition. You can't expect your brain to "just shut off" when you get into bed and carry you through the night if you're constantly changing the times when you go to bed and wake up. If you want your sleep to be automatic and effortless, you must prioritize a consistent sleep schedule, especially a consistent wake up time. Good sleep is consistent sleep, and regularly playing sleep catch-up undermines this.
- 2. Social Jet Lag.** Regular jet lag occurs when there's a discrepancy between our body's biological clock and the actual time of day. If you catch a flight from San Francisco at 4:00pm and land in Boston at 9:00pm, the clock on the wall at the hotel room may read 10:00pm, suggesting it's time for bed. But your biological clock hasn't had time to adjust—you still feel as if you're on San Francisco time, which is 7:00pm and much too early to fall asleep.



We suffer from Social Jet Lag when our internal biological clock is similarly mismatched compared to actual time. But in this case, the cause is an inconsistent sleep schedule rather than a plane flight across time zones. If you stay up for 3 hours later than normal Friday and Saturday night and wake up 3 hours later than usual on Saturday and Sunday morning, the Social Jet Lag you'll experience for the next few days (when you return to your normal schedule) is the same as if you crossed three time zones! In other words, sleeping in leads to Jet Lag just as much as jets do.

3. Low Sleep Drive. The third problem with playing sleep catch up and sleeping in is that it depletes our sleep drive. Sleep drive is the body's need for deep, restorative sleep (sometimes called "core sleep"). Being awake and alert throughout the day builds it up so that when bedtime rolls around, your body has a strong need for deep sleep—this results in a faster time to fall asleep and deeper, more restful sleep throughout the night. When we sleep in, we have less time to build up sleep drive over the course of the day, which means that we'll be less sleepy at our normal bedtime and more likely to wake up in the middle of the night. Remember: Low sleep drive leads to low sleep quality.

The Solution

The good news is all three of the above problems—Inconsistent Sleep Schedules, Social Jet Lag, and Low Sleep Drive—can be cured by one simple fix: Wake up at the same time every day. Even on weekends, holi-



days, and vacations. Even if you didn't sleep well the night before or had a stressful/exhausting day.

Why It's Difficult

While conceptually simple, waking up at the same time every day is often a major challenge for most folks. Below are the 3 most common obstacles or points of resistance I hear from people trying to adopt a more consistent wake up schedule and some suggestions on how to think differently or work through them.

- 1. But sleeping in feels so good!** True, but does the pleasure that comes from an hour or two of sleeping in each week really outweigh the the costs of chronic poor sleep? Lack of sufficient sleep drive and an inconsistent sleep schedule are two of the most significant factors in poor sleep and insomnia, which means eliminating insomnia and poor sleep means greater sleep drive and more consistent sleep schedules. Which means... Waking up at the same time every day.
- 2. If I get just a little more sleep I'll feel much better (and perform much better) during the day.** The degree to which you feel rested throughout the day and can function at your normal level is almost entirely dependent on how much deep sleep (technically Stage 3 sleep) you get, not the overall number of hours you sleep. And almost all of our deep sleep happens in the first 3-4 hours of sleep. Consequently, the sleep you get from 7:00am to 8:00am, while it may feel good, is not going to meaningfully impact how you feel or your performance



throughout the day. But it will decrease your sleep drive and make it harder to fall asleep that evening, perpetuating the cycle of poor sleep.

3. Weekend mornings in bed are the only time my spouse and I have to be affectionate/intimate/cuddle. If Saturday and Sunday mornings are truly the only time you can find to cuddle and be intimate, maybe it's time to re-adjust your priorities and make some time for physical and emotional affection with your partner during a couple of the other 100+ waking hours during the week.

ProTip

If you're having trouble getting up at the same time every day, use some kind of immediate reward to offset the perceived loss of pleasure from sleeping in. Here are some examples of strategies that have been effective for people who struggle to get up early:

- Treat yourself to some fancy coffee and a pastry at your favorite local coffee shop early on Saturday and Sunday mornings (If possible, walk there at a brisk pace, maybe with your favorite podcast or music playing).
- Use the very early morning hours to do something you would normally feel guilty about doing during the day—gaming, that TV show your spouse isn't interested in, a long-deferred hobby or side project, etc.



- Childish as it sounds, simply giving yourself a physical reward can be effective, whether it's a piece of chocolate or a big red X on your [Seinfeld Method](#) calendar.



PITFALL #2: Turning in Early Before a Big Day

Key Takeaways

- The feeling of restedness and daytime performance has much more to do with sleep quality than sleep quantity.
- Getting in bed too early can lead to Sleep Anxiety and Problematic Sleep Conditioning, both of which will harm your sleep.
- Never get into bed unless you are truly *sleepy*—not just *tired*—no matter what’s going on the following day.

The Problem

Turning in early before a big day is the flip side of playing sleep catch up. In either case, by trying to modify our sleep routines in order to get better sleep, we end up creating worse sleep in the long run. When you turn in early before a big day, you more often than not end up laying in bed awake instead of falling asleep.

For example: Tomorrow is the start of a big trial, the outcome of which determines whether you make partner. Or maybe you’re defending your dissertation, pitching your startup to a group of VCs, playing in a championship tennis match, or any other stressful, high-stakes situation. In the face of a daunting challenge tomorrow, many of us make the mistake of “turning in early” tonight in an attempt to get to bed early, get more



sleep, and therefore be better rested and able to perform well the following day.

