

Tricks to Get Better Sleep

Our mind is often the best resource we have for creating and solving problems. This is certainly the case when it comes to insomnia. Those who have problems sleeping know far too well the way anxiety about not sleeping perpetuates the problem. You cannot sleep; you toss and turn; worrying about having to be up by a certain time the next morning exacerbates the situation and you toss and turn even more.

There is, however, something you can do to turn the situation around. You can trick the mind to get better sleep. The mind, after all, can be tricked into compliance, especially if you work at re-programming what it understands to be a time for wakefulness and a time for sleep. Here are a few suggestions you might find helpful to trick the mind into compliance with a sleeping schedule.

a) Maintain good Sleep Hygiene or setting a regular schedule and routine for sleep. Getting habituated to a set routine at bedtime works well because it programs the mind and body to a set of expectations: the same time every night, in the same bed with the same routines. Nothing convinces the mind more of your seriousness and expectation than repetitive action. You might experience sleeplessness for the first night or two, but if you persist with the routine schedule, chances are within a week, you will have little difficulty falling asleep. According to a report in the Boston Globe, a study of insomniacs found that those who had set and regulated their waking and sleeping times, who avoided naps during the day and used their bedrooms only for sleep, were able to reduce their sleepless period (after retiring to bed) by 54%. This percentage is significant considering that a control group using relaxation therapy experienced only a 16% reduction while a placebo group had only a 12% reduction. Maintaining good sleep hygiene is one way of tricking the mind to get better sleep.

b) Lower the temperature of the bedroom before sleep. Cool temperatures make for better sleep because they can trick the body into lowering its temperature, a prerequisite for deep sleep. The body's temperature is triggered by an internal clock. Although the average body temperature for humans is about 97 degrees F, it fluctuates in a regular pattern on a daily basis. Body temperature hits its low (about 88 degrees F) between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., then climbs steadily through the morning before dipping again at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

c) Wearing socks and mittens to bed can also trick mind and body into getting better sleep. Socks and mittens widen blood vessels in hands and feet, a necessary step to inducing sleep, according to a Swiss study. In this study, researchers found that as the body prepares for sleep, the blood vessels in hands and feet dilate. This dilation precipitates the cooling of the blood as it flows through the open channels near the surface of the skin; when body temperatures fall, sleep automatically follows.

d) Do not go to bed hungry. Hunger will keep you alert and tense. A bedtime snack that contains amino acid tryptophan is best. The body converts tryptophan to sleep-inducing chemicals. Having a small, lean slice of turkey (rich in this amino acid) with a piece of toast is best. Another alternative is one oatmeal cookie with a glass of milk (also rich in tryptophan).

e) If stomach problems like heartburn or acid reflux prevent you from getting a good night's rest, consider sleeping on your left side. Studies show that patients who sleep on their left sides are less likely to suffer from acid reflux. According to Dr. Anthony A. Star-poli, a New York City gastroenterologist and assistant professor of medicine at New York Medical College, when you sleep on your right side, your stomach is higher than the esophagus, allowing food and stomach acid to slide up your throat. However, when you sleep on your left side, you turn the situation around and stomach acid slides down.

f) Focusing on staying awake rather than trying to fall asleep can do the trick as well. In what is known as "paradoxical intention," the mind that focuses on being awake will sooner relax than the mind that is struggling to fall asleep. If you aren't asleep 30 minutes after you retire to bed, get up and read a book—preferably one that you know is dull and tedious. Research shows that the longer you lie awake in bed, the less likely you will have a night of uninterrupted sleep. Far better it is to get up, do something else until you feel sleepy.

g) Getting at least 1-2 hours of sunlight each day can also trick mind and body to get better sleep. Research suggests that getting enough sunlight keeps our biological clock on track. Our master body clock is a tiny cluster of cells that lies deep within the brain in an area called the hypothalamus. This area controls basic functions such as food intake and body temperature. This cluster of nerve cells is influenced by light which regulates the secretion of melatonin, a hormone that controls the circadian rhythm of our body (when we sleep and when we stay alert). During the day, sunlight slows the production of melatonin (which is a reason why we feel so alert during the day); at night, the production of this hormone increases, allowing us to feel relaxed and drowsy. Getting 2 hours of sunlight during the day will ensure that the natural wake and sleep cycles of the body are maintained.

If you still have difficulty falling and staying asleep, make sure you see a physician because insomnia can be triggered by physiological conditions such as sleep apnea, menopause or depression. Some drugs that can disturb sleep include antidepressants, beta-blockers, diuretics and painkillers.

Resources:

The Body Clock Guide to Better Health by Michael Smolensky Ph.D and Lynne Lamberg

No More Sleepless Nights by Dr. Peter Hauri

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About the Author

A runner for 27 years, retired schoolteacher and writer, Mary is helping people reclaim their bodies through nutrition, exercise, positive vision and creative engagement. You can visit her at <http://www.GreatBodyat50.com> or learn how she lost her weight at <http://www.greatbodyproteinpower.com>