The crucial error in this line of thinking is that the degree to which you feel rested and perform at your peak potential has far less to do with the quantity of your sleep and far more to do with the quality of your sleep. Of course, in a perfect world we'd get both ample quantity and quality of sleep every night. And while this occasionally happens as a result of a perfect storm of positive factors, it's foolhardy to think that we can make it happen by simply getting into bed earlier than usual. Think about it this way, if you had to choose, would you rather get 6 hours of high-quality sleep or 8 hours of fitful, restless sleep?

When we try to turn in early before a big day, we typically end up doing more harm than good because our body may not be ready to fall asleep. As a result, we lay in bed for a long time not sleeping. This sets us up for two major sleep problems: Sleep Anxiety and Problematic Sleep Conditioning.

Sleep Anxiety. You're laying in bed, lights off, alone, with nothing going on. No external stimuli whatsoever because you're religious about following your sleep hygiene rules (eye mask on, ear plugs and white noise machine, blackout drapes, etc.). In a perfect world, this would help you sleep. Unfortunately, your sleep world isn't perfect, in part because you got into bed too early without your sleep drive being sufficiently high.



As a result, you're going to lay awake with nothing but your thoughts and no sleepiness. Inevitably, you start thinking about your to-do list for tomorrow, the big presentation you have to give next week at work, that thing you promised your mother you'd take care of, etc...

This example illustrates a simple point: When you're in bed but not sleepy, your mind starts working—in this case, thinking, because there's nothing external to work on. Right away, this thinking increases your overall level of arousal and signals to your body that sleep drive should be suppressed because it's time to work. Instead of drifting off into sleep, you find yourself even more awake and alert. This leads to an uncomfortable thought: "What if I can't sleep? How will things go tomorrow if I'm groggy and "out of it." I need to fall asleep NOW!"

And so begins sleep worry and anxiety, which takes our already aroused brain to new heights of arousal (the challenge of a to-do list or presentation are mildly arousing, but the anxiety of being sleep deprived is majorly arousing). By worrying about the effects of not sleeping we create a self-fulfilling prophecy that keeps us awake. All because we got into bed too early.

Problematic Sleep Conditioning. Problematic Sleep Conditioning is when we teach our brain to associate arousing activities with the act of laying down in bed. If every time we lay down in bed we start reviewing our to-do list for tomorrow and worrying about the quality of our sleep,



our bed is going to become a unconscious cue for anxious feelings and mental arousal, and by extension, suppressed sleep drive.

In other words, being in bed when you're not truly sleepy is doubly harmful: In the moment it creates arousal and sleep anxiety which makes it harder to fall asleep that night. But over time it also establishes an unconscious association between our bed and arousal, which is the worst thing to have associated with our bed since it turns the act of getting into bed as a signal to wake up.

The Solution

Don't get into bed until you are truly sleepy, not just tired. This means that no matter how tired you are, if you're not sleepy specifically (see #2 below), you should not be getting into bed. Because, if you do, chances are you will:

1. Start to worry, problem-solve, and generally activate yourself, and
2. You will be creating or strengthening all sorts of arousing association with your bed, all of which interfere with falling asleep.

Why It's Difficult

1. **We make the mistake of believing that quantity rather than quality of sleep is what's most important.** Remember: 6 hours of quality sleep beats 8 hours of crummy sleep every time. If you're worried about performing well tomorrow, remind yourself that the quality of



your sleep is the most important thing to prioritize. If anything, you should try to go to bed slightly later than usual before a big day since this will allow your sleep drive to build up even further, increasing the odds of falling asleep quickly and staying asleep.

2. Tired isn't the same thing as sleepy. Tired is a broad umbrella term for fatigue or exhaustion. Sleepy is the very specific term for when your body is ready to fall asleep. When people cross the finish line of a marathon they're often quite tired, but I've never heard of anyone falling asleep at the finish line. Similarly, after a long day at work with multiple physical, mental, and emotional stressors, you may feel extremely tired, but that fact is often independent of sleepiness. The foolproof way to know when you're truly sleepy and not just tired is droopy eye lids and the head nod. During the evenings, try to notice the difference between tiredness and sleepiness, so that you can more effectively refrain from getting into bed too early.



PITFALL #3: No Sleep Runway

Key Takeaways

- The mind needs a period of relaxation in the evenings before bed in order to transition effectively from work-related mental activity to sleep-promoting restfulness.
- Create a “sleep runway” of at least an hour before bedtime when you refrain from any work-related or stimulating activity.
- Effective sleep runway activities should be engaging enough to hold your attention but not so engaging that they are arousing or activating.

The Problem

Many people are frustrated with their poor sleep (frustration, by the way, is a form of arousal and therefore leads to worse sleep), because they expect that their minds will simply shut off and go to sleep as soon as they decide to get into bed. Unfortunately, the mind doesn't work that way. You've probably spent all day with your mind being fairly active and energetic so that you can be productive, solve problems, and get things done. *Doesn't it seem a bit unrealistic to think that all of that will just instantly shut off and you'll be able to go into sleep mode at the drop of a hat?*



Your mind before bed is like a jet before landing: The bigger, more powerful the jet the longer a runway it needs to land and come to a complete stop. Similarly, the more mentally active and stimulated you are during the day, the more time you need to gradually slow your mind down in the evening before it's ready to fall asleep.

If you have the common problem of getting into bed only to have your mind racing with thoughts, it's probably because you haven't given your mind a long enough period of time to transition from alert and aroused to relaxed and sleepy.

The Solution

In order to fall asleep quickly in bed, you need a transition period of relaxation that bridges work and rest. Specifically, your mind needs some time to switch out of problem-solving work mode and into relaxed rest mode if you want to be able to easily and quickly fall asleep. This dedicated time you give to your mind to unwind and relax is called a sleep runway.

By intentionally creating space and time for relaxation before bedtime, you allow your mind to slowly and organically shift gears into a sleep-promoting state of relaxation. If you're not doing this already, it may take some deliberate thought and planning on your part. By implementing and sticking with a consistent sleep runway, you'll also be creating reliable and powerful cues for sleep that will serve as unconscious sig-



nals to your mind that it's time to fall asleep soon. This will make the actual act of falling asleep essentially effortless.

To create an effective sleep runway, schedule an hour or so before your planned bedtime where you do no work at all. And the term *work* here is used in a broad sense—of course you shouldn't be emailing clients or reviewing spreadsheets, but you also should abstain as much as possible from any kind of goal-directed or striving activity. Anything that might signal to your mind, *I need to do some mental work*.

Reading the news, for example, is a good way to subtly put your mind into work mode. After all, the news is—almost by definition, unfortunately—a long series of problems and crises to which your mind will naturally respond with worry and problem solving. And when you start worrying or problem-solving, you put your mind in work mode, which is arousing and inhibits your sleep drive and increases sleep anxiety.

Why It's Difficult

We're good at working and problem-solving and we do it a lot, so it can actually be a challenge to come up with and implement non-work and non-arousing activities for our sleep runway. The key to good sleep runway activities is to think of things that hit the sweet spot of being interesting or enjoyable enough to hold your attention but not so exciting that they become arousing.

Reading is typically a good choice, and often fiction tends to be better than non-fiction. A good trick is to re-read a favorite novel or story. This



tends to hit that sweet spot of interesting and enjoyable but also not arousing since you've read it before and there aren't any surprises.

Other good sleep runway activities include:

- TV Shows. A lot of people report success with nature documentaries like Planet Earth or old favorite sitcoms like Cheers or Seinfeld. And don't worry about blue light impacting your sleep. The science of this is shaky at best, and even when some studies have shown a negative effect of blue light on sleep, the effects are typically quite small—much less influential than, say, worrying and getting anxious about not sleeping because you got into bed without being sleepy.
- Stretching or yoga
- Meditation or formal relaxation practices like Progressive Muscle Relaxation or Diaphragmatic Breathing
- Puzzles or other non-competitive games
- Certain hobbies may have aspects that are non-stimulating and would therefore be appropriate sleep runway activities. For example, sketching ideas for a new watercolor painting or simply listening to music without doing anything else.



PITFALL #4: Not Enough Physical Activity

Key Takeaways

- Regular exercise and physical activity increases sleep drive and promotes better sleep through both direct and indirect effects.
- In order to establish an effective and consistent exercise habit, pick a type of exercise you enjoy, start very small, and make use of temptation bundling.
- Any kind of consistently increased physical activity promotes better sleep not just formal exercise.

The Problem

A prominent sleep psychologist and researcher once made the point that if drug companies could package the positive effects of exercise in pill form it would be the most effective and popular drug of all time, by a huge margin. In other words, the beneficial effects of exercise on a host of physical and emotional maladies are tremendous, and poor sleep is no exception.

When you exercise regularly, you increase your sleep drive and therefore are more likely to feel sleepy at bedtime and to sleep soundly through the night. Think about it this way: The body's job during sleep is to do regular maintenance and restorative repairs. Exercising and being physically active during the day is like creating extra work for your body to do during sleep. And if your body has extra work to do during sleep, that



means it will want to sleep more (higher sleep drive and increased sleep quality) and need more time to do it (longer sleep duration). Conversely, when we're not physically active on a regular basis, we build up less sleep drive over the course of the day, and as a consequence, will not be as sleepy.

Aside from this direct effect of exercise on sleep, exercise exerts many indirect positive effects on sleep. For example, regular exercise has proven benefits for mood, energy levels, and stress. When we're in a better mood and have more energy, we tend to work harder and be more productive during the day which results in a higher sleep drive and better sleep. Physical exercise also helps decrease many of the health related factors that impair sleep such as obesity and breathing problems, depression and anxiety, etc.

The Solution

Exercise regularly. It really isn't any more complicated than that. The general guidelines are mild to moderate exercise or physical activity most days of the week for about 30 minutes or moderate to intense exercise three to four days a week. Importantly, even a general increase in physical activity levels—not even exercise per se—gives you most of the benefits. In other words, doing yard work and walking instead of driving when possible is still effective even if you're not going to the gym.



Why It's Difficult

Exercise is arguably the simplest solution on this list, but that doesn't make it easy. In fact, regularly exercising is a notoriously difficult habit to make stick (think about how much money gyms make at the beginning of each year when people sign up for memberships, use the gym twice, then never come back...).

Here are three tips to creating an effective and lasting habit of sleep-promoting exercise:

1. **Pick a type of exercise you enjoy.** The research is pretty clear that the type of exercise or physical activity (and even the intensity) doesn't matter nearly as much as just doing something. Which means you don't necessarily have to run five miles on the treadmill every day to get most of the beneficial effects. So pick an exercise that's inherently rewarding or enjoyable to you (or at least something less painful) to increase your odds of simply doing the exercise at all.
2. **Start small.** I mean, painfully small. Many people fail to establish regular habits because they bite off more than they can chew, inevitably fail, then beat themselves up, which makes it even less likely that they'll try again in the future. To avoid this negative feedback loop, start very, very small in order to build up some quick wins and confidence. Go for a brief walk around the block every evening after dinner; take a walking lunch break at work; park 15 minutes away from



your office and get a half an hour of walking in each day. If you want to create a lasting habit, start so small that it seems ridiculous.

3. Use temptation bundling. Temptation bundling involves pairing something unpleasant (like exercise) with something enjoyable that you normally wouldn't do. For example, if you feel guilty about watching too much TV during the day, allow yourself to watch a TV show on your iPad while you walk on the treadmill or using the elliptical. Note that temptation bundling tends to work best when the reward is immediate and concrete. For example, grabbing a beer (concrete) at the restaurant next to the gym after a workout (immediate) would be more effective than taking a personal day off work (abstract) at the end of the month (delayed).



PITFALL #5: Scapegoating Sleep

Key Takeaways

- Inappropriately blaming sleep for difficulties throughout the day creates sleep anxiety and makes it harder to sleep well in the long-term.
- Remind yourself that common complaints such as low energy levels or heightened stress during the day are likely influenced by many other factors besides sleep.

The Problem

When we inaccurately blame our sleep for negative feelings and experiences throughout the day, we create more sleep anxiety and consequently a self-fulfilling prophecy that makes it harder to sleep.

Some of the most common negative feelings that we unjustly ascribe to poor sleep include low energy levels, morning grogginess, and stress. Although all of these phenomena are related to and influenced by sleep, rarely is poor sleep the only factor in any of them.

1. **Low energy levels.** Blaming low energy levels on poor sleep is usually a mistake because many things besides sleep influence our energy and enthusiasm throughout the day. In fact, quality sleep leads to restedness, a feeling that's similar to, but ultimately distinct from, energy. Restedness is simply the absence of sleepiness while energy is a much



broader, more complex phenomena that involves a mixture of physical, emotional, and mental states. For example, having adequate calories in your system, feelings of excitement and enthusiasm, plus being in an active state of curious engagement with something will lead to the overall sensation of *energized*. Put another way, it's completely possible to be adequately rested but lack a sense of energy because of other factors such as poor diet, lack of exercise, depression, boredom, etc.

2. **Grogginess.** Just about everybody gets groggy first thing in the morning. Grogginess is your body shifting gears from a state of sleep to one of wakefulness. Depending on the person, the groggy transitional period can naturally last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more. Grogginess is typically only a sign of poor sleep if it lasts well into the morning and happens consistently, day after day.
3. **Stress.** Similar to having low energy levels, having high stress levels and feeling “stressed out” is probably the result of a lot more than the extent to which you slept well or not. For example, if you don't have an appropriate and reliable system of planning and organizing your work, you may feel a constant underlying sense of stress because you're never quite sure what needs to get done, when, and in what way. Another source of stress can be persistent unaddressed mental health issues. If you have an anxiety disorder that isn't being treated or at least managed, that can be a significant source of stress.



The Solution

It's human nature to want simple, one-to-one relationships between things, especially distressing things in our lives like poor sleep. But it's essential to remind ourselves that sleep and how we feel throughout the day are incredibly complex phenomena, rarely amenable to simple causal explanations such as *I feel miserable today because I didn't sleep well*. Remind yourself that sleep can't be blamed wholly for all our ills and that doing so will only lead to greater sleep anxiety and worse sleep.

Why It's Difficult

1. **Force of habit.** We're used to blaming sleep. It will take an intentional and sustained effort to re-evaluate what negative effects in your life are and are not appropriately ascribed to poor sleep. For example: If you wish you had better energy throughout the day, consider some of the many other factors that contribute to energy levels such as the quality of your diet, how often you exercise, how interesting and/or challenging your work is, whether you have other medical or mental health issues and whether or not they are well-managed, etc. Make a list of the factors besides sleep that may be negatively influencing your energy levels and make a point to remind yourself of them whenever you catch yourself scapegoating sleep.

Another example might be that if you have a tendency to mentally



complain about how groggy you feel in the morning and blame it on poor sleep, consider the other factors that affect the intensity or duration of morning grogginess: *What's your morning routine like? Do you do some kind of physical activity first thing? Do you get exposed to sunlight as soon as possible? Do you get right out of bed? Do you eat and make coffee or tea first thing?*

If the answers to these are no, consider making some modifications to your morning routine that might positively affect your grogginess.

2. Fear. The second reason we tend to scapegoat sleep for many of our daytime woes is that changing other lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, morning routines, career paths, etc. can be pretty daunting. If you lack the confidence or knowledge of how to make changes in other aspects of your life, it makes sense that it would be harder to face them. If this is the case for you, challenge the belief that you can't make meaningful changes to your lifestyle by brainstorming concrete, specific, and modest goals toward improvement in one or more of these areas. If necessary, get support in your endeavor by, for example, recruiting a friend to exercise with you, hiring a professional dietitian to create a meal plan that works for you, or working with a therapist to better manage a mental health issue like anxiety or marital difficulties.



PITFALL #6: Medicating Ourselves to Sleep

Key Takeaways

- Sleep medications and supplements have been shown to have at best limited effectiveness for—and never be curative of—sleep problems.
- Many sleep medications have significant negative side effects, can lead to tolerance and addiction, and tend to increase sleep anxiety.
- In order to effectively deal with sleep difficulties, consider non-pharmacological approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia first.

The Problem

The most commonly prescribed medications for sleep are hypnotics or anxiolytics such as Ambien, Lunesta, Klonopin, and Xanax. And while these medications can have some limited usefulness in terms of helping you fall asleep, they often worsen the overall quality of your sleep and lead to many other negative side effects and consequences. In general, the problem with trying to medicate your way into better sleep is that the costs almost always outweigh the benefits. Consequently, it's important to be informed about the details of what those costs and benefits actually are.



Not a Cure

The first thing to acknowledge up front is that medications and supplements will likely never correct or cure an underlying insomnia-related sleep problem because the vast majority of these sleep problems have psychological and behavioral causes not physiological causes. So even if a particular medication or supplement legitimately improved some aspect of your sleep to some extent, it is unlikely to ever be truly corrective. Even the most effective sleep medications are Band-Aids.

Limited Effectiveness

Medications and supplements for sleep have at best limited effectiveness. The best studies of hypnotic use for sleep disturbances shows only mild effectiveness for improving sleep, and even then the effects tend to be restricted to sleep onset. Further complicating the picture of sleep medication effectiveness is that many of the studies looking at the effectiveness of sleep medication are funded or sponsored by pharmaceutical companies, which obviously poses a serious conflict of interest and should, at the very least, be a cause for skepticism.

Interestingly, even though people often report improved sleep quality when taking commonly prescribed sleep medication, there's evidence to suggest that this is due to the memory-impairing effect of the drugs. In other words, they may not be directly improving your sleep so much as making you think they are since people who use them are less likely



to remember mid-night awakenings or other difficulties with their sleep. Over the counter or herbal supplements have even less proven effectiveness. The most commonly taken supplement for poor sleep is melatonin, which has shown to have—at best—only mild effectiveness in helping people sleep, and even then only with people who have circadian rhythm disorders. If supplements like melatonin do work, there's good evidence that it is probably the result of a placebo effect.

Downsides

Sleep meds may have significant downsides and side effects. The vast majority of sleep medications have important negative side effects:

- **Tolerance and Addiction.** Perhaps the most alarming risk of sleep medications is tolerance and even addiction, especially in the case of benzodiazepines like Xanax and Klonopin which are highly addictive. Very quickly, we build up a tolerance to sleep medications which means we need increasingly higher doses over time to get the same effect and have to deal with increasingly strong side effects.
- **Contraindicated with Alcohol.** Drinking alcohol is highly contraindicated with almost all sleep medications since both are respiratory depressants and when combined can have potentially lethal effects.
- **Contraindicated with Apnea.** Similarly, many sleep medications are contraindicated for anyone with sleep apnea, since they inhibit respiratory function which is already low due to the apnea.



- **Memory Impairment.** Some research shows that hypnotics may interfere with the memory consolidation function of sleep.
- **Hangover Effects.** Some of the longer-lasting sleep medications such as Ambien and Lunesta have a relatively long half-life which means that they may remain in your system even after you wake up. Consequently, you may experience unduly high levels of grogginess, difficulty concentrating, and impaired motor skills during the day.

Dependence & Anxiety

The last major downside to using medication to try to improve your sleep is that it can foster dependency and increases sleep anxiety. By taking a pill for our sleep, we reinforce the idea that sleep problems are “just chemical” and that improving them is outside of our control or agency. This creates even more fear and fragility around sleep which tends to make sleep problems even worse.

The Solution

If your sleep problems are significant and regularly impacting your life, it's usually best to try non-pharmacological strategies first, including the suggestions in this guide. If sleep problems are severe or you're having trouble making headway on your own, consider Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I). CBT-I is overwhelmingly considered the first-line treatment of choice for insomnia by most major medical and psychological associations, including The American College of Phy-



sicians. CBT-I involves using many research-backed techniques and interventions from cognitive behavioral therapy to change mental and behavioral habits around sleep. It's a proven treatment that consistently achieves successful results without side effects.

Why It's Difficult

We naturally gravitate toward pharmacological solutions to our sleep problems for 5 primary reasons:

1. **We want a quick solution.** It's essentially baked into human nature to prefer solutions that are fast to ones that are slow. Unfortunately, like most difficult problems we face in life, decades of poor sleep habits can't be undone overnight with a few pills.
2. **We want an easy solution.** A corollary to #1 above is that we prefer easier solutions to more difficult ones. All other things being equal, conservation of energy is a pretty good idea. The problem is, all other things aren't equal when it comes to sleep. Namely, both the downsides of continued poor sleep and the upside of a significant investment in changing sleep habits for the better are extremely high. No one, for example, achieves and maintains healthy weight or high levels of proficiency in playing the piano with easy solutions. Effective sleep is no different.
3. **We want to believe that poor sleep is a chemical or physiological process.** Maybe as much as we love quick and easy solutions, as human beings we also love to avoid responsibility. And there's no easier



way to avoid responsibility for something than by blaming our brains. However “It’s just chemical” isn’t an excuse for the majority of sleep difficulties.

4. **Many doctors and medical professionals (not to mention the media) aren’t well-informed about current best practices for treating sleep disturbances.** Most major professional organizations acknowledge that medication *should not* be the first line treatment for insomnia. Unfortunately, many medical professionals aren’t well-informed on the topic of sleep, and end up recommending a treatment that is relatively quick, easy, responsibility-shifting, and familiar: drugs.
5. **Sleep medications work.** Kind of. Of course, no one would actually take sleep medications if they simply didn’t work at all. A major problem with most drugs taken for sleep is that they do “work” in some fashion. For instance, many common sleep medications help you fall asleep initially. The problem is that most of them also don’t actually improve the overall quality of your sleep, and may also foster poor sleep beliefs and habits, which in the long run make the difficulties worse. Finally, there’s good evidence that strong placebo effects are at work in people who regularly take drugs or supplements for sleep, meaning that the effectiveness probably has less to do with the drugs/supplements themselves and more to do with people’s beliefs in them.

Remember that you should always consult with your physician before making any changes to your current medication use.



PITFALL #7: Ignoring Your Chronotype

Key Takeaways

- Your chronotype is your body's tendency toward morningness (being an early bird) or eveningness (being a night owl).
- Especially for people with extreme chronotypes, it's best to adjust your lifestyle to fit your chronotype rather than the other way around.
- We often have trouble accepting our chronotype because of the Cartoon Fallacy and a lack of clarity about the tradeoffs required when we ignore our chronotype.

The Problem

Chronotype is the term for your tendency toward morningness or eveningness—in other words, whether you're an early-bird, a night owl, or somewhere in between. Your chronotype is largely biologically determined and there's not much you can do to influence it one way or another. People get into trouble with their sleep when they try to fit their chronotype into an incompatible schedule, routine or lifestyle.

For example, if you're a night owl by nature—generally you get up around 9:00 or 10:00am, have your best energy in the evening, and aren't ready to fall asleep until well past midnight—it's unlikely that



you'll be able to live an early-bird lifestyle without some major friction. Similarly, an early-bird is going to have a hard time in a lifestyle that encourages staying out past midnight every day.

Now, most of us probably aren't an extreme night owl or early bird. Rather, while we may have a mild tendency toward eveningness or morningness, we can usually be pretty flexible either way—adapting, for example, to a job that demands that we wake up at 5:30 every morning even though our natural wake up time is probably closer to 7:00.

It's the people on the extremes who need to be thoughtful about how they are constructing their lifestyles and expectations for their daily schedules given their chronotype. If not, they can easily begin to suffer from Social Jet Lag on a regular basis (more on Social Jet Lag in Pitfall #1) and potentially develop insomnia because they start thinking and worrying about sleep which leads to sleep effort and sleep anxiety.

The Solution

The solution to the problem of a mismatch between your chronotype and your lifestyle is to adjust your lifestyle, since you can't very well fight your biology. If you have an extreme chronotype in one direction or the other, best to make peace with that fact and start to think creatively about how to modify or adjust your schedule and lifestyle.

If you're not sure what your chronotype is, it probably means you're somewhere in the middle, which is good news since that means you're



pretty flexible. That being said, here are a few questions you can ask yourself to get a better idea of what your chronotype may be:

- *What would your sleep schedule look like if it had no constraints on it?*
- *What does your sleep schedule look like at the end of a vacation?*
- *What was your sleep like as a child and teenager? What does your family say about your history as a sleeper? Always up at the crack of dawn or sleeping in 'till noon?*
- *If you had to schedule an important test or job interview, and had complete freedom to arrange the time, when would you do it?*

Why It's Difficult

1. **The Cartoon Fallacy.** The Cartoon Fallacy is when you take action on the idea of something rather than the thing itself. In this case, many people like the idea of being a “morning person”—getting up at 5:00am, going for an early-morning run, getting into the office before everyone else and getting loads of uninterrupted work done before breakfast, etc. The problem is, for some people (i.e. those with a chronotype that's tuned in the extreme for eveningness), this makes the actual experience untenable—constant grogginess, poor energy, low motivation, etc.
1. **Unpleasant Tradeoffs.** The second reason people have a hard time identifying and accepting their chronotype is that adapting our environment to better fit our biology takes effort and requires sometimes



unpleasant tradeoffs. Asking for a modified work schedule might mean an uncomfortable conversation with your boss, or even having to get a new job with a more accommodating or flexible schedule. Going to bed on the early side when friends and colleagues (or spouses) want to go out regularly and stay up late means setting some boundaries and creatively coming up with alternative situations and contexts for socializing. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself: *How important is it to me to get consistently good sleep? Am I willing to make some difficult trade offs in order to achieve it?*



PITFALL #8: Catastrophizing Poor Sleep

Key Takeaways

- The negative effects of poor sleep are rarely as severe as people commonly imagine.
- Catastrophic thinking about the negative effects of poor sleep leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy that contributes to poor sleep in the future.
- Most poor sleepers underestimate the amount of sleep they get by an hour and a half.

The Problem

When we habitually interpret sleep disturbances in the worst possible light, we make it more difficult to sleep because it increases our sleep anxiety and trains our brains to be afraid of sleep.

Many poor sleepers get into the mental habit of catastrophizing—imagining the worst—when it comes to sleep. Common examples include:

- *Ah, I'm still awake and it's 2:30... Tomorrow's going to be a disaster.*
- *This is crazy, why can't I just fall asleep!*
- *I knew I shouldn't have had that ice-cream before bed. Now I won't sleep at all.*



- *I can't keep sleeping 4 hours per night... I want to live a long life.*

There are two big problems with this particular habit of thinking about sleep:

1. **Catastrophic thoughts about the negative consequences of sleep are almost always inaccurate and unrealistic.** Will a bad night's sleep really lead to a disaster tomorrow? Was ice-cream at 10:30pm really the reason you're having a hard time falling asleep, and does it really mean you won't sleep at all?
2. **Catastrophic thinking tends to make us more activated and aroused, leading to more sleep anxiety and more difficulty falling and staying asleep.** Even though most of us can, after the fact, acknowledge intellectually that poor sleep tonight will probably not lead to horrific consequences tomorrow, the simple act of thinking that and elaborating on it (irrespective of it's accuracy) causes our brain to light up and go into work/problem-solving mode which just wakes us up even more. Once again, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Solution

Stop worrying about the effects of poor sleep. Ironically, if you struggle with poor sleep, you probably sleep a lot more than you think. Most studies that look at how well people estimate the real amount of time they slept each night show that people with sleep problems tend to underestimate how much sleep they actually got by over an hour! Remember that the first 3-4 hours of sleep are by far the most important be-



cause this is when you get deep, restorative sleep. This means you can go to sleep by 10:00pm, wake up at 1:30 or 2:00am and probably not have any major consequences the next day because you've gotten all of your deep sleep already.

Why It's Difficult

Most of us don't have sufficient knowledge and expertise of what the actual science says about sleep loss. Instead, our beliefs are based on headlines we hear in the media and from friends, neither of which are necessarily very reliable. But the consequences of even pretty severe sleep deprivation are not nearly as disastrous as you might imagine.

For example, there is no consistent evidence from the scientific literature that insomnia causes significant health problems. Furthermore, many large research studies have failed to demonstrate any significant negative effects on daytime functions as a result of a poor night's sleep. For example, daytime alertness does not suffer significantly unless sleep is consistently reduced below 5.5 hours. As you do the math in your head, remember that if you're not a good sleeper, statistically your estimation of how much sleep you're actually getting each night is probably an hour or more than you think.



PITFALL #9: Bedtime Couples Counseling

Key Takeaways

- The bed is not a good place to solve relationship problems because it creates unhelpful sleep associations with your bed that make sleep more difficult in the future.
- Create a dedicated time and place to discuss relationship issues that does not conflict with sleep.
- Be honest with yourself about using a lack of time during the day as an excuse for having relationship conversations in bed.

The Problem

Many of us have important conversations with our spouses and partners in bed before we fall asleep. Sometimes these conversations are about external issues or problems like financial difficulties. But often they're about the relationship itself or some particular conflict. And while it's definitely a good thing to talk through your relationship difficulties and concerns, your bed is not the place for it.

Of course, we're busy people and most of us feel as though the 30 minutes before bed is the only time we have to discuss important concerns with our partners. But, just like the cuddling dilemma outlined in Pitfall #1, if the 30 minutes before bed is the only time you can find to discuss



your relationship, a serious readjustment of priorities may be warranted. The habit of discussing difficult relationship issues in bed can lead to two primary problems when it comes to sleep:

- 1. Unhelpful associations with bed.** Remember that you want to have as few things other than falling asleep associated with being in bed as possible. But if you frequently use bedtime to hash out relationship trouble, that gets associated with your bed. So even on nights where there isn't a need for a conversation, your mind is going to be thinking about it, looking for unrealized issues, worrying about potential ones, ruminating on past ones, etc. All of which, of course, causes arousal and makes it difficult to fall asleep.
- 2. Bad Timing.** From an energy standpoint, laying in bed at 11:00pm is probably the worst time to have a difficult conversation. If you're like most busy people, by the early evening you're often drained—physically, mentally, and emotionally. As a result, the odds of you having a respectful, conflict-free conversation about a hot-button issue at bedtime are slim to none. If the issue is important, schedule a time to deal with it when you're as mentally and emotionally fresh as possible.

The Solution

It should be obvious by now, but if you want to fall asleep easily at night, don't have relationship discussions in bed. In fact, don't have any serious discussions in bed. A little casual banter before bed is fine, and



arguably good, since humor is usually a relaxing and non-effortful activity which could be sleep-promoting. But anything more than that should be kept out of the bedroom. To do this, create a dedicated time and place (other than bed) to have these conversations, ideally on a regular and consistent basis.

Why It's Difficult

We usually end up having big conversations in bed because we claim to not have the time during the rest of the day. But for even the busiest of couples, there's often hidden time that could be used for relationship discussions. If you're honest with yourself about how much time per day you spend watching Netflix, browsing Facebook, reading the news online, or spending those luxurious extra 10 minutes in the shower every morning, you could probably find some time to create a dedicated space to discuss important topics with your spouse.

The key is to have a regular, consistent time to do this, which will mean that you rarely have enormous issues that have been building up for weeks or months blow up all of a sudden and require a giant conversation in bed at 11:30pm.

If relationship conversations in bed are negatively affecting your sleep, make a point to have a conversation about it with your spouse. Then, collaboratively, see if the two of you can't come up with some ideas for creating another time to work through or discuss important relationship issues.



PITFALL #10: Too Much Sleep Hygiene

Key Takeaways

- Sleep hygiene can be detrimental to your sleep since it often encourages sleep effort which is always counter-productive for effective sleep.
- Your body knows how to sleep perfectly well on its own; the best thing you can do to help is simply get out of the way and stop *trying* to sleep.
- Effective sleep hygiene should follow a “set it and forget it” approach where you create automatic habits and routines based on a few core principles of effective sleep rather than checklists of rules and procedures.

The Problem

Everybody's seen the articles and lists online: *Sleep Hygiene 101*; *10 Sleep Hygiene Hacks*; *The 15 Most Important Sleep Hygiene Habits According to Science*; etc. While many of these lists contain some potentially useful advice and recommendations, lurking beneath their easy, actionable exterior is an insidious downside: Sleep Effort.

While some sleep hygiene tips can be beneficial if implemented correctly, the overall idea of sleep hygiene is dangerous because it fosters



Sleep Effort. We engage in sleep effort when we perform some action (including mental actions like problem-solving) with the intention of getting to sleep.

The problem is that while effort is largely a positive thing in our lives, when it comes to sleep, any form of effort has paradoxical effects. By trying, you are telling your brain to get to work. As a result, this charges up the arousal system and inhibits the sleep drive system leading to a lower probability of falling asleep and sleeping well. While most activities in our lives benefit from a little bit of arousal, every ounce of sleep effort and arousal decreases the likelihood that you'll fall asleep and sleep well.

Most sleep hygiene advice convinces people that sleep is something they need to “work on” and figure out. But it isn't. Our bodies know perfectly well how to sleep on their own. Our bodies don't need our help to sleep any more than our hearts need our help to pump blood. In fact, the best thing you can do to promote sleep is simply get out of your body's way.

But sleep hygiene tells you to do the exact opposite. It implicitly suggests that your body isn't capable of sleeping on its own so you need to come to the rescue with your eye masks and blackout shades and chamomile tea. But you don't. And the mindset that such strategies encourage (thinking about your sleep as a project) actually make it harder to fall asleep and get a good night's rest in the long run. When it be-



comes really extreme, sleep hygiene can even lead to sleep anxiety, an even stronger form of arousal that will really disrupt your sleep.

Here are a few other downsides to sleep hygiene:

- **It interferes with the relaxation of the sleep runway.** You can't truly relax and unwind in the hours before bedtime if you've got a 20-item sleep hygiene checklist that you're always rushing through or modifying.
- **It gets expensive.** It can be shocking to learn how much money people routinely spend on gadgets, devices, room accessories, and especially supplements for helping them fall asleep—many of which are actually doing more harm than good because they encourage sleep effort.
- **It makes us a pain to live with.** At some point, our fussiness with sleep hygiene probably starts to wear down spouses, partners, or roommates. This in turn can lead us to feel guilty and frustrated with our sleep, which of course makes it even harder to sleep.

The Solution

If you took the 100 best sleepers in the world and compared them across any number of factors to the 100 worst sleepers in the world the biggest difference would be this: Good sleepers don't think much about sleep; they just do it. Bad sleepers, on the other hand, are obsessed with sleep; they think about it constantly and are always “working” on it.



For the vast majority of people, in the vast majority of situations, sleep hygiene as it's normally thought of has more risks than benefits. Most people would be far better off if they simply followed a few core principles of good sleep and then stopped thinking about it.

When it comes to what factors influence sleep, there are few very big factors that account for most of our success or failure sleeping: If you have an appropriate and consistent sleep schedule, wake up at the same time every day and don't get into bed until you're actually sleepy, and refrain from thinking very much about sleep, the vast majority of your sleep difficulties will go away, making all those sleep hygiene tips irrelevant.

Of course, many sleep hygiene recommendations are not harmful in and of themselves. It's generally not a great idea, for example, to eat a huge carb-heavy meal 10 minutes before bed. But the timing of your last meal is A) insignificant compared to factors like how much sleep drive you have built up and how much sleep effort and anxiety you engage in, and B) potentially just one more thing to worry about.

To do sleep hygiene well, you want to take a “set it and forget it” approach. Pick three to five sleep hygiene practices, implement them, and then stop thinking about them. In other words, sleep hygiene should be about habits and routines not rules and checklists.

Most people get into trouble with sleep hygiene because they are constantly tinkering and modifying all their sleep hygiene practices. This completely defeats the purpose and usefulness.



Why It's Difficult

Letting go of sleep hygiene can be difficult for two reasons primarily:

1. **We all want quick fixes.** While maintaining a consistent and biologically appropriate sleep schedule is all but guaranteed to have massively positive effects on your sleep, it can be a tough change to make and may require giving up lots of things that you enjoy. Consequently, we hold out hope that a certain type of green tea plus a warm bath 25 minutes before bed will be the magic combination that improves our sleep once and for all. If you want to make significant positive changes to your sleep, acknowledge that it likely won't happen overnight with quick fixes or the latest miracle cure.
2. **Many sleep hygiene tips are interesting or mysterious, which we humans are naturally suckers for.** We tend to ignore boring and obvious yet accurate things—like not getting into bed unless you're actually sleepy—in favor of quasi-mystical things like a special blend of organic, artisanal, Dali Lama-sanctioned tea. Don't get distracted by the sirens call of new-age fads. The true solutions for poor sleep aren't exciting but they work.



Notes & Disclaimer

Pitfall #1

- **On Sleep Debt.** If you are deprived of deep (stage 3) sleep, your body will spend a higher proportion of time the following night in deep sleep, but this is more about quality rather than sheer number of hours slept. For a good overview of the issues around sleep debt, see [this article](#).
- **On the relationship between feeling rested and deep sleep.** See *Say Goodnight to Insomnia* by Colleen Carney and Rachel Manbur.

Pitfall #3

- **On blue light.** The research on the effects of blue light exposure from screens on sleep is mixed. While many studies do show a negative effect of blue light on sleep that are statistically significant, they often do not translate into meaningful day-to-day differences (i.e. does it really matter if it took you a couple of minutes longer to fall asleep while being exposed to blue light? See [this study](#) for a good example).

Pitfall #4

- **Exercise in pill form.** See *Say Goodnight to Insomnia* by Gregg Jacobs.



- Effects of exercise and physical activity on health outcomes. See [CDC Report on Physical Activity and Health](#).
- Beneficial effects of exercise on sleep quality. For example, see [this recent study](#).
- On Temptation Bundling. See [James Clear's overview](#) or [the original research](#) by Katy Milkman.

Pitfall #5

- On the effects of sleep medication. For a general overview of the downsides of sleep medications, see *Say Goodnight to Insomnia* by Gregg Jacobs for a comprehensive overview of the research.
- On the limited effectiveness of most sleep medication. See [this overview](#) from the NY Times.
- On memory consolidation interference from sleep medications. See [this article](#) for an overview.
- On CBT-I, not medication, as the first line treatment for insomnia. See [the American College of Physicians' report](#).

Pitfall #8

- On the tendency for people with insomnia to underestimate their actual duration of sleep. See [this study](#) from Bianchi et al.



- On the overstated connection between insomnia and long-term health outcomes. See, for example, [this study](#) by Barbara Phillips.
- On the overstated connection between insomnia and negative performance outcomes. See [this study](#) from Sateia et al.

Disclaimer

Information and recommendations contained in this guide should not replace the advice and services of your medical professional or caregiver. Always consult your own physician for answers to personal questions about your physical or mental health, including your sleep. The author has tried to ensure that the information contained in this guide is as accurate and current as possible, but it may contain errors or content that is out of date at the time you read it. The author has no legal liability or responsibility for errors or non-current information or advice in this guide.

Copyright 2018 NUTHYMIA LLC